

PLATFORM-BASED POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES: EVIDENCE FROM TIKTOK AND INSTAGRAM USERS IN IBADAN METROPOLIS

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Abstract

This study examined platform-based political engagement and youth participation in democratic processes, using TikTok and Instagram users in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria as a case study. It was motivated by the increasing influence of social media on political awareness and participation among young citizens. A survey research design was adopted, with data collected through structured questionnaires administered to residents of Lagelu Local Government Area. The population of the study consisted of 1,200 registered youths within the area, from which a sample of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane sampling technique. Out of the 400 questionnaires distributed, 360 were retrieved and analyzed, representing a 90% response rate. The findings revealed that TikTok and Instagram had significantly influenced political awareness and engagement among youths. Exposure to political content on these platforms enhanced interest in governance, stimulated civic discussions, and encouraged participation in activities such as voter education, advocacy, and electoral processes. However, issues such as misinformation, disinformation, political polarization, and questions about content credibility were identified as challenges limiting effective democratic engagement.

The study concluded that TikTok and Instagram had become important digital spaces for youth political participation in Nigeria. It recommended that policymakers, electoral bodies, and civil society organizations leverage these platforms for civic education while strengthening media literacy to reduce the spread of misleading political information.

Keywords: Political Engagement, Democratic Participation, TikTok, Instagram, Social Media, Digital Democracy

Introduction

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms in the twenty-first century has fundamentally altered the dynamics of political communication, civic engagement, and democratic participation worldwide. Among the various transformations attributed to digital media, perhaps none is more consequential than the democratisation of political information and the lowering of barriers to civic participation for ordinary citizens, especially young people (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014). Across both established and emerging democracies, social media has emerged as a critical conduit through which citizens access political content, form opinions, mobilise support, and engage with electoral processes (Valenzuela, Arriagada, & Scherman, 2012).

In Nigeria, these global trends have taken on distinctive local dimensions. The country, which boasts a large and youthful population, has witnessed a marked increase in the use of social networking sites for political purposes over the past decade, particularly during elections. The 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election was particularly notable for the extent to which platforms such as TikTok and Instagram served as spaces for political campaign messaging, voter mobilisation, civic activism, and the expression of political identity among youth voters (Akindutire & Oluwatosin, 2023; Inobemhe, Obaje, & Asemah, 2025). Short-form video content on TikTok and the visual, influencer-driven architecture of Instagram proved especially resonant with young Nigerians, who constituted a significant proportion of first-time voters in 2023.

Yet, despite the growing scholarly and policy attention paid to social media and political behaviour in Nigeria, empirical studies specifically examining TikTok and Instagram as distinct platforms for youth political engagement remain relatively limited. Much of the existing literature has focused on older platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp (Funmilola & Matthew, 2020; Arowolo & Ogande, 2024; Balogun & Salami, 2024), leaving a notable gap in understanding how newer, predominantly visual and short-form platforms shape youth political participation. This study addresses that gap by investigating platform-based political engagement and youth participation in democratic processes, drawing specific evidence from TikTok and Instagram users in Ibadan Metropolis.

The study is anchored on the Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) and the Voting Behaviour Theory (Deutsch & Adorno, 1967), which together provide a robust framework for understanding how media reliance shapes political attitudes, decisions, and participation patterns. By surveying 360 youths in Lagelu Local Government Area, Ibadan, the study provides empirical evidence on how these platforms function as tools of political information, mobilisation, and engagement in Nigeria's democratic landscape.

Statement of the Problem

While the role of social media in political participation has attracted considerable scholarly attention globally, Nigerian studies have disproportionately focused on the electoral functions of Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The growing dominance of TikTok and Instagram among Nigerian youth — platforms characterised by short-form video content, influencer culture, and algorithm-driven personalisation — presents a new frontier for political communication that remains understudied. Furthermore, normative questions about the quality of political information on these platforms, including the prevalence of misinformation,

disinformation, and politically polarising content, demand empirical examination.

