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Poisoning the Well: Negative Political Advertising and the Shaping of Voter Perception in Nigeria's 2023 Election

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Abstract

Objective: This study assessed the impact of negative political advertisements on voters' perceptions of candidates' competence during the 2023 Nigerian general election. Specifically, it identified the media platforms where voters were most exposed to negative ads, evaluated their influence on perceptions of competence, and determined the key aspects of competence that were affected.

Methodology: A survey research method was employed, targeting a judgmental sample of 399 voters in Ekwulobia, Anambra State. Data was collected via structured questionnaires and analysed using percentages, frequency tables, and bar charts.

Results: The study found that social media platforms were the most prevalent channels for negative political advertisements, with 68% of respondents exposed to such content. These advertisements had a notable impact on voter perceptions, as 66% of respondents indicated that the ads influenced their views on a candidate's competence. The key aspects of competence most affected were overall leadership, decision-making, and economic policies.

Conclusion: The findings suggest that negative political advertising played a significant role in shaping voter perceptions during the 2023 election, particularly on digital platforms. It is

recommended that regulatory bodies enforce responsible advertising practices and encourage issue-based campaigns to promote a healthier political environment in Nigeria.

Keywords: Negative Political Advertisements, Voter Perception, Candidate Competence, Nigerian General Election, Political Communication, Social Media, Voter Behaviour

Introduction

In nascent democracies like Nigeria, the integrity of elections is paramount for delivering meaningful governance and progress. As a result, political advertising has become a critical component of the electioneering process (Chiakaan et al., 2021). According to Egbulefu and Emeke (2023), political advertising is a specialised form of social communication, which, within the broader field, serves as an aspect of social marketing.

Historically, political campaigning in Nigeria relied on expensive, traditional media channels such as nationwide tours, press conferences, and the distribution of flyers and banners (Gana, 1992, as cited in Egbulefu & Emeke, 2023). However, a significant shift occurred during the 2023 general election, which was marked by a massive surge in social media campaigning. This shift was driven mainly by the "Obidients," a grassroots movement that supported the Labour Party's presidential candidate, Peter Obi. This unprecedented digital engagement, particularly on platforms like X (formerly Twitter), played a pivotal role in shaping voters' perceptions and became a central battleground for political discourse (Aboh & Okoi, 2023; Onyemachi, 2023).

This new media landscape also enabled an increase in negative campaigning. Accusations, propaganda, and personal attacks became commonplace, often aimed at damaging candidates' reputations. For example, Obisesan (2023) notes that the campaign period put candidates' character and past on trial, with Bola Ahmed Tinubu's candidacy being a frequent target. Specific allegations, such as his alleged involvement in illicit narcotics trade and his educational background, were widely circulated online. Ibrahim (2023) further highlights that while Tinubu had a strong following in the "BATified" group, the "Obidients" were among the most active online participants, often facing accusations of spreading misinformation. Despite public pleas from Obi for his supporters to refrain from such attacks, online propaganda and disinformation remained a dominant feature of the electoral information space (Ibrahim, 2023).

Given this context of intense online political activism and the prevalence of negative advertising, it is crucial to understand its effects on the electorate. This study aims to assess the impact of negative political advertisements on voters' perceptions of candidates' competence during the 2023 Nigerian general election.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were:

1. To identify the media platforms where voters were most exposed to negative political advertisements during the 2023 Nigerian general election.

2. To evaluate the influence of these negative advertisements on voters' perceptions of candidates' competence.
3. To determine the specific aspects of competence (e.g., leadership, economic policy) that were most affected by negative political advertisements.

Literature Review

Previous research on political advertising in Nigeria has provided valuable insights, though a gap remains regarding the specific impact of negative campaigns on voter perceptions in a digital age.

Radio has been identified as a highly effective medium for political advertising in Nigerian elections, significantly influencing voter choices based on the perceived credibility of campaign messages (Udeze & Akpan, 2013). Their survey-based research highlights that the influence of political advertisements is contingent upon the electorate's trust in the messages. However, this study did not explore the long-term effects or the specific impact of negative messaging.

Similarly, a content analysis of political advertising during the 2015 general election by Batta et al. (2015) sought to determine the role of factors such as religious sentiments and hate messages in print media. The researchers found that political advertising in Nigerian newspapers was largely non-issue-based and often included personal attacks, falling short of compliance with industry codes. While insightful, this study was limited to traditional print media and did not examine the psychological effects on voters.

Nkiru and Augustine (2018) examined the effectiveness of X (formerly Twitter) in Southeast Nigeria during the 2015 presidential campaign. Their findings revealed that while the platform facilitated communication and access to information, it did not significantly alter voter interest or decision-making. Crucially, their study did not specifically address the negative effects of political advertisements on voters' perceptions, which is the central focus of the current research.

The existing body of literature has established the presence of negative political advertising in Nigeria and its growing prevalence on social media. However, it has yet to fully explore the direct consequences of such advertising on voters' perceptions of candidate competence. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on the 2023 general election, an election cycle characterised by its digital-first approach to campaigning.

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by Cognitive Dissonance Theory, which was first proposed by Leon Festinger in 1957. The theory posits that individuals strive for internal psychological consistency when faced with conflicting information or ideas, such as a negative political ad that contradicts a voter's existing positive view of a candidate. A state of mental discomfort, known as cognitive dissonance, is created.

To resolve this dissonance and restore psychological equilibrium, