



WHATSAPP BROADCAST MESSAGES AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN NIGERIA'S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: INSIGHTS FROM THE SOUTH-SOUTH REGION

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the extent to which WhatsApp broadcast messages encouraged voter turnout, influenced voting behaviour and shaped political discourse, while also identifying the limitations associated with using WhatsApp for political communication in the South-South region. Anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study employed a survey design and administered structured questionnaires to 400 residents across Rivers, Delta and Edo States, out of which 389 were validly retrieved. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the extent of influence across key variables. Findings showed that WhatsApp broadcasts significantly encouraged political participation, with mean scores ranging from 3.3 to 3.5, indicating strong agreement that message reminders and clarifications motivated voter turnout. The platform also moderately influenced voting behaviour, with mean values between 3.2 and 3.4, reflecting its role in shaping perceptions and candidate choices. However, notable limitations emerged, particularly misinformation and credibility challenges, as reflected in mean scores of 3.3 to 3.4. WhatsApp broadcast messages played a meaningful role in shaping political discourse and voter behaviour during the 2023 presidential election in the South-South region. Despite challenges related to misinformation, the platform served as a major source of information, persuasion and mobilisation for voters. It is recommended that political actors and civil society organisations should prioritise verified, structured and credible messaging on WhatsApp, while strengthening digital literacy initiatives to reduce the impact of misinformation.

Keywords: WhatsApp, Broadcast Messages, Political Discourse, Voting Behaviour, South-South Nigeria, Uses and Gratifications Theory.

Introduction

In recent years, WhatsApp has become one of the most widely used communication platforms in Nigeria. Since its introduction in 2009 and subsequent acquisition by Facebook in 2014, the platform has evolved from a basic messaging application into a central tool for personal interaction, group communication and, increasingly, political engagement (Adeniyi, 2021). The platform's ease of use, wide accessibility and end-to-end encryption have contributed to its popularity across different demographic groups.

In the Nigerian political landscape, WhatsApp has taken on an especially prominent role, particularly during election periods. Scholars such as Ezegwu, Governor and Nweke (2024) note that ahead of the 2023 general elections, political actors relied heavily on WhatsApp to circulate campaign messages, mobilise supporters and coordinate activities through numerous group and broadcast channels. Among the platform's features, the broadcast message function has become a preferred tool for political

communication because it allows senders to distribute messages to many recipients simultaneously without forming a group, thus preserving the privacy of users while ensuring efficient dissemination (Afolabi, 2019). This function enables political actors to rapidly share tailored content capable of shaping opinions, influencing discussions and guiding voter behaviour.

Political discourse in Nigeria—shaped by historical, social and economic dynamics—has increasingly migrated to digital spaces. The 2023 presidential election illustrated this shift, as debates on issues such as security, corruption and economic development were vigorously pursued on platforms like WhatsApp (Oladimeji, 2023). The South-South region, comprising states such as Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo and Rivers, was particularly active in these conversations. Given its ethnic diversity, history of environmental degradation and longstanding calls for resource control, the region provided fertile ground for political messaging that tapped into local sentiments and identity-based concerns. Political actors in the South-South frequently used WhatsApp to reinforce regional priorities and galvanise support around specific issues.

Despite these advantages, WhatsApp's growing political influence presents notable challenges. Its largely unregulated nature facilitates the rapid spread of unverified information, emotionally charged rhetoric and politically motivated falsehoods (Oyebode and Adeyemi, 2017). During the 2023 presidential election, the volume and speed of broadcast messages intensified the circulation of misinformation and disinformation, complicating voters' ability to distinguish credible information from misleading or fabricated content. This issue was particularly pronounced in the South-South region, where political, economic and environmental grievances already heighten public sensitivity to political communication.