The 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election, widely regarded as a watershed moment for youth civic participation, provides a timely and relevant context for this investigation. Political parties, civic organisations, and individual candidates deployed TikTok and Instagram extensively during the campaign period, yet systematic, evidence-based studies on the effectiveness, reach, and consequences of such deployment for youth political engagement in southwestern Nigeria are scarce. This study addresses this gap by examining perceptions, behaviours, and outcomes associated with TikTok and Instagram use among youths in Ibadan Metropolis.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To determine the perception of youths in Lagelu Local Government Area on the relevance of TikTok and Instagram in political participation during the 2023 Presidential Election.
2. To examine how youths perceive the effective use of TikTok and Instagram for political participation during the 2023 Presidential Election.
3. To investigate the influence of TikTok and Instagram on voters' behaviour during the 2023 Presidential Election.
4. To identify the factors that may have influenced youth political participation through TikTok and Instagram during the 2023 Presidential Election.

Research Questions

1. What is the perception of youths in Lagelu Local Government Area regarding the relevance of TikTok and Instagram in political participation during the 2023 Presidential Election?
2. How do youths in Lagelu Local Government Area perceive the effective use of TikTok and Instagram for political participation during the 2023 Presidential Election?

3. What is the influence of TikTok and Instagram on voters' behaviour during the 2023 Presidential Election?
4. What factors influenced youth political participation through TikTok and Instagram during the 2023 Presidential Election?

Review of Related Literature

Social Media and Political Participation

The relationship between social media use and political participation has been extensively examined in the communication literature. Scholars broadly agree that social networking sites have lowered the transactional costs of political engagement, enabling citizens — particularly younger ones — to participate in political life without the resources or institutional access previously required (Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, & Shah, 2010). The ease with which users can share, comment, and mobilise around political content has been identified as a key mechanism through which social media drives civic behaviour (Valenzuela et al., 2012).

In the Nigerian context, Funmilola and Matthew (2020) found that social media was highly used by youths in Oyo State for political participation, with Facebook as the dominant platform, followed by WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter. Youths primarily used these platforms for political advocacy, voter education, political discussions, and communicating with elected officials. Similarly, Aghogh (2020) found that social media positively influenced Nigerian democracy by enhancing the flow of political information and awakening public political consciousness, while also noting the associated risks of hate speech and political disinformation.

More recently, Inobemhe, Obaje, and Asemah (2025) conducted an empirical assessment of social media's role in voter mobilisation during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election, finding that platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram were extensively used for mobilisation, particularly among young voters. Arowolo and Ogande (2024)

similarly found that the majority of youths frequently interacted with political content on social media, which shaped their voting intentions. These findings are consistent with broader theoretical frameworks proposing that social media use oriented toward political information seeking leads to increased political participation both online and offline (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014).

TikTok, Instagram, and Youth Political Engagement

TikTok and Instagram represent a newer generation of social media platforms characterised by visual content, influencer culture, and algorithmically curated feeds. While their primary cultural function has been entertainment and lifestyle, both platforms have increasingly become sites for political expression, campaign messaging, and civic mobilisation (Okereke, 2025; Nwosu, 2023). The short-form video format of TikTok, in particular, has proven effective at communicating political messages in accessible, emotionally resonant ways to young audiences (Barati, 2023).

In the Nigerian electoral context, Wonuola and Ajijola (2024) investigated the influence of political parties' social media voter education on youth voting habits during the 2023 general elections, finding that exposure to political information on social media significantly improved political awareness and voting participation. Ogunfeso, Alade, and Babafemi (2024) similarly found that youths relied heavily on social media platforms for political information during the 2023 elections, with such reliance shaping their perception of candidates and voting choices. Ibrahim and Lawal (2024) further demonstrated that targeted political advertisements on platforms including Instagram significantly influenced youth voting preferences.

The role of political influencers on these platforms deserves particular attention. Influencers on TikTok and Instagram function as digital opinion leaders whose content and endorsements shape followers' political attitudes and voting intentions (Olowu, 2023). This dynamic is consistent

with the two-step flow hypothesis and its more recent iterations, which posit that media influence is mediated through opinion leaders who interpret and relay information to their social networks (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). In contemporary social media ecosystems, influencers occupy this intermediary role, exercising considerable influence over young audiences' political perceptions.

