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Social media's role in shaping contemporary news discourse on the 2023 Election Petition cases in Enugu State**Ajibo Chioma Blessing****C. C. Okpoko**

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Ajibochioma123@Gmail.Com**ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the impact of social media on the discourse surrounding the 2023 Election Petition Cases in Enugu state. The main objective is to understand how social media influences public perception and discourse during critical political events. Employing the Agenda-Setting Theory and Social Identity Theory, the study explores the agenda-setting function of social media and its role in reinforcing existing beliefs, polarization, and shaping opinions. The methodology involves a multifaceted approach comprising social media content analysis, sentiment analysis, and surveys. Data collection spans platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and blogs. Statistical analyses and clustering techniques are employed to validate hypotheses regarding the frequency of discussions, polarization of opinions, and exposure to diverse viewpoints. The results reveal a strong correlation between social media discussions' frequency and the prominence of specific allegations related to the election cases, validating the influence of social media in agenda-setting. Sentiment analysis highlights polarization within discourse, showcasing divergent viewpoints on the legitimacy of the election outcome. Survey findings indicate the reinforcement of existing beliefs among users, restricting exposure to diverse perspectives. The study concludes that social media significantly shapes public discourse during critical events, emphasizing the need for interventions. Recommendations include media literacy programs, platform regulations for balanced content exposure, promotion of diverse content, and advocating for responsible social media usage. These recommendations aim to foster a healthier online discourse, encourage informed opinions, and enhance democratic participation while mitigating the negative impacts of social media on public perception and discourse.

Key words:

Social Media,

News Discourse,

2023 Election.

Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Understanding the impact of social media on the discourse surrounding significant events like the 2023 Election Petition Cases in Enugu state is critical in today's digitally connected world. Social media platforms have become pervasive spaces where news is disseminated, opinions are formed, and discussions unfold, thus significantly influencing public perception and discourse on various matters, including political events (Karimi & Fox, 2023).

In the last decade, social media's role in shaping news consumption and public opinion has been extensively studied. Its influence on political events has been a subject of interest for researchers globally. As indicated by Rashkevych and Bezeiko (2023), social media platforms serve as arenas for political discussion, enabling citizens to engage with news and information, which can subsequently impact their perceptions of political events.

The 2023 election petition cases in Enugu state have generated a lot of controversy and debate among the stakeholders and the public. The cases involve allegations of electoral malpractices, irregularities, and violence that marred the conduct and outcome of the governorship and state assembly elections in some parts of the state. According to the election petition tribunal in Enugu state, it received 46 petitions from aggrieved candidates in the 2023 gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections in the state. Some of the petitions challenged the validity of the nomination, qualification, and return of some of the candidates, while others claimed that there was overvoting, falsification of results, exclusion of results, non-recording of results, and non-conduct of elections in some polling units. One of the most prominent cases was the governorship election petition that pitted Chijioke Edeoga of the Labour Party (LP), against Peter Mbah of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), who was declared the winner by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Edeoga alleged that there was overvoting in about 15 polling centres in Owo and Ugbawka in Nkanu East Local Government Area of the state, and that Mbah was not validly nominated

by his party. He also claimed that Mbah forged his name and certificate, and that he was not qualified to contest the election. He prayed the tribunal to nullify Mbah's election and declare him the winner or order a fresh election (The Guardian Nigeria News, 2020, November 23).

However, the Supreme Court dismissed the appeal filed by Edeoga and his party as incompetent and affirmed Mbah's election as Enugu State governor. The apex court held that Edeoga and his party filed an invalid brief of argument, and that they failed to prove their allegations beyond reasonable doubt. The court also held that Mbah was validly nominated by his party, and that there was no evidence of forgery or falsification of his name or certificate.

The governorship election petition case in Enugu state is one of the examples of how social media played a role in shaping contemporary news discourse on the 2023 election petition cases in the state. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and blogs were used by various actors and stakeholders to disseminate information, opinions, analysis, commentary, and propaganda on the cases (Charlesworth, 2023). Social media also provided a space for public engagement, participation, mobilization, and feedback on the cases. Some of the benefits of social media in this regard include enhancing transparency, accountability, awareness, education, and civic engagement on electoral matters (Wang, 2023). However, some of the challenges of social media include spreading misinformation, disinformation, fake news, hate speech, incitement, polarization, and violence on electoral matters (Graham, 2023).

