Twitter and Political Communication in Emerging Democracies: An Analysis of Nigeria's 18 Political Parties

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Abstract
Twitter, the 15th most popular social networking platform (Dixon, 2022) is one of the world's dominant political communication and campaign tools. Although there is a plethora of research on Twitter usage by political parties, many of the studies focus on economically and politically stable economies. Little is, therefore, known about the functions Twitter serves and the topics discussed by political parties using the platform in emerging democracies. This study addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence on the functions of Nigerian political party tweets, the frequency of Twitter usage, and the dominant issues Nigeria's 18 registered parties tweet about. Evidence is presented which shows that the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Nigeria's main opposition party accounted for the highest frequency of Twitter usage. The study also revealed Twitter as primarily a promotional tool for Nigerian political parties; and the 2023 elections, 2023 presidential flagbearers, and the state of the nation as the dominant topics discussed by the registered political parties. Our findings are an offshoot of a manual and computer-aided content analysis of 10, 097 tweets posted by the parties. This study is one of the first to offer critical insights into the role of Twitter in Nigerian political institutions.

Keywords: Twitter, Nigerian political parties, Politics, Nigeria, PDP, Affordances

Introduction

The Internet has birthed digital natives and immigrants who are reshaping the political landscape via social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. These individuals who leverage the affordances of social media have been labelled at one time, "the text-messaging generation" (Shirky, 2011, p. 1) and in another instance, the Sorosoke generation (Onyedinefu, 2022, p. 6). The usefulness of this platform for participation, organisation, and collaboration for civic and democratic purposes has not gone unnoticed by political actors (Ahmed et al., 2016). As Dimitrova and Matthes asserted, social media have redefined "the way we learn about politics, form opinions and attitudes, and ultimately engage in or disengage from the political process" (2018, p. 333).

Social media were introduced into the Nigerian political scene during the 2011 general elections (Dagona et al., 2013). The flag bearers of political parties, civil organisations, political parties, and other politically active citizens used these platforms to organise campaigns, express their positions on key social and economic issues, mobilise votes, sample public opinion, and share their manifestos. The gains obtained via the use of social media during the 2011 elections, especially for speedy information dissemination between political actors like politicians, the news media, and the public resulted in its massive deployment in 2015 and other subsequent elections (Okoro & Santa, 2017; Apuke & Tunca, 2018).

Although Twitter is not the most popular social media network, its growing user base of over 396 million (Shepherd, 2022) and unique affordances make it relevant for political communication and engagement (Hong & Nadler, 2011). Unlike Facebook, content on Twitter is visible to all Twitter users (tweeps). This is because, by design, the platform operates an "open, horizontal, and broadly-networked architecture" (Kadijat et al., 2020, p. 134). Twitter shares some similarities with traditional platforms in terms of its logic. Like legacy media, Twitter favours prominent people, conflict, and human-interest posts as well as stories that trigger positive and negative sentiments (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Trilling et al., 2017). Twitter is also an important news source because news breaks on the platform a lot faster than it does on traditional media. These features and affordances such as visibility, 'editability', persistence, and networked association (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) explain why the platform is preferred for access to and

dissemination of information and messages by many political actors around the world, including Nigeria.

For several reasons, Twitter for political communication and engagement is particularly important in the Nigerian context. Firstly, Nigeria's political landscape is shifting following a significant rise in political participation among the youth, many of whom can be found on Twitter. According to Statista, the number of Twitter users in Nigeria in 2022 is approximately 5.1 million (Sasu, 2022). Secondly, whereas legacy media in Nigeria are highly regulated and more accessible to the elite, Twitter offers everyday people the opportunity to directly engage politicians and political parties, challenge government policies, and draw attention to critical social and economic issues. Thirdly, Twitter is a critical platform for political activism in Nigeria as evidenced in the #EndSARS protests and the events leading to the ban of Twitter in Nigeria.

The EndSARS campaign commenced around December 2017, when young Nigerians on Twitter began to speak up regarding the indiscriminate use of power by an arm of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). There were widespread claims of targeted abuse, extrajudicial killings, extortion, and harassment by the unit (Dambo et al., 2020). By October 2020, Nigerian youths had leveraged the affordances of Twitter and other social media platforms to successfully mobilise a global protest, such as had never been witnessed in the country. A national concern quickly went global because social media platforms like Twitter "are increasingly playing the role of public sphere where public issues are debated outside the control and dominance of government" (Hari, 2014, p. 37). In June 2021, many Nigerians asked Twitter to suspend the account of the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari claiming a post by the President was inciteful. Twitter deleted the post, while the Nigerian state banned the platform. The ban on Twitter was lifted seven months later after the government claimed it had reached an agreement with Twitter (Akinwotu, 2022).