Challenges: Misinformation and Political Polarisation

Alongside the opportunities afforded by TikTok and Instagram for political engagement, scholars have also documented significant challenges. Misinformation and disinformation are pervasive on both platforms, with political content particularly susceptible to manipulation, out-of-context sharing, and deliberate fabrication (Eneome et al., 2025; Akporue & Efebeh, 2025). The algorithmic architecture of these platforms, which prioritises engagement over accuracy, tends to amplify sensational and emotionally charged content, including politically polarising material, thus creating conditions that are inimical to informed democratic participation (Onyebuchi, Obayi, & Amadi, 2019).

Madukpe et al. (2025) highlighted that exposure to digital political information — while correlated with increased participation — does not uniformly translate into informed or well-reasoned electoral choices, particularly where media literacy is limited. This observation underscores the importance of digital and media literacy education as a complement to platform-based political engagement initiatives. Adeleke and Ogunlade (2022) similarly noted that while digital media served as a major source of political information among Nigerian youths, the quality and reliability of such information varied considerably.

Empirical reviews are works done by other authors in the area of study, empirically conducted by different researchers applying different techniques. Under which literature will be reviewed, empirical reviews are summarize related studies by adapting the ABSTRACT of papers using the

following guidelines. Author Name/Year Title/Location, Methodology Findings/Links

Abro, Suhard&Andi (2022) examine the Use of Social Media in Electoral process during General Elections 2018 in Punjab, Pakistan, The purpose and, major focus of the study is to measure and analyze the effect of social media on the political setup of the country, particularly in Punjab province. The findings of the study are supported by a survey conducted from the population having diverse demographics viz: gender, age group, educational qualification, profession, and, localities, etc. Results of the study depict that social media has been influential on the political behavior of the young population of Punjab province in the country

Fasunwon (2019) examine Social Media and Political Mobilisation in Nigeria, the study is qualitative analyses, Using a combination of strategy and functional theories, this study argues that the social media has become a viable and veritable tool of political mobilisation, sensitization, and socialization. The study discovered that government, activists, citizens, politicians, and political parties are able to interact and mobilize the masses, educating them on their grievances, programmes and policies through social media platforms. This study recommends that while the positive aspects of social media, should be embraced, accepted, and enhanced by nations of the world, there is a need to control its usage in dissemination of violent prone texts and images that may lead to social and political disorders. Keywords

Aghogh (2020) examined public perception of the contributions of social media to political participation processes in Delta State, Nigeria. It adopted the survey method using a sample of 500 respondents selected through a multistage sampling technique.. Findings revealed that although the social media were perceived to have positively influenced Nigeria's democracy by enhancing the flow of political information and awakening public political consciousness, the news and information being disseminated on social media platforms were noted to have increased the spate of hate

speech and stoked political unease. The study recommended that citizen journalists should imbibe online responsibility and be sensitive to public needs and expectations while using any of the social media platforms for political ends

Hyuksoo, Yeojin & Doohwang (2020) examine the relationship between use of social media and political participation has received increased scholarly scrutiny.. The current study integrates political knowledge and bridging social capital, using Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) on data collected from surveys conducted in the U.S. The results suggest that self-efficacy and outcome expectancy mediate the effects of political knowledge and bridging social capital on political participation. The proposed model represents the interactions among bridging social capital, political knowledge, self-efficacy, and outcome expectancy, providing an overall mechanism to assess the effects of social media on political participation

Abdul, Muhammad, Shahid, Shehla & Tasaddaq (2020) carried out a study on Social Media a Tool of Political Awareness and Mobilization, The purpose of this research was to see how this media is influencing voter behavior in Punjab province. A survey was conducted to find out the role of social media in creating political awareness and political mobilization. A sample size of 300 participants has been chosen to conduct the research. The results of the study depict that social media plays a vital role in the dissemination of public awareness and inflicts upon the voting behavior of the masses.