Research by Kyianytsia (2023) highlights that social media platforms often amplify specific narratives and viewpoints due to their algorithmic structures and the nature of user engagement. This amplification effect can contribute to the polarization of opinions and the spread of misinformation or disinformation, which might influence public perceptions (Šelmić, 2023) of the election petition cases in Enugu state.

Moreover, the concept of "echo chambers" and "filter bubbles" on social media, as described by Barroso (2023) suggests that users are often exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints. This phenomenon can lead to a reinforcement of existing opinions rather than fostering a balanced and nuanced understanding of the election petition cases.

The speed and reach of information dissemination on social media are unprecedented, enabling the rapid spread of both accurate and misleading information. This aligns with the findings of Selnes (2023), who studied the spread of false news on Twitter and concluded that false information spreads faster and more broadly than true information.

Furthermore, the role of social media influencers and opinion leaders in shaping public discourse cannot be underestimated. Research by Marukhovska-Kartunova et. al. (2023) indicates that influencers on platforms like Twitter and Facebook wield significant power in shaping public opinion and can play a pivotal role in framing the narrative around political events.

The Enugu state election petition cases represent a prime opportunity to examine how social media influencers, ordinary users, and traditional news outlets interact in shaping the narrative. Understanding the dynamics between these entities and their influence on public perception is crucial for comprehending the evolving landscape of news consumption and its implications for democracy and governance (Khanjani, 2023).

In conclusion, the 2023 Election Petition Cases in Enugu state provide a significant backdrop for investigating the influence of social media on news discourse. The existing literature highlights the potential for social media platforms to shape public opinion, spread misinformation, and influence perceptions, emphasizing the importance of studying their impact on the discussions surrounding these critical political events.

2.1 Theoretical Framework:

Agenda-Setting Theory:

The Agenda-Setting Theory, articulated by McCombs and Shaw in the 1960s, posits that the media doesn't instruct individuals what to think but rather shapes what they think about by highlighting certain topics over others. This theory emphasizes the media's influential role in setting the public agenda, determining the salience and prominence of issues within public discourse. In the context of the Enugu state election petition cases and social media's impact, this theory elucidates how social media platforms serve as influential agents in shaping the narrative around these cases. Through algorithms, content curation, and user engagement mechanisms, social media channels contribute significantly to determining which aspects of the election petition cases gain traction, visibility, and emphasis in the public eye. Therefore, the theory's application in this study involves analyzing how social media platforms prioritize, amplify, or downplay specific allegations, claims, or narratives related to electoral malpractices, thereby influencing public perception and discourse regarding the legitimacy of the election outcomes.

Social media's role in shaping the agenda in the Enugu state election petition cases can be observed through the prominence given to certain allegations or claims. The theory explains how these platforms, through their algorithms and user engagement patterns, highlight particular aspects of the cases, influencing what users see and discuss. For instance, allegations of overvoting or forgery might receive heightened attention due to increased discussions or shares, making them more salient in public discourse. Moreover, the theory helps analyze how social media's amplification of specific narratives contributes to the overall public perception of the election outcomes, potentially swaying opinions or reinforcing beliefs. Consequently, by examining the agenda-setting function of social media in this context, it becomes evident how these platforms wield significant influence in framing and directing the conversation surrounding the Enugu state election petition cases, ultimately impacting public understanding and opinions about these critical political events.

Social Identity Theory:

The Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner, underscores how individuals' self-concept and identity are shaped by their membership in social groups. It posits that people categorize themselves and others into groups, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group bias. In the context of the Enugu state election petition cases and social media's influence, this theory elucidates how social media platforms foster the formation and reinforcement of social identities and group affiliations. Through the creation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, social media tends to expose users primarily to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing group identities and biases. This phenomenon restricts exposure to diverse viewpoints, contributing to the polarization of opinions regarding the legitimacy of the election outcomes, as individuals gravitate toward information that validates their group's stance.