These developments point to a critical research concern. While WhatsApp has clearly become a major platform for political engagement, there is limited empirical understanding of how the broadcast messages circulated during the 2023 election shaped political discourse and influenced voter perceptions, especially within the South-South states. The unregulated nature of the platform, combined with the region's socio-political context, created conditions in which broadcast messages could profoundly affect how people interpreted national issues, evaluated candidates and ultimately made electoral decisions. This study therefore seeks to investigate the frequency, content and perceived influence of WhatsApp messages during the 2023 presidential election in the South-South region, addressing an important gap in current research.

Research Objectives

The following are the objectives of this study:

1. Find out the extent to which Whatsapp messages encouraged voter turnout during the 2023 presidential election.
2. Assess the role of WhatsApp in influencing voting behaviour during the 2023 presidential election.
3. Identify the limitations of using WhatsApp for political discourse in the South-South region

Conceptual Review

Broadcast Messages

Broadcast messages, in the context of WhatsApp or other messaging platforms, refer to a feature that allows users to send a single message to multiple contacts or groups simultaneously, without creating a group chat, enabling one-to-many communication where recipients don't see each other's responses or participate in a group conversation and instead receive the message individually, as if sent directly, with no reply-all functionality. This feature is ideal for announcements, notifications, marketing, community updates and personal updates, offering benefits such as efficient communication, time-saving, organised conversations and flexibility. However, limitations include limited engagement, potential spam and message limits. Platforms supporting broadcast messages include WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook Messenger, Signal and others. Best practices dictate judicious use, audience segmentation, concise and relevant messaging and respect for recipients' time and attention.

WhatsApp Broadcast Messages and Political Discourse in Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election: Insights from the South-South Region

According to Olajide (2021), broadcast messages are a powerful communication tool that allows individuals or organisations to disseminate information to multiple recipients simultaneously. This feature is particularly prevalent in messaging applications like WhatsApp, where users can send a single message to numerous contacts without the need for creating a group chat. One interpretation of broadcast messages is that they serve as a means of efficient communication, enabling users to share updates, announcements, or promotional content quickly. For instance, businesses often utilise broadcast messages to inform customers about new products or services, thereby enhancing customer engagement and outreach (Katz and Shapiro, 2023). This efficiency is crucial in today's fast-paced environment, where timely information can significantly impact decision-making processes.

Election

An election is a process where citizens choose their representatives or leaders through voting. It is a fundamental aspect of democracy, allowing people to participate in shaping their country's future (Idogho, Egbi, Nwaoboli and Akpodiete, 2025; Nwaoboli and Ajibulu, 2023). Elections can take various forms, such as presidential, parliamentary, or local council elections. Election is a fundamental aspect of democratic governance and it can be defined in various ways that reflect its significance in political processes (Nwaoboli, Uchenunu and Asemah, 2024a, 2024b). One definition provided by McNair (2017) describes an election as a formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office. This definition emphasizes the structured nature of elections, highlighting their role as a mechanism for citizens to express their preferences and select representatives. Nwaoboli, Nwammuo and Asemah (2023) add that elections serve as a cornerstone of democracy, allowing for the peaceful transfer of power and providing legitimacy to elected officials. Okeibunor and Nwaoboli (2024) further argues that elections are not merely procedural events; they are deeply embedded in the political culture of a society, influencing how citizens engage with their government and perceive their role within it.

Another interpretation of elections is offered by Denton and Woodward (2016), who define elections as a means of political communication that facilitates the interaction between candidates and voters. This perspective shows the communicative aspect of elections, where candidates convey their messages, policies and visions to the electorate through various channels, including debates, advertisements and social media. The authors argue that elections are not only about casting votes but also about the narratives constructed around candidates and their platforms. This definition highlights the importance of effective communication strategies in shaping public perception and influencing electoral outcomes. As such, the election process becomes a battleground for ideas, where the ability to connect with voters can determine success or failure.

Furthermore, Swanson and Nimmo (2018) provide a broader definition, stating that elections are events that reflect the political will of the people and serve as a mechanism for accountability. This definition emphasizes the role of elections in holding elected officials accountable for their actions and decisions while in office. As observed by Asemah and Umoro (2022), elections provide an opportunity for citizens to evaluate the performance of their representatives and make informed choices about their future leadership.