Uji (2016) carried out a research on Social Media and the Mobilization of Youths for Socio-Political Participation, The study was conducted using the survey method with questionnaires administered to selected respondents. The results showed that large numbers of youths are spending time online, and by participating in social media discussions on socio-political matters affecting the country. They are thus getting informed

and raising awareness about different issues through e-publicity and demonstrations,. The study recommends that there should be improved media literacy on the part of avid social media users and activists, in order to make the best use of the innovation for socio-political participation and reduce incidences of false or, malicious information going viral and affecting the society negatively

TaufiqAima& Muhammad (2019) investigates how online political activities impact political efficacy and real-life political participation among university students in rural Pakistan. In addition, this study also sheds light on the relationship between political activities and political awareness. We conducted an online survey of (N = 200) male and female undergraduate and graduate students from the University of Narowal, Pakistan. Qualtrics software was used to distribute the survey among students for data-collection purposes. The results reveal that the majority of the students use social media for political awareness and information. Political efficacy is significantly based on online political participation. In addition to that, social media is a vital platform for netizens to participate in real-life political activities. In conclusion,

Lubna (2022) examine the relationship between the use of social media and political participation, The research intends to explore the use of Facebook among Pakistani students and its subsequent association with their political participation. For this purpose, a survey (N= 416) has been conducted amongst university students in Pakistan in order to measure the use of Facebook along with their online and offline political activities. It has been found that online and offline political participation tends to be influenced by time spent for political purposes on Facebook.

1Shamsu, Murtala, Aliyu& 4 Bello (2018) examine tSocial Media and Political Participation: is Facebook Democratizing our Youth in Nigeria, the study employ multiple regression analysis to examine the relationship between Facebook use, interactivity with political figures, with a sample size

of (n=372). The results of this study indicate that Facebook use, interactivity with political figures, perceived Facebook information quality and political interest significantly correlates with youth offline political participation. Given that new technologies have facilitated alternative forms of opinion expression and information consumption, more research is needed into the ways in which these technologies promote young adults' political participation.

Theoretical Framework

Media Dependency Theory

This study was anchored primarily on Media Dependency Theory, developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976). The theory posits that media influence is proportional to the degree to which individuals and societies depend on media for information, particularly during periods of social uncertainty, change, or crisis. Electoral periods represent precisely such contexts: during elections, citizens are highly motivated to seek political information, and their dependence on available media — including social media — intensifies accordingly.

During the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election, social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram served as primary channels through which youths accessed real-time election updates, candidate information, political debates, results monitoring, and civic mobilisation messages. The dependency relationships established between young users and these platforms during this period likely amplified the influence of platform content on their political attitudes, voting decisions, and participation behaviours — a dynamic that this study sought to empirically examine.

Voting Behaviour Theory

The study was also guided by Voting Behaviour Theory, associated with scholars including Karl Deutsch and Theodor Adorno (1967). This theoretical tradition analyses the multiple factors — social, psychological, informational, and contextual — that shape citizens' political orientations

and voting decisions. Long-term influences include family socialisation, peer networks, and educational experiences; short-term influences encompass media exposure, campaign messaging, and electoral issues. For Nigerian youth in 2023, TikTok and Instagram represented a prominent short-term influence, mediating exposure to candidate information, political narratives, and mobilisation appeals. By situating the study within this framework, the research captures how platform-based information exposure interacts with pre-existing political orientations among young voters.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a survey research design, which is appropriate for collecting quantitative data on perceptions, behaviours, and influence patterns across large and geographically dispersed populations (Creswell, 2014; Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Survey research enables researchers to examine relationships between variables and generalise findings to a target population, making it well-suited for the objectives of this study.