Considering the many benefits of Twitter in global politics and its growing relevance in Nigeria, it is projected that the platform could be critical in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Nigeria's seventh quadrennial general election, scheduled to hold in February 2023 is significant for several reasons. First, there is overwhelming resentment against the current administration, which many deem responsible for the declining state of the economy. For instance, a recent study conducted by the Africa Polling Institute found that 78% of Nigerians disapprove of the Buhari administration (Yusuf, 2022). This outcome may be attributed to high inflation levels and severe food insecurity (Oluwole, 2022). Nigeria is also the country with the highest number of extremely poor persons in Africa (Oluwole, 2022) and about 23 million Nigerians are unemployed (George, 2022). In addition to all these, the rate of insecurity is alarming with Boko Haram terrorists, killer herdsmen, and secessionists wreaking havoc in different parts of the country. The 2023 election for many Nigerians, presents an opportunity to oust the country's poor-performing leaders.

Second, voting patterns in 2023 are predicted to change owing to a significant rise in youth participation (Obinna et al., 2022). Although Nigeria possesses one of the largest youth populations globally (World Bank, 2022), the country has repeatedly witnessed apathy among this demographic during elections (Bamigbola, 2022). This trend is pictured to change in 2023 following the massive involvement of youths in the Continuous Voter Registration (CVR) exercise organised by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Whereas only 28% and 29% of youths voted during the 2019 presidential and gubernatorial elections, youths accounted for 80% of newly registered voters according to INEC (Onyedinefu, 2022). The postulations regarding the increase in youth participation in the 2023 elections and more generally, Nigerian politics have been linked to the successes recorded during and after the #EndSARS protests. Although the #EndSARS movement was initially designed to protest police brutality, it soon evolved into a call to end bad governance in Nigeria (Akerele-Popoola et al., 2022, p. 8). The #EndSARS protests have been described as an episode of "real political awakening" for many Nigerian youths, one which some

claim is responsible for the massive turnout for voter registration, Permanent Voters Card (PVC) collection, and possible youth involvement in the 2023 elections (Onyedinefu, 2022, p. 7).

Third, after months of holding back assent, President Muhammadu Buhari on 25 February 2022 signed into law the 2022 Electoral Act Amendment Bill. Whereas Nigeria's old electoral guidelines have been described as inherently flawed, contributing to a high incidence of election rigging and a threat to democratic values (Awopeju, 2011), this new act has been labelled a "landmark improvement" (Ayokunmi, 2022, p. 2). For instance, the introduction of a central electronic voter base could bolster transparency and effective record keeping, reining in instances of illegal voting. The new act also stipulates that election results be electronically transferred. This is likely to reduce instances of ballot box snatching, vote buying, and other expressions of electoral violence and malfeasance (Eme, 2022). Whereas the electoral body, INEC, and other civil society organisations have launched campaigns encouraging citizens to vote in 2023 owing to the changes in the electoral act, it remains to be seen whether these laws will be effectively executed, and defaulters punished. This is because some of the challenges with Nigerian elections are not limited to the flaws within the electoral laws but are in some instances centred on the implementation of already existing laws.

Lastly, Nigerian presidential elections have in the last two election cycles been a two-horse race, a contest between the two largest and most popular parties - the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). Unlike the 2015 and 2019 general elections, the 2023 presidential election is shaping up to be a three-horse race between the flag bearer of the APC, Bola Ahmed Tinubu; the PDP's Atiku Abubakar; and the Labour Party's (LP) candidate, Peter Obi. Peter Obi who resigned his membership in the PDP to emerge as the candidate of the LP, is now a top contender following his meteoric rise and popularity among the youth. The support Obi enjoys among Nigeria's teeming youths is unprecedented as his base has pullulated into an organic front termed the Obidient Movement, many of whom are active on Twitter. Using the platform, members of the movement have organised marches and rallies across and beyond the borders of Nigeria, mobilising support for their preferred candidate. According to Okocha et al. (2022), "Mr. Peter Obi, is not just the issue in the election, but he also appears set to disrupt and deadlock the February 25 presidential race" (para. 1). In addition to the three-horse race posture of the 2023 elections, each of the flag bearers is from Nigeria's largest ethnic groups, Yoruba, Hausa/Fulani, and Igbo respectively. Ethnicity like religion is a key identity marker in Nigeria and an important variable in the allocation of state resources (Babalola, 2014; Lewis & Bratton, 2000, p. 26). During elections, these identity markers are often wielded as weapons and negotiation tools and have, therefore, become major determinants in election outcomes. Although Nigerians have historically voted along religious, ethnic, and party lines, the outcome of the 2023 general elections may be significantly influenced by the Obi factor and internal party crises.

Previous studies, especially with a focus on economically and politically stable economies, have shown how political actors use Twitter during electoral campaigns, and how elected leaders utilise the platform for governance purposes (Larsson & Moe, 2012; Graham et al., 2013). Researchers around the world have also established that citizens rely on social media to access political content, mobilise and/or organise in support of or against various causes, as well as express their dissatisfaction with the leadership class (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Lee & Chan, 2015; Ajisafe, 2021; Chiakaan et al., 2022). However, much less is known about Twitter usage by political parties in emerging democracies and deeply polarised political settings like Nigeria. This study addresses this gap by providing additional empirical evidence on the frequency of Twitter usage, the functions of Nigerian political party tweets, and the dominant issues Nigerian political parties tweet about.

Research objectives

In this study, we seek to gain a more robust understanding of how Nigeria's 18 political parties use Twitter. To do this, we raised three key objectives. The first was to determine the frequency of Twitter usage by the different parties. Although the frequency of Twitter usage could be interpreted in many ways including measuring how often, political party account managers, open the application, here it refers to how often the political parties use Twitter to share or distribute information, and this is measured in terms of the number of visible political party tweets. The second objective was to delineate the functions political party tweets serve, while the third, we sought to identify the dominant topics and issues Nigerian political parties tweet about.

Research questions

The following research questions have been formulated to guide this study:

   i.   How often did the 18 political parties tweet?

  ii.   What were the functions of political party tweets?

 iii.   What were the dominant topics and issues the political parties tweeted about?

Review of related literature

This research is undertaken from the perspective of two communication theories - mediatisation and uses and gratification. Mediatisation is a communication theory that captures how evolutions in media technologies are reshaping the "communicative construction of culture and society" (Hepp, 2013, p. 616). Mediatisation accounts for how social media is revolutionising how politics is conducted and justifies their inclusion as a critical aspect of political parties' communication strategy, the Uses and Gratification Theory underpins the benefits and values gained because of social media use. Together, these theories explain the growing popularity of platforms like Twitter as evidenced in the utilisation of the platform by opposition parties (Hemphill et al., 2013: Plotkowiak & Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2013); established parties (Amirullah et al., 2013), incumbents (Evans et al., 2014), and parties with high and low campaign budgets (Gilmore, 2012; Jungherr, 2016).

The rising influence of Twitter as a favoured platform for political discourse has not gone unnoticed by scholars. For instance, Graham et al. (2013) while examining Twitter use by British political parties during the 2010 elections noted that political actors use the platform as a public relations tool, for self-promotion and representation, political mobilisation, and dissemination of campaign timelines and updates. On a larger scale, however, political parties primarily used the platform for posting campaign updates (Evans et al., 2014). Whereas incumbents adopted a more broadcast style to Twitter usage (Grusell & Nord, 2012; Adams & McCorkindale, 2013), opposition parties interacted more with users (Larsson & Kalnes, 2014). Other scholars have sought to establish the relevance of Twitter for electoral wins. Whereas Ahmed et al. (2014) investigation of the 2014 Indian elections and LaMarre and Suzuki-Lambrecht's (2013) study about the 2010 US congressional elections indicated a positive relationship between Twitter use and electoral wins, Jungherr (2014) found a negative correlation between Twitter mentions and votes during the 2009 federal elections in Germany.

Although research is replete on Twitter use by political parties globally, very few focus on Nigerian political parties. This is even though the political party system as a means of electing leaders has been in existence in Nigeria for about 100 years, following the introduction of elective representation in the 1922 constitution (Agunbiade, 2022). While many of Nigeria's earliest parties were described as ethnic-based, the fourth republic saw the proliferation of multicultural political parties and as of 2019; there were over 90 political parties in the country. Ahead of the 2023 elections, Nigeria's electoral umpire, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) announced the de-registration of 74 and registration of 18 political parties. These include the All Progressives Congress (APC) Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), All Progressives Grand Alliance

(APGA), Accord Party, (AP) Action Alliance (AA), African Action Congress (AAC), African Democratic Congress (ADC), African Democratic Party (ADP) and Allied Peoples Movement (APM), Labour Party (LP), New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), National Rescue Movement (NRM), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), Social Democratic Party (SDP), Young Progressives Party (YPP), Action Peoples Party (APP), Boot Party (BP), and Zenith Labour Party (ZLP) (Kwen, 2022, para. 1, 3-6). According to Statista, the APC is Nigeria's most popular political party (Sasu, 2022b).