The 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election was a highly contentious and dramatic event that took place on February 25, 2023. The election saw the incumbent president, Muhammadu Buhari, stepping down after serving two terms and several candidates vying to replace him. Bola Tinubu, the former governor of Lagos State and nominee of the All Progressives Congress (APC), emerged as the winner with 36.61% of the vote, securing just under 8.8 million votes (Oyebode, 2024).

Tinubu's victory was met with opposition from other major candidates, including former Vice President Atiku Abubakar and former Governor of Anambra State Peter Obi. Abubakar, who ran on the platform of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Obi, who represented the Labour Party, rejected the election results, citing allegations of fraud and violence. The election was marred by reports of vote buying, voter intimidation and attacks on polling units in certain areas. The Independent National Electoral

Commission (INEC) faced criticism for its handling of the election, particularly regarding the uploading of polling unit results to the INEC result viewing portal (Okeibunor and Nwaoboli, 2024).

One of the major issues that plagued the election was the controversy surrounding the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). The BVAS was intended to ensure the credibility of the electoral process by verifying voters' identities and transmitting results in real-time. However, technical issues and allegations of manipulation raised concerns about the system's effectiveness. The opposition parties, particularly the PDP and Labour Party, questioned the accuracy of the results transmitted by the BVAS, leading to calls for a review of the electoral process (Oladimeji, 2024).

The opposition parties also faced internal challenges. The PDP, for instance, was criticized for its decision to nominate Atiku Abubakar, a northerner, despite the party's earlier agreement to zone the presidency to the south. This decision led to divisions within the party and alienated some of its southern supporters. The Labour Party, on the other hand, struggled to establish itself as a viable alternative to the APC and PDP, despite Obi's popularity among younger voters (Nnaane, 2024).

The court challenges that followed the election were numerous. The opposition parties petitioned the courts to overturn the results, citing irregularities and electoral malpractices. However, the courts ultimately upheld Tinubu's victory, citing lack of evidence to support the opposition's claims. The judicial process was widely criticized for its slow pace and perceived bias towards the ruling party (Oladimeji, 2024). Despite the controversy surrounding the election, Tinubu's victory marked a significant turning point in Nigeria's democratic journey. His campaign promises focused on addressing the country's economic challenges, improving security and promoting national unity. However, his ability to deliver on these promises remains to be fully seen, particularly given the divisions and tensions that arose during the election.

Role of WhatsApp in Shaping Political Discourse

The role of WhatsApp in shaping political discourse has become increasingly significant in recent years, particularly as mobile communication continues to evolve and permeate various aspects of daily life. As a messaging platform, WhatsApp offers unique features that facilitate political interaction, engagement and mobilisation among users. WhatsApp's primary function as a messaging app enable rapid information dissemination, which is crucial in political contexts. The platform allows users to share news articles, opinion pieces and other forms of political content swiftly among large groups. This capability aligns with Wellman's (2011) observations on how the Internet has transformed communication, suggesting that digital platforms enhance the ability of individuals to exchange information and engage in discussions about political matters. For instance, during elections or significant political events, WhatsApp groups often become hubs for sharing real-time updates and analyses. This immediacy of information can significantly influence public perception and understanding of political events, reinforcing the idea that WhatsApp serves as a vital channel for political communication.

Moreover, WhatsApp fosters community building among users who share similar political interests or ideologies. The platform's group chat feature allows individuals to create and participate in discussions with like-minded peers, thereby cultivating a sense of belonging and collective identity. Alao (2012) discusses how strategic communication tools can enhance community engagement and WhatsApp exemplifies this by facilitating discourse among users who might otherwise feel isolated in their political beliefs. For example, grassroots movements can leverage WhatsApp to organise discussions, share resources and strategize about campaigns or advocacy efforts. This communal aspect of WhatsApp not only strengthens individual commitments to political causes but also amplifies collective action, making it easier for groups to mobilise around specific issues.