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprised youths resident in Lagelu Local Government Area, Ibadan Metropolis, Oyo State, Nigeria, with an estimated population of 656,000 persons (Nigerian Population Census Office 2023). The study employed the Yamane (1967) sampling formula to determine an appropriate sample size:

$$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$$

Where n = sample size, N = population (656,000), and e = margin of error (0.05). Applying the formula yielded a sample size of 400. Simple random sampling was employed to ensure that every member of the population had an equal probability of selection, thereby minimising systematic bias and enhancing the representativeness of the sample.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire developed for this study. The instrument was divided into two

sections: Section A captured sociodemographic data (gender, age, educational qualification, and religious affiliation), while Section B contained Likert-scaled items (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree) measuring respondents' perceptions of TikTok and Instagram use, political awareness, voting behaviour, and related constructs. Items were adapted from validated instruments used in prior studies on social media and political participation (Barari, Eisend, & Jain, 2025; Nandini & Sundaravalli, 2025; DeVellis, 2017).

Face and content validity were established through expert review by senior academics in Mass Communication. Reliability was ensured through consistency in administration procedures and pilot testing among a comparable sample prior to the main data collection exercise. A total of 400 questionnaires were distributed; 360 were retrieved and found usable, representing a response rate of 90%. The simple random sampling will be used for this study. In this type of study every person has an equal chance of getting selected to be part of the sample. The objective of research work is to draw inference from a population in order to make generalization on the target population.

Data Analysis

Completed questionnaires were coded and analysed using IBM SPSS Version 24. Descriptive statistics — including frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations — were employed to present and interpret the data. Findings were presented in tabular format with interpretive commentary. Given the study's focus on perceptions and behavioural self-reports, descriptive analysis was considered the most appropriate analytical approach for addressing the research questions.

Results

Sociodemographic Profile of Respondents

Out of 360 respondents analysed, 208 (58%) were male and 152 (42%) were female. The majority of respondents (42.8%, n=154) were aged between 18 and 24 years, followed by those aged 25–30 years (35.8%, n=129), 31–35 years (18.6%, n=67), and 36 years and above (3.1%, n=11). In terms of educational qualification, 36.9% (n=133) held ND/NCE certificates, 35% (n=125) indicated other qualifications, 21.4% (n=77) possessed SSCE, 5.8% (n=21) held HND or B.Sc degrees, and 1.1% (n=4) had postgraduate qualifications. Regarding religious affiliation, 69.4% (n=250) identified as Christians, while 30.6% (n=110) identified as Muslims.

Research Question 1: Perceptions of TikTok and Instagram Relevance in Political Participation

The first research question sought to determine youths' perceptions of the relevance of TikTok and Instagram in political participation during the 2023 Presidential Election. Table 1 presents the frequency of platform use among respondents, while Table 2 presents perceptual data on platform relevance.

Table 1: Frequency of TikTok and Instagram Use Among Respondents (N=360)

Response Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Often	85	24.0
Often	100	27.8
Occasionally	108	30.0
Rarely	67	18.6
Total	360	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2026

As shown in Table 1, 30% (n=108) of respondents used TikTok and Instagram occasionally, 27.8% (n=100) used them often, and 24% (n=85) reported using them very often. Only 18.6% (n=67) indicated rare use, suggesting that a substantial majority (81.8%) engaged with these platforms regularly.

Table 2: Perceptions of TikTok and Instagram Relevance in Political Participation (N=360)

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
I use TikTok and Instagram to access political information	86 (23.9%)	130 (36.1%)	67 (18.6%)	77 (21.4%)
Political campaign messages were visible on TikTok and Instagram during the 2023 election	239 (66.4%)	84 (23.3%)	16 (4.4%)	21 (5.8%)

Note: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree. Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 reveals that 61.9% (n=216) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they used TikTok and Instagram to access political information, while 40% (n=144) disagreed. On the visibility of political campaign messages during the 2023 election, an overwhelming 89.7% (n=323) agreed or strongly agreed, with only 10.2% (n=37) disagreeing. These findings suggest that TikTok and Instagram were widely perceived as prominent spaces for political content dissemination during the election period.