Ndinojuo et al. (2015) conducted the most visible research on Twitter and Facebook usage by Nigerian political parties. The scope of the research covered 2013 to 2014. The scholars reported low visibility of political party profiles on Twitter as well as low follower count and engagement. They also observed that political parties primarily used the platforms for news distribution. The dearth of Nigerian-based research on Twitter usage by political parties or more generally politics is evident in the absence of the country in some comprehensive literature reviews. For instance, Nigeria was not mentioned in any of the 115 studies explored in Andrea Jungherrs' (2014) comprehensive literature review of published works on Twitter in politics. This study addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence on Twitter usage by Nigerian political parties. It differs from Ndinojuo et al.'s work by focusing only on Twitter, thus providing a deeper insight into the platform. This research is important given that Nigerians will be electing new federal and state leaders in February 2023 and previous studies have shown that extensive Twitter usage and capacity to reach a lot of first-time voters could shape success in elections (Rukmini, 2014; Sardesai, 2014).

Methodology

This study employed a content analysis method to answer the three research questions. The first question was answered by examining the Twitter handles of all the political parties and extracting the number of tweets they had posted at the time of data collection, that is, October 2022. The findings of the second and third research questions were based on the analysis of a convenience sample of 10,097 of a population of 60,551 tweets by the 18 political parties. The tweets were collected with the aid of Botster, an advanced automation platform, effective for monitoring and harvesting data from different types of social media platforms. The retrieved tweets were analysed using manual and computer-assisted content analysis. To answer the second question, the 10,097 tweets extracted via Botster were coded for their functional purpose using manual content analysis. The unit of analysis was individual tweets. The categories in the coding scheme were adapted in part from a previous study by Saifuddin Ahmed and Marko Skoric (Ahmed & Skoric, 2014; 2015). Other categories were included following a multiple-reading process of the tweets. The categories were as follows:

i. campaign updates – these are tweets containing campaign location, dates, and general information about rallies, street walks, and marches
ii. promotion – these relate to tweets designed to publicise party-related events, calling to attention the achievements of the party, promoting its flag bearers and other candidates and faithful
iii. criticism against the ruling party – tweets highlighting the shortfalls falls of the party in power (the APC), condemning the actions or policies of the APC or its candidates
iv. criticism against other political parties or their candidates - tweets highlighting the shortfalls of other political parties or condemning the actions or policies of their candidates
v. call to vote – tweets asking citizens to vote
vi. threat/cyber violence – tweets containing intentions to inflict harm, damage, or carry out hostile action against the state, other political parties, or citizens
vii. political news – news about the government or political parties and candidates
viii. other news – news that is not political in nature
ix. other – all other tweets including links to other external sources

These categories were largely mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and independent; with mean reliability of 0.94, and a range of 0.7 to 1.0 following Holsti's formula. The third research question was resolved with the assistance of Graphext, a no-code exploratory data analysis and predictive modelling software (www.graphext.com, 2022). The data analysis software helped in the creation of clusters. Also, it revealed significant terms within each cluster. A conclusion on the dominant topics and issues tweeted by the political parties was reached by exploring the significant terms associated with the largest clusters.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Twitter usage by each political party

The first research question aimed to determine the frequency of Twitter usage by each of the political parties. Table I below shows the name and acronyms, Twitter accounts/handles, number of followers, and the total number of tweets posted by the political parties as of 23 October 2022. The Table also presents parties' periods of active engagement on the platform. Taken together the parties as of 23 October 2022 had a total of 2,353,453 followers and had posted 60,551 tweets. Of the 18 political parties only three, the PDP, APC, and LP had the blue verified badge – a Twitter feature that distinguishes a public-interest account as authentic.

As can be seen from Table I, the PDP, which has been active for the longest period, emerged as the party with both the highest number of tweets (n2=41,000; about 68% of total tweets) and the largest number of followers (n1=1,100,000; about 47% of total followers). It is important to point out that the three parties (PDP, APC, and LP) with the highest number of followers are also the key contenders in the 2023 presidential election. It was also interesting to observe that although the LP only joined Twitter in 2022, it emerged as the party with the third-highest follower count and had 1,364 posts. The LP's high follower count may be attributed to the Peter Obi factor as explained in the literature section. The LP's ranking is significant, especially when compared to APGA. APGA joined in 2022 but had only 236 followers and posted only 50 tweets. Again, as of the time of data collection, the NNPP ranked 4th in terms of follower count (n1 = 21,200) but recorded only 246 tweets, an indication that the party is not very active on Twitter. The APM had the fewest number of followers and tweets.