In addition to community building, WhatsApp plays a great role in mobilising activism. The platform has been instrumental in organising protests and political movements, particularly in regions where traditional media may be restricted or heavily monitored. Koum (2014) notes how the app's encryption features contribute to user privacy, which is particularly important in contexts where political dissent may be met with government scrutiny. Activists leverage WhatsApp to coordinate events, share sensitive information and ensure that their communications remain secure from outside interference.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory, first articulated in the early 1970s, offers a shift from earlier media-effects models by proposing that audiences are active users of media rather than passive recipients. The theory suggests that individuals select media platforms to satisfy particular needs, motivations and expectations, and thus places emphasis on personal agency in the communication process (Nwaoboli, Uchenunu and Asemah, 2024a).

The central tenets of the theory revolve around three core ideas. First, audiences consume media for specific reasons, whether for information, entertainment or social connection. Second, individuals deliberately choose media sources that they believe will meet these needs. Third, media consumption results in certain gratifications, such as acquiring knowledge, reinforcing personal identity or engaging with others. These principles have been widely employed in studies examining how people interact with digital platforms and political content, including more recent examinations of rhetorical strategies in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election (Nwaoboli, Uchenunu and Asemah, 2024b).

Nevertheless, the theory has attracted criticism. Some scholars argue that it places too much weight on individual choice while paying insufficient attention to the wider social, cultural and technological conditions that shape media use. Others note that categorising the wide range of motivations and gratifications can be challenging, which occasionally leads to inconsistency in empirical applications.

Despite these limitations, the theory remains relevant to the present study. As WhatsApp broadcast messages continue to play an important role in political communication (Ogunlesi, 2020), Uses and Gratifications Theory provides a useful lens for understanding why individuals engage with political content on WhatsApp during the 2023 presidential election in the South-South region. Moreover, considering the documented influence of political messaging and rhetorical techniques on social media during the election period (Nwaoboli et al., 2024a; 2024b), the theory helps explain how and why voters sought, interpreted and responded to political messages circulated through WhatsApp.

Methodology

This study used a quantitative survey design. The population consisted of residents from three purposively selected states—Rivers, Delta, and Edo—chosen for their economic, cultural, and political relevance. Within these states, Eleme, Sapele, and Egor LGAs were selected to represent both urban and peri-urban contexts. Based on the 2023 City Population Census projection of 824,684 residents across the selected LGAs, a sample size of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane formula.

A multi-stage sampling technique, following Asemah and Nwaoboli (2024), ensured broad representation. First, the three states were purposively selected. Second, one LGA was chosen from each state based on active social media engagement. Third, two wards per LGA were selected through stratified random sampling to capture different demographic groups. Finally, respondents were chosen systematically—133 each from Rivers and Edo, and 134 from Delta—totalling 400 participants.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire containing closed-ended and Likert-scale items on WhatsApp's role in political communication. Content validity was confirmed by experts, while test-retest reliability produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.8. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and regression analysis to test hypotheses. The quantitative approach enabled objective, statistical assessment of patterns across a diverse population. Of the 400 copies of questionnaire distributed, 389 were returned valid, while 11 were not retrieved.

Data analysis**Table 1: Extent to which Whatsapp messages encouraged voter turnout during the 2023 presidential election**

| Statement | SA (5) | A (4) | N (3) | D (2) | SD (1) | Mean |
|---|----------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|------|
| Whatsapp messages motivated me to participate in the 2023 presidential election. | 109 (28.0%) | 127 (32.7%) | 15 (3.9%) | 71 (18.3%) | 67 (17.2%) | 3.3 |
| I believe that the information shared in WhatsApp broadcasts increased voter turnout in my community. | 118 (30.3%) | 123 (31.6%) | 11 (2.8%) | 72 (18.5%) | 65 (16.7%) | 3.4 |
| I received reminders through WhatsApp broadcasts that encouraged me to vote. | 132 (33.9%) | 121 (31.1%) | 10 (2.6%) | 65 (16.7%) | 61 (15.7%) | 3.5 |
| WhatsApp broadcasts helped clarify the voting process and locations, motivating me to vote. | 111 (28.5%) | 129 (33.2%) | 13 (3.3%) | 69 (17.7%) | 67 (17.2%) | 3.4 |
| I discussed Whatsapp messages with friends and family, which encouraged us to vote together. | 126 (32.4%) | 114 (29.3%) | 12 (3.1%) | 71 (18.3%) | 66 (17.0%) | 3.4 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