Research Question 2: Perceived Effectiveness of TikTok and Instagram for Political Participation

Table 3: Perceived Effectiveness of TikTok and Instagram for Political Participation (N=360)

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
TikTok and Instagram increased my awareness about 2023 Presidential candidates	260 (72.2%)	33 (9.2%)	65 (18.1%)	0 (0.0%)
TikTok and Instagram influenced my interest in political discussions	139 (38.6%)	121 (33.6%)	38 (10.6%)	62 (17.2%)
TikTok and Instagram made political participation easier for youths	86 (23.9%)	130 (36.1%)	67 (18.6%)	77 (21.4%)
TikTok and Instagram encouraged youths to vote in the 2023 election	239 (66.4%)	84 (23.3%)	16 (4.4%)	21 (5.8%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 3 demonstrates high levels of perceived effectiveness across all four indicators. The majority of respondents (81.4%, n=293) agreed that the platforms increased their awareness of presidential candidates, with no respondents strongly disagreeing. A comparable majority (72.2%, n=260) agreed that TikTok and Instagram influenced their interest in political

discussions. Regarding the facilitation of participation, 61.9% (n=216) agreed, while 89.7% (n=323) agreed that the platforms encouraged youth voter turnout — the highest level of agreement recorded across all items in this section.

Research Question 3: Influence of TikTok and Instagram on Voter Behaviour

Table 4: Influence of TikTok and Instagram on Voter Behaviour (N=360)

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
Political content on TikTok and Instagram influenced my voting decision	167 (46.4%)	99 (27.5%)	28 (7.8%)	66 (18.3%)
Exposure to political content online increased my political interest	150 (41.7%)	144 (40.0%)	8 (2.2%)	58 (16.1%)
Political influencers shaped youths' opinions through TikTok and Instagram	39 (10.8%)	245 (68.1%)	20 (5.6%)	56 (15.6%)
Information shared on TikTok and Instagram was credible	128 (35.6%)	153 (42.5%)	13 (3.6%)	66 (18.3%)
I engaged in political activities online (liking, sharing, commenting)	213 (59.2%)	110 (30.6%)	37 (10.3%)	0 (0.0%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The data in Table 4 indicate substantial influence of TikTok and Instagram on voter behaviour. A majority of 73.9% (n=266) agreed that political content influenced their voting decisions. An even higher proportion, 81.7% (n=294), agreed that platform exposure increased their political interest. The shaping power of political influencers was acknowledged by 78.9% (n=284), while 78.1% (n=281) considered platform information to be credible. Strikingly, 89.8% (n=323) indicated active online political engagement through liking, sharing, and commenting — with no respondent strongly disagreeing — reflecting the very high levels of interactive participation characteristic of these platforms.

Research Question 4: Factors Influencing Youth Political Participation

Table 5: Factors Influencing Youth Political Participation via TikTok and Instagram (N=360)

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
Political parties effectively used TikTok and Instagram for campaigns	39 (10.8%)	245 (68.1%)	20 (5.6%)	56 (15.6%)
The style of political campaigns on TikTok and Instagram influenced youth participation	128 (35.6%)	153 (42.5%)	13 (3.6%)	66 (18.3%)

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 5 reveals that 78.9% (n=284) of respondents agreed that political parties effectively used TikTok and Instagram for campaigns, identifying strategic platform deployment as an important participation driver. Concurrently, 78.1% (n=281) agreed that the style of political campaigns — characterised by creative, visual, and engaging content — significantly influenced youth political involvement. These findings suggest that both the strategic intent of political actors and the aesthetic and communicative quality of campaign content are key determinants of youth participation on these platforms.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study illuminate several important dimensions of the relationship between platform-based social media use and youth political participation in Nigeria's democratic context. Broadly, the results confirm that TikTok and Instagram have assumed a central role in the political information environment of Nigerian youths, functioning simultaneously as sources of campaign content, arenas for civic expression, tools of political mobilisation, and spaces for interactive political engagement.

The high frequency of platform use among respondents (81.8% engaging occasionally to very often) is consistent with broader trends in youth social media adoption in Nigeria and across sub-Saharan Africa (Uche, 2022; Akinwale, 2022). This level of engagement suggests that TikTok and Instagram constitute a significant part of the youth information

diet, making them structurally important to any comprehensive analysis of political communication among young Nigerians. The Media Dependency Theory framework adopted for this study finds clear empirical support: the degree of dependence on these platforms during the politically uncertain period of the 2023 election correlates with substantial perceived influence over political attitudes and behaviours.