Table I. Twitter details of the 18 registered political parties in Nigeria

s/no	Names & Acronyms of Political Parties	Twitter Handles	Followers as of 23/10/22 (n1)	Tweets as of 23/10/22 (n2)	Years Active
1	Peoples Democratic Party (PDP)	@OfficialPDPNig	1,100,000	41,000	2016-2022
2	African Action Congress (AAC)	@aacparty	8,414	5,034	2017-2022
3	All Progressive Congress (APC)	@OfficialAPCNg	808,400	3,800	2017-2022
4	Young Progressive Party (YPP)	@YPPNational	5,699	3,088	2018-2022
5	African Democratic Congress (ADC)	@ADCNig	10,300	2,051	2019-2022
6	Labour Party (LP)	@NgLabour	396,100	1,364	2022
7	Action Democratic Party (ADP)	@ADPng	962	1,095	2016-2021
8	Boot Party (BP) Because Of Our Tomorrow	@TheBOOTParty	160	949	2018-2022
9	Zenith Labour Party (ZLP)	@ZLabourParty	827	661	2018-2020
10	Accord (A)	@AccordPartyNG	366	404	2016
11	Peoples Redemption Party (PRP)	@prp_ng	445	394	2018-2022
12	Action Alliance (AA)	@action_nigeria	59	266	2020-2022

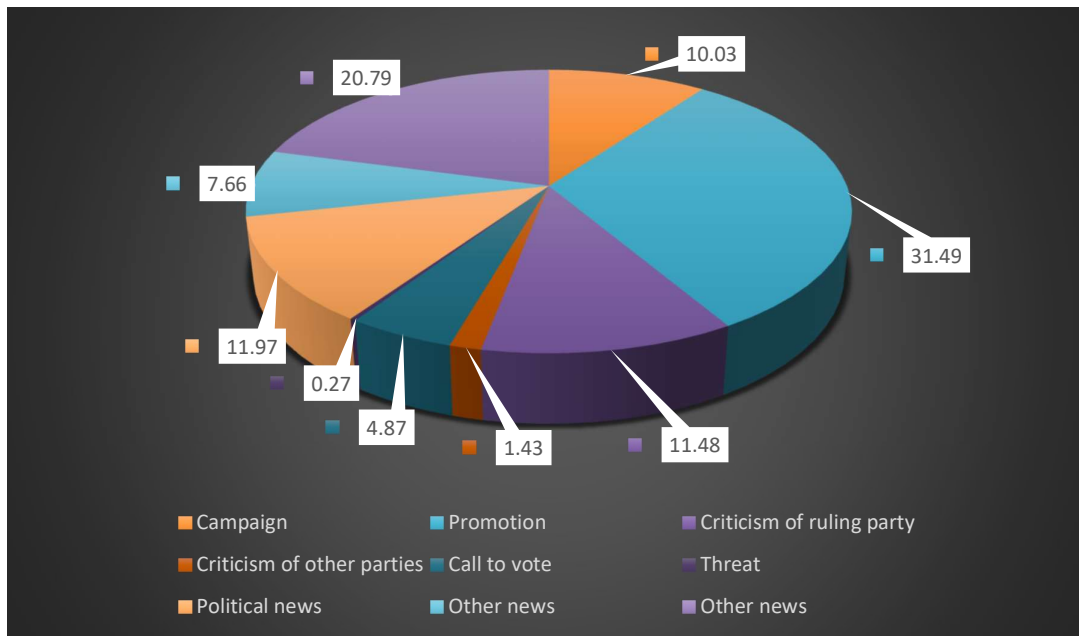| 13 | New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) | @OfficialNNPPng | 21,200 | 246 | 2020-2022 |
14	Action Peoples Party (APP)	@OfficialAPPNg	14	71	2017-2018
15	National Rescue Movement (NRM)	@NRM_Nigeria	39	62	2017-2018
16	All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA)	@OfficialAPGA	236	50	2020
17	Social Democratic Party (SDP)	@officialsdpng	225	11	2018
18	Allied Peoples Movement (APM)	@FirstApm	7	5	2018

Figure 1: Tweet functions by percentage

Overall, the 18 political parties primarily used Twitter as a promotional tool. As can be seen in Figure 1, 31.49% of the sampled tweets were instances where the respective parties publicised their leaders and highlighted their achievements. This category also consisted of announcements of upcoming events, rallies, marches, media appearances, and interviews; birthday salutations of party faithful; and the enunciation of party positions on societal issues and debates. For example:

@aacparty: @Buchi_Laba @YeleSowore Thank you @Buchi_Laba for your comcern. It's a political issue. Legalisation/legislation of any substance ends at the corridors of power. We are proud as a party that we are leading this conversation. Follow us for more on our policies on marijuana. #WeCantContinueLikeThis

@AccordPartyNG: Olusola Oke is a man of Great Vision. A man with Clean Records . A man of his words.

@NgLabour: Kindly Watch the live streaming of HE Peter Obi as he addresses the AREWA JOINT COMMITTEE PROGRAM @ 4pm today. Don't miss it. We keep moving Obidently & Yusfuly From; Dr. Yenusa Tanko.