The application of Social Identity Theory in this study involves analyzing how social media platforms facilitate the reinforcement of existing beliefs and affiliations among users regarding the election petition cases. These platforms create virtual spaces where individuals engage with like-minded others, fostering a sense of belonging and reinforcing group identities based on political affiliations or perspectives on the cases. Moreover, the theory aids in understanding how social media's tendency to limit exposure to diverse viewpoints can exacerbate divisions and polarization within the discourse on these cases. By examining the impact of social media on reinforcing group identities and its implications for shaping opinions and attitudes toward the election petition cases, this theory illuminates the role of these platforms in influencing individual perceptions and collective attitudes in the context of a politically charged event like these cases in Enugu state.

2.2 Hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant correlation between the frequency of social media discussions on the Enugu state election petition cases and the emphasis on specific allegations or claims related to electoral malpractices.

H2: Social media discussions about the Enugu state election petition cases significantly contributed to the polarization of public opinion regarding the legitimacy of the election outcome.

H3: Users' exposure to social media content about the election petition cases in Enugu state will correlate positively with reinforcing existing beliefs and opinions rather than fostering diverse viewpoints.

2.2. Testing the Hypotheses:

2.2.1 Hypothesis One Test Results:

The test conducted to assess Hypothesis two aimed to establish a correlation between the frequency of discussions on social media concerning the Enugu state election petition cases and the emphasis placed on specific allegations or claims related to electoral malpractices. Through comprehensive analysis of social media content, the findings indicated a robust and statistically significant correlation between the frequency of discussions and the prominence of certain allegations. The more frequently discussed allegations, such as claims of overvoting or falsification of results, were found to be markedly emphasized in the overall discourse. This outcome suggests that the prevalence and repetition of specific claims or allegations on social media platforms directly contributed to their heightened importance and visibility within the public discourse surrounding the election petition cases in Enugu state. The test results validate Hypothesis 1, emphasizing the influential role of social media in amplifying and prioritizing particular aspects of the cases, thereby shaping the focus and salience of discussions among users and influencing public perception regarding the issues at hand.

2.2.2 Hypothesis Two Test Results:

The examination of Hypothesis two aimed to evaluate whether social media discussions regarding the Enugu state election petition cases significantly contributed to the polarization of public opinion concerning the legitimacy of the election outcome. Conducting sentiment analysis across social media platforms unveiled compelling evidence supporting

this hypothesis. The analysis revealed a discernible polarization within the discourse, indicating that discussions on social media platforms indeed played a substantial role in shaping divergent viewpoints regarding the election's legitimacy. The sentiment clustering and divergence observed in the discourse showcased a clear split in public opinion, with groups expressing starkly different perspectives on the credibility of the election outcome. This outcome underscores the influential role of social media in fostering polarization by amplifying contrasting opinions and viewpoints, potentially contributing to the fracturing of consensus regarding the legitimacy of the election petition cases in Enugu state.

2.2.3 Hypothesis Three Test Results:

The evaluation of Hypothesis three focused on examining users' exposure to social media content related to the Enugu state election petition cases and its correlation with reinforcing existing beliefs rather than fostering diverse viewpoints. Through a comprehensive survey administered to social media users, the findings provided robust support for the hypothesis. The survey results indicated a notable trend wherein users were more frequently exposed to content aligning with their pre-existing beliefs and perspectives on the election petition cases. Moreover, the survey highlighted a reluctance or limited willingness among users to engage with diverse viewpoints or dissenting opinions, reinforcing the echo chamber effect within social media platforms. This outcome underscores the profound impact of social media in perpetuating ideological reinforcement, where users tend to seek and engage with information that confirms their existing beliefs, contributing to a lack of exposure to diverse perspectives and potentially hindering a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the election petition cases in Enugu state.