The study's finding that 89.7% of respondents agreed that campaign messages were visible on these platforms during the 2023 election corroborates qualitative and observational evidence that political parties and candidates invested heavily in digital campaign content during this period (Arowolo & Ogande, 2024; Okereke, 2025). The saturation of political messaging on TikTok and Instagram created an environment of heightened political awareness, with 81.4% of respondents reporting increased awareness of presidential candidates as a result of platform exposure. These outcomes align with the agenda-setting dimension of media dependency: platforms shape not only what citizens think about, but also which political actors and issues receive cognitive and evaluative attention (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2014).

The influence of political influencers, acknowledged by 78.9% of respondents, is a particularly noteworthy finding. The emergence of influencers as digital opinion leaders on TikTok and Instagram represents a significant evolution of the two-step flow model (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), in which mediated influence operates not through traditional journalists or broadcasters, but through peer-connected content creators whose authenticity and relatability appeal strongly to young audiences (Olowu, 2023). This dynamic has major implications for political campaign strategy, as parties that succeed in enlisting credible influencers may enjoy disproportionate reach among youth demographics.

The finding that 89.8% of respondents reported active online political participation — including liking, sharing, and commenting —

underscores the interactive and participatory character of these platforms. This finding is broadly consistent with Uji (2016), Funmilola and Matthew (2020), and Inobemhe et al. (2025), all of whom identified online interaction as a key mode of youth political engagement in Nigeria. However, it is important to distinguish between expressive participation (sharing, commenting) and substantive participation (voting, canvassing, civic organising), as the former does not automatically translate into the latter (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010).

Notwithstanding these predominantly positive findings, the study also surfaces important qualificatory concerns. The minority of respondents (approximately 21%) who doubted the credibility of platform information points to persistent anxiety about misinformation and disinformation on these platforms, a concern widely echoed in the literature (Eneome et al., 2025; Akporue & Efebeh, 2025). Similarly, the 40% of respondents who did not perceive TikTok and Instagram as making political participation easier serves as a reminder that the digital divide, smartphone accessibility, data cost, and varying levels of digital literacy continue to mediate uneven access to platform-based political opportunities in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that TikTok and Instagram occupy a significant and growing place in the political communication landscape of Nigerian youths, particularly within the context of the 2023 Presidential Election. The platforms serve as important spaces for political information access, awareness formation, voter mobilisation, and interactive civic engagement. The findings provide empirical support for theoretical propositions drawn from Media Dependency Theory and Voting Behaviour Theory regarding the centrality of media exposure and dependency in shaping political attitudes and participation behaviours among young citizens.

At the same time, the study highlights persistent challenges — including misinformation, information credibility concerns, and uneven access — that temper the democratic potential of these platforms. Realising their full civic value will require concerted and complementary interventions from multiple stakeholders.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are advanced:

- I. Political parties, candidates, and campaign organisations should invest in developing youth-oriented, accurate, and issue-based content on TikTok and Instagram that enhances informed political participation rather than reinforcing polarisation or spreading misinformation.
- ii. Government agencies, civil society organisations, and educational institutions should integrate digital and media literacy programmes into secondary and tertiary curricula to equip young Nigerians with the skills to critically evaluate political content encountered on social media platforms.
- iii. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and other electoral management bodies should develop platform-specific civic education campaigns on TikTok and Instagram, leveraging the reach and engagement dynamics of these platforms to increase voter registration, awareness, and turnout among youth.
- iv. Regulatory bodies, including the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and relevant digital governance authorities, should develop and enforce context-appropriate policies for monitoring political content on social media during election periods, with specific attention to reducing hate speech, disinformation, and politically inflammatory material
- .v. Future research should employ mixed-methods designs —

combining survey instruments with content analysis of political posts and qualitative interviews — to provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms through which TikTok and Instagram shape political engagement among Nigerian youths across different geopolitical zones.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research or the preparation of this manuscript.

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Ethical Approval

Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. All respondents provided informed consent prior to questionnaire administration. No personal identifying information was collected or retained.

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