Looking at Figure 1, the category with the least functionality is threats/cyberviolence (n=0.27%). This is probably an indication that the parties were conscious of the violation of the platform's policy on abuse, harassment, threat, and violence, which ranges from a request to remove a tweet to outright suspension of the violator's account.

The information on the pie chart in Figure 1 is also quite revealing in some other ways. Firstly, a considerable number of the tweets (11.48%) were content criticising the activities and policies of the current administration. For instance:

@aacparty: RT @AkanniKarounwi: Some rogues want to privatise our Commonwealth with their Emilokan balderdash. For #AACParty, it's the #MassesLokan! It…

@ZLabourParty: RT @akinduro: Gov @RotimiAkeredolu runs an elitist government - #MimikoSpeaks

@OfficialPDPNig: The attack today by the @OfficialAPCNg must give well-meaning Nigerians concern as some report allege that the vicious assault on the @OfficialPDPNig Presidential Campaign was spearheaded by the @OfficialAPCNg governorship candidate in Kaduna State.

Secondly, a very large percentage of tweets qualified as other (20.79%), an indication that in future research, the coding categories be broadened thirdly, of particular interest is the strategic use of Twitter for the distribution of political news stories by the parties. As is shown in the chart, 11.97% of the tweets were political news content. Lastly, at 4.87%, it may seem that the parties paid less emphasis on using Twitter to call for votes. This may be attributed to the timing of the research, which was four months before the February 2023 general elections. Parties may likely increasingly use Twitter to mobilise votes as the election draws closer.
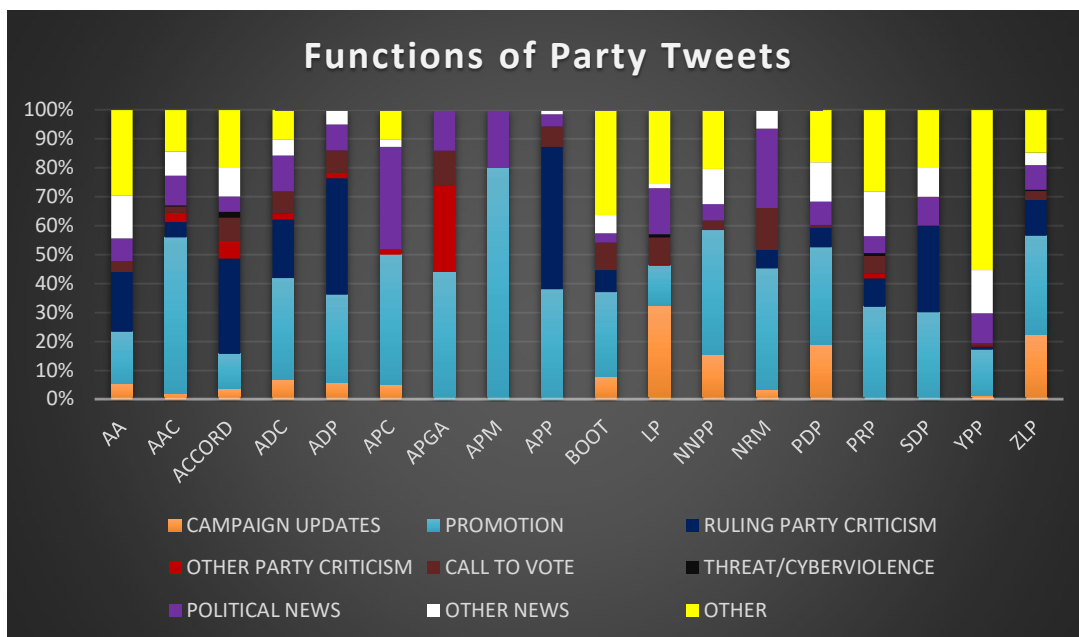

Figure 2: Stacked column showing tweet functions by the 18 registered political parties in Nigeria

Figure 2 shows the functions of political party tweets by each of the political parties. From the column chart, the AAC and the ACCORD parties had tweets covering each of the categories and as such, had the most diverse application of Twitter. In contrast, 80% of the tweets by the APM served promotional purposes. It is, however, important, to restate that the APM had the fewest number of tweets (n=5).   Also, while the AAC emphasised the promotion of their party, a large portion of the Accord party's tweets was content finding fault with the policies of the ruling party, the APC. For the APC, however, Twitter was primarily a promotional and political news dissemination instrument.