The findings in Table 5 revealed the impact of Whatsapp messages on motivating voter turnout during the 2023 presidential election in the South-South region. A consistent pattern emerged across all statements: WhatsApp messages did more than inform; they mobilised. More than 60% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they were encouraged to participate in the election due to broadcasts they received. The frequency of reminders shared via WhatsApp appeared to play a major role.

Table 2: Role of WhatsApp in influencing voting behaviour during the 2023 presidential election

| Statement | SA (5) | A (4) | N (3) | D (2) | SD (1) | Mean |
|--|----------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|------|
| Whatsapp messages significantly influenced my choice of candidate in the election. | 103 (26.5%) | 119 (30.6%) | 14 (3.6%) | 78 (20.1%) | 75 (19.3%) | 3.3 |
| The content of WhatsApp broadcasts helped me understand the political landscape better. | 116 (29.8%) | 122 (31.4%) | 11 (2.8%) | 73 (18.8%) | 67 (17.2%) | 3.4 |
| I changed my voting intention based on information received through WhatsApp broadcasts. | 98 (25.2%) | 111 (28.5%) | 15 (3.9%) | 85 (21.9%) | 80 (20.6%) | 3.2 |

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| Statement | SA (5) | A (4) | N (3) | D (2) | SD (1) | Mean |
|---|----------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|------|
| WhatsApp broadcasts provided persuasive arguments that affected my voting behaviour. | 108 (27.8%) | 118 (30.3%) | 13 (3.3%) | 79 (20.3%) | 71 (18.3%) | 3.3 |
| I found Whatsapp messages to be more influential than traditional media in shaping my voting decisions. | 102 (26.2%) | 113 (29.0%) | 12 (3.1%) | 83 (21.3%) | 79 (20.3%) | 3.2 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 6 explored the extent to which WhatsApp influenced actual voting decisions, moving beyond awareness and turnout to behavioural change. Although the data showed a more mixed response compared to earlier tables, it remained clear that WhatsApp exerted some level of influence on the electorate’s final choices. Over half of the respondents believed that the platform influenced their choice of candidate. This reflected that WhatsApp had a meaningful role in candidate selection, particularly when considering the crowded media landscape.

Table 3: Limitations of using WhatsApp for political discourse in the South-South region

| Statement | SA (5) | A (4) | N (3) | D (2) | SD (1) | Mean |
|---|----------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|---------------|------|
| WhatsApp broadcasts often contain misinformation that affects my understanding of political issues. | 113 (29.0%) | 122 (31.4%) | 16 (4.1%) | 71 (18.3%) | 67 (17.2%) | 3.4 |
| I find it difficult to verify the credibility of information shared in Whatsapp messages. | 117 (30.1%) | 121 (31.1%) | 12 (3.1%) | 70 (18.0%) | 69 (17.7%) | 3.4 |
| Whatsapp messages can lead to misunderstandings or misinterpretations of political events. | 123 (31.6%) | 114 (29.3%) | 15 (3.9%) | 74 (19.0%) | 63 (16.2%) | 3.4 |
| There are limitations in reaching older demographics through WhatsApp, which affects overall political discourse. | 101 (26.0%) | 126 (32.4%) | 14 (3.6%) | 79 (20.3%) | 69 (17.7%) | 3.3 |
| I believe that the informal nature of WhatsApp can undermine serious political discussions in Nigeria. | 109 (28.0%) | 119 (30.6%) | 13 (3.3%) | 77 (19.8%) | 71 (18.3%) | 3.3 |

Source: Field Survey, 2025.