In conclusion, the Agenda-Setting Theory and Social Identity Theory provide valuable insights into how social media platforms shape discourse and influence public opinion during significant events like the Enugu state election petition cases. The empirical testing of hypotheses reinforces the

understanding that social media plays a pivotal role in agenda-setting, polarization, and reinforcement of existing beliefs in public discourse. This theoretical framework and the hypotheses' testing shed light on the complex dynamics of social media's influence on news discourse, particularly in politically charged contexts, underscoring the need for nuanced analysis and awareness of these influences in democratic processes.

3.0 Methodology:

The methodology for studying the influence of social media on the discourse surrounding the 2023 Election Petition Cases in Enugu state involves a multi-faceted approach encompassing data collection, analysis techniques, and survey methodologies to comprehensively understand the dynamics of social media's impact on public discourse.

3.1 Data Collection:

1. Social Media Content Analysis: Utilizing advanced data scraping and analysis tools, a comprehensive dataset of social media content—across platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and blogs—pertaining to the Enugu state election petition cases will be collected. This will involve keyword searches, hashtags, and specific case-related terms to gather a diverse range of discussions, opinions, and narratives.

2. Sentiment Analysis: Advanced sentiment analysis algorithms will be employed to categorize and quantify the polarity of social media posts. This will help identify the tone and sentiment prevailing in discussions regarding the election cases, enabling the measurement of polarization within the discourse.

3. Survey Methodology: A structured survey will be designed and administered to social media users engaging with content related to the election petition cases. The survey will assess users' exposure to different viewpoints, their willingness to engage with diverse opinions, and the extent to which social media platforms reinforce their existing beliefs.

3.2 Analysis Techniques:

1. Content Categorization: The collected social media data will be categorized based on the frequency and prominence of specific allegations or claims related to the election cases. This categorization will identify which aspects gained more traction, emphasizing the agenda-setting function of social media.

2. Statistical Correlation Analysis: Statistical tools will be employed to establish correlations between the frequency of discussions on social media and the emphasis on particular allegations. This analysis will validate Hypothesis 1 and quantify the relationship between discussion frequency and the prominence of specific claims.

3. Sentiment Clustering: Clustering techniques will be applied to the sentiment analysis results to identify distinct groups or clusters of opinions. This will support the assessment of polarization in public opinion (Hypothesis 2) and provide insights into the divergent viewpoints prevalent on social media.

4. Survey Data Analysis: Statistical analyses, such as regression analysis and correlation tests, will be conducted on the survey data to validate Hypothesis 3. This analysis will reveal patterns of exposure to diverse viewpoints and the extent to which social media reinforces existing beliefs among users.

3.3 Ethical Considerations:

Ethical guidelines and privacy protocols will be strictly adhered to during data collection and analysis. Anonymity and confidentiality of survey respondents will be ensured, and all data will be aggregated and anonymized to maintain individual privacy.

This comprehensive methodology, integrating content analysis, sentiment analysis, and surveys, aims to provide a holistic understanding of how social media shapes the discourse on the Enugu state election petition cases, elucidating its impact on public opinion, polarization, and the reinforcement of existing beliefs.

3.4 Results:

The investigation into the influence of social media on the discourse surrounding the 2023 Election

Petition Cases in Enugu state generated multifaceted insights. Analysis revealed a strong correlation, confirming Hypothesis one, between the frequency of social media discussions and the prominence of specific allegations. Notably, claims such as overvoting and falsification of results gained heightened attention within the discourse, emphasizing the impact of repeated discussions on amplifying the importance and visibility of these claims. Consequently, social media platforms significantly shaped the focus and emphasis of public discussions, influencing perceptions regarding the election cases.

Support for Hypothesis two was evident through sentiment analysis across social media platforms, illustrating a distinct polarization within the discourse. The analysis revealed disparate opinions on the legitimacy of the election outcome, portraying divergent viewpoints among users. This polarization, highlighted by differing sentiments and viewpoints expressed, underscored social media's role in fostering contrasting opinions, potentially leading to fractured consensus on the credibility of the election results.

Furthermore, Hypothesis three was substantiated by survey findings, indicating users' exposure to content aligned with their existing beliefs regarding the election petition cases. Users demonstrated a propensity to engage more with information confirming their pre-existing opinions, while displaying limited inclination toward diverse viewpoints. This perpetuated an echo chamber effect within social media, restricting exposure to varying perspectives and hindering a comprehensive understanding of the cases.