Data from Figure 2 also indicate that the LP, NNPP, and PDP used Twitter in a similar way. These parties to varying degrees focused on using the platform for campaign updates, promotion, political news, and more. Whereas the LP was more strategic in outright calling for votes, the

tweets by the PDP included criticisms of the ruling party. This outcome may be explained on the grounds that the PDP is a long-established party as well as the country's main opposition party, while the LP has only recently received a boost following the entrance of Peter Obi. As stated earlier, Peter Obi resigned from his membership of the PDP and joined the LP in 2022, where he emerged as the party's presidential flag bearer.

Topics and Issues in Political Parties Tweets

From Table II it is evident that the issues and topics deliberated upon by the political parties on Twitter centred primarily on three key areas.

Table II: Summary of issues/topics tweeted by the 18 political parties

S/NO	Political Parties	Dominant Topics & Issues	
1	PDP	a)	Tensions within the PDP
		b)	Atiku is not an ethnic bigot
		c)	Attack at Kaduna rally
		d)	5 million fitness walk in Calabar
2	AAC	a)	Omoyele Sowore's media apprearances
		b)	The poor state of Tinubu's Lagos (flooding)
		c)	Poverty and unemployment in Nigeria
3	APC	a)	2nd Niger bridge (Buhari's achievement)
		b)	The Ekiti victory
		c)	Leaked election document a product of the opposition
		d)	Atiku is an ethnic bigot
4	YPP	a)	2023 election campaign
		b)	Obi Cubana endorsement
		c)	Insecurity under Buhari, worse
5	ADC	a)	2023 election campaign
		b)	Tonto Dikeh
6	LP	a)	Peter Obi's ideas on governance
		b)	@NgLabour as the official LP Twitter account
7	ADP	a)	70 deregistered parties
		b)	Anti-social media bill
8	BP	a)	Video of kidnapped passengers of the Abuja-Kaduna
		b)	Endsars
9	ZLP	a)	Ondo elections (Mimiko vs Akerodolu)
10	A	a)	APC's negative change (poverty & unemployment)
		b)	Oke for Ondo Governor
11	PRP	a)	Senator Shehu Sani's achievements
		b)	Kidnapped Kankara students
		c)	Buhari must resign
12	AA	a)	Bye election
		b)	Endsars
13	NNPP	a)	Support NNPP to save democracy
		b)	Kwankwaso-Obi Saga
		c)	Bishop Idahosa as VP NNPP
14	APP	a)	Vote buying and selling
		b)	Party launch
15	NRM	a)	Ongoing voter registration
16	APGA	a)	Frank Nweke
		b)	Peter Obi
17	SDP	a)	State of the nation
		b)	Lazy Nigerian youths
18	APM	a)	First NEC meeting
		b)	Not too young to run law

The first is the state of the nation. For example, the AAC, YPP, PRP, A, and SDP described the current state of the nation. They highlighted some of the major problems plaguing the country including insecurity, poverty and unemployment. While the YPP claimed that insecurity under the Buhari administration had worsened, the PRP demanded Buhari resigned following his inability to

protect the lives and properties of citizens. The second issue parties tweeted bordered on activities associated with the 2023 general elections such as political party campaigns and media appearances by party representatives and flag bearers. A notable example, in this case, was a war of words following a statement made by the PDP presidential flag bearer, Atiku Abubakar. Atiku during a town hall event in the northern part of the country had said: "What the average Northerner needs is somebody who is from the North; he doesn't need a Yoruba candidate or an Ibo candidate," (Agba, 2022, para. 3). While the APC, LP, AAC, and other parties labelled Atiku an ethnic bigot, claiming his declaration could jeopardise the country's fragile unity, the PDP claimed Atiku's statement was wrongly interpreted. Last of all, tweets by the AAC and LP are good illustrations of instances where presidential flag-bearers were the dominant issue. While the AAC tweets emphasised Sowore's media appearances, the LP redistributed Peter Obi's tweets, lending further visibility to his opinions and thoughts regarding governance.

A closer inspection of Table II provides some useful information regarding the timing of the issues discussed by the parties. Whereas some of the topics deliberated upon were current, others were not. While posts about the state of the country, the upcoming elections, and the flag bearers are topical; the not too young to run law (APM), lazy Nigerian youths (SDP), and the anti-social media bill (ADP) are not. The non-topical conversations are a clear indication that not all parties use Twitter frequently. As can be seen from Table I, the APM and SDP were only visible on Twitter in 2018, while the ADP last tweeted in 2021.

Another striking aspect of Table II is the presence of popular Nigerian celebrities as dominant topics in political part tweets. Whereas the YPP made an issue of Obi Cubana's (formally known as Obinna Iyiegbu) endorsement of the party's Abia state governorship flag bearer, the ADC emphasised Tonto Dikeh's emergence as the Rivers State deputy gubernatorial candidate. The appearance of Tonto and Obi in Table II can be attributed to their status as popular celebrities. While Dikeh is a Nollywood actress, Cubana is a businessman who became an internet sensation after he lavishly buried his mother in what was described as the biggest Nigerian party of 2021 (Stephen, 2021).