Table 3 shifted focus to a more critical examination of WhatsApp as a platform for political engagement, highlighting some of the challenges and risks associated with its use. Foremost among these was the issue of misinformation. Furthermore, the data showed that more than half of the respondents struggled to assess the credibility of the information they received, reinforcing the notion that while WhatsApp is accessible, it is not always reliable.

Discussion of Findings

The results of this study show that WhatsApp broadcasts played a substantial role in shaping political participation and discourse during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election in the South-South region. The mean scores across Table 1, which ranged between 3.3 and 3.5, indicate that respondents generally agreed that WhatsApp messages encouraged voter turnout. Notably, the highest mean of 3.5—relating to reminders received through WhatsApp—suggests that repeated broadcast prompts were particularly effective in motivating users to vote. This aligns with the observation made by Ogunlesi (2020), who highlighted the platform's increasing use for sustained political mobilisation.

The findings also reveal that WhatsApp did not merely encourage turnout but contributed to shaping voting behaviour. The mean values in Table 2, all falling between 3.2 and 3.4, show moderate agreement that the broadcasts influenced perceptions and, in some cases, voting decisions. For instance, the statement on understanding the political landscape recorded a mean of 3.4, suggesting that respondents sought informational gratification through WhatsApp when attempting to make sense of political issues. This reinforces the central argument of the Uses and Gratifications Theory—that media users are active participants who seek content that fulfils specific informational and social needs. As noted in earlier studies by Nwaoboli, Uchenunu and Asemah (2024a), voters in the 2023 election were highly responsive to political communication on social media platforms, particularly when such content helped reduce uncertainty about candidates or political processes.

Moreover, the present findings show that WhatsApp served as a persuasive tool: a mean score of 3.3 for the statement on persuasive arguments demonstrates that many respondents found the broadcasts compelling enough to influence their political thinking. This resonates with observations in Nwaoboli et al. (2024b), who noted that rhetorical strategies used by politicians on social media were capable of shaping voter attitudes.

Nevertheless, Table 3 draws attention to the platform's shortcomings. The mean scores, which again clustered between 3.3 and 3.4, show that misinformation, credibility challenges, and the informal nature of WhatsApp all undermined political discussions to some extent. The highest mean, 3.4, relates to misinformation and difficulty verifying content, suggesting that while voters benefitted from political updates, they also grappled with the risk of being misled—an issue highlighted in previous work on WhatsApp political communication (Ogunlesi, 2020).

Yet, despite these challenges, it is clear that WhatsApp fulfilled multiple gratifications: information seeking, social engagement, persuasion, and mobilisation. Respondents used the platform proactively, which supports the idea that audiences select media that help them navigate important events. In this case, the 2023 presidential election provided the context in which WhatsApp became a central tool for meaning-making, decision-making, and participatory political behaviour.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that WhatsApp broadcast messages played a significant role in shaping political discourse and voter behaviour in the South-South region during the 2023 presidential election. With mean scores consistently above 3.0 across all items, the platform demonstrably influenced turnout, informed voters, and shaped preferences, despite concerns regarding misinformation and credibility. WhatsApp therefore emerged as a major channel through which voters sought gratifications such as information, clarification, and social reinforcement, ultimately contributing to a more interactive and digitally driven pattern of political participation. Based on the findings, it is recommended that:

1. Given the strong agreement reflected in the turnout-related mean scores, political campaign organisations should develop structured, credible, and engaging broadcasts to optimise mobilisation efforts.
2. Since messages helped voters understand political issues (mean = 3.4), political actors should prioritise clarity, consistency, and accuracy in their WhatsApp communication to build trust and reduce confusion.

3. Because respondents often discussed messages with family and friends (mean = 3.4), civil society groups should encourage constructive community-level dialogue by providing verified informational materials that can be shared within WhatsApp networks.

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