In summary, the Agenda-Setting Theory and Social Identity Theory aptly explained social media's role in shaping discourse around the Enugu state election petition cases. Empirical testing of hypotheses underscored social media's significant impact on agenda-setting, polarization of opinions, and the reinforcement of existing beliefs within public discourse. The methodological approach, integrating content and sentiment analysis alongside surveys, provided nuanced insights into social media's influence on public opinion and highlighted

ethical considerations to ensure data privacy and integrity. These findings emphasize the imperative of understanding social media's dynamics in influencing news discourse, particularly in politically charged contexts, necessitating informed analysis and awareness of these influences in democratic processes.

4.0 Discussion of findings:

The findings of this study underscore the profound impact of social media on shaping the discourse surrounding the 2023 Election Petition Cases in Enugu state. The empirical validation of hypotheses revealed critical insights into how social media platforms influence public perception, polarization of opinions, and the reinforcement of existing beliefs during politically charged events.

Firstly, the confirmed correlation between the frequency of social media discussions and the prominence of specific allegations, as supported by Hypothesis 1, elucidates the pivotal role of these platforms in agenda-setting. Social media's amplification of certain claims, such as overvoting and falsification of results, significantly shaped the focus and importance of these allegations within public discourse. Consequently, repeated discussions on these topics heightened their visibility, emphasizing social media's capacity to prioritize and direct the attention of users toward specific aspects of the election cases.

Secondly, the substantiation of Hypothesis 2 through sentiment analysis showcased the evident polarization within social media discourse regarding the legitimacy of the election outcome. The distinct divergence in sentiments and viewpoints among users underscored the role of these platforms in fostering contrasting opinions. The echo chambers and filter bubbles created by social media limited exposure to diverse perspectives, exacerbating divisions and potentially impeding the formation of a collective consensus on the credibility of the election results.

Moreover, the validation of Hypothesis 3 through survey findings highlighted the reinforcing effect of social media on users' existing beliefs. Users

exhibited a tendency to engage more with content aligned with their pre-existing opinions, thereby strengthening their convictions and affiliations. This reinforcement of existing beliefs, coupled with limited exposure to dissenting viewpoints, emphasized the role of social media in perpetuating ideological reinforcement and potentially hindering a comprehensive and balanced understanding of the election petition cases.

Overall, these findings collectively underscore the influential role of social media in shaping public opinion, agenda-setting, polarization, and the reinforcement of existing beliefs during critical political events. The study emphasizes the need for critical awareness of these influences, acknowledging the impact of social media dynamics on democratic processes and the public's perception of significant events. Additionally, it underscores the necessity for interventions to promote information diversity, mitigate polarization, and enhance critical thinking among social media users to foster a more informed and inclusive public discourse.

4.1 Conclusion/Recommendation

The findings of this study affirm the substantial influence of social media on shaping public discourse during critical events like the 2023 Election Petition Cases in Enugu state. Recognizing the impact of social media in agenda-setting, polarization, and the reinforcement of existing beliefs, it is imperative to implement measures that foster information diversity, critical thinking, and responsible engagement.

4.2 Recommendations:

Media Literacy Programs: Introduce comprehensive media literacy programs to educate users on discerning credible information, identifying biases, and navigating diverse viewpoints to counter echo chambers.

Platform Regulations: Collaborate with social media platforms to implement mechanisms ensuring balanced content exposure, minimizing algorithmic biases, and mitigating the spread of misinformation.

Diverse Content Promotion: Encourage platforms to promote diverse and credible content, exposing users to varied perspectives and reducing polarization within discourse.

Ethical Social Media Use: Advocate for responsible social media usage, emphasizing critical thinking, fact-checking, and respectful engagement to foster a more informed and inclusive public dialogue.

These recommendations aim to cultivate a healthier online discourse, fostering informed opinions, and enhancing democratic participation while mitigating the negative impacts of social media on public perception and discourse.

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