Discussion of findings

Although it has been established that Twitter is relevant for politics, little is known about how Nigerian political parties use Twitter. This study addressed this lacuna by investigating the frequency of Twitter usage, the functional relevance of the platform, and lastly, the dominant topics and issues Nigerian political parties highlight on Twitter. In doing this, this study provides crucial empirical evidence and answers to how Nigeria's recently registered 18 political parties utilise Twitter.

On the frequency of Twitter usage, it was quite a surprise to observe that the PDP had the largest number of followers ($n1 = 1,100,000$) and singlehandedly accounted for 68% of tweets posted by all the political parties in Nigeria. This outcome indicates that the party with the largest number of tweets or in this case, the highest frequency of usage may not necessarily be the most popular. PDP's emergence as the most frequent Twitter user is noteworthy, especially when compared to the ADP, which like the PDP joined Twitter in 2016, and the APC, which is Nigeria's ruling party as well as the most popular party in the country (Sasu, 2022b). This finding is important because the Twitter algorithm affords more visibility to accounts that post often and have a high follower count. Frequent usage translates to a higher possibility of reaching first-time voters and thus, the chances of winning elections. It is, however, important to remember that elections in Nigeria are influenced by other deeper social and cultural issues, which may prove challenging to the PDP, especially with the emergence of Atiku Abubakar and the projected changes in the 2023 elections as laid out in the literature section. On a general level, this finding suggests poor Twitter usage by many of the political parties and mirrors Ndinojou et al.'s (2015) conclusion that political parties in Nigeria are yet to fully leverage social media.

On the question of the functions of political party tweets, this study found that the 18 political parties primarily used Twitter as a promotional tool. As is detailed in the literature section, political actors are influenced by changes in the media landscape and are aware of the benefits that platforms like Twitter afford. For instance, social media platforms are less expensive and offer access to a more diverse audience with limited interruptions by traditional gatekeepers.

Apart from promoting content, this study also found that the parties relied on Twitter for the distribution of political news and for criticising the incumbent government. This result may be explained by the fact that the Twitter algorithm favours content that triggers conflict (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Trilling, Tolochko & Burscher, 2017). In addition, whereas traditional media platforms are subject to direct government influence, Twitter is more democratised and serves as a dais where governments can be held to account and their policies questioned.

The last research objective was aimed at identifying the dominant topics and issues political parties tweeted about. Here, the research found that parties emphasised the current state of the nation, the 2023 elections and campaigns, and the presidential flag bearers of the parties. The study also observed the emergence of pop culture celebrities as dominant topics by at least three of the parties. These findings contribute to the literature on the logic and affordances of Twitter by lending to the evidence that the platform shares similarities with legacy platforms concerning news values and routines. Like broadcast media, for instance, Twitter by design facilitates the distribution of current news and information. The platform as detailed in the literature section also prioritises content by and about prominent people. It was also interesting to observe how the parties made an issue of ethnicity and religion when discussing the presidential flag bearers. This outcome is critical given the Nigerian context where ethnicity and religion are important identity markers.

Conclusion

Taken together, therefore, this study has contributed to our understanding of the use of Twitter by political parties in emerging economies. The empirical evidence provided here with respect to the Nigerian case is significant for three main reasons. First, this is the first study to explore Twitter usage by Nigeria's duly registered 18 political parties. Second, the findings revealed here add to the growing body of literature on Twitter usage by political institutions, and thus, the relevance and significance of Twitter in Nigerian politics. Third, should the PDP win the 2023 elections, this study would be the first to have shown a clear-cut positive possible influence of Twitter usage on election outcomes.

One issue with the current study was that only a sample of the tweets was explored and the outcome in terms of usage was not measured against any election result. Further studies are encouraged in this area as this would help us better understand the place of Twitter in elections. Secondly, the present study only explored Twitter, and as such the findings may not apply to other social media platforms such as Facebook. Again, this study encourages research on platforms like Facebook, which is the largest social media network, and Instagram, a platform that is popular among Nigerian youths. The literature indicates that whereas there are about five million Nigerians on Twitter, Nigerian Instagram users are over 13 million (Degenhard, 2021; Sasu, 2022a).

This study makes three key recommendations:

i.   Nigerian political parties should fully leverage Twitter and its affordances;
ii. the parties should encourage followership as this would facilitate the reach and visibility of their content; and
iii. political parties should utilise the platform to promote solutions to problems and focus less on fault-finding and re-echoing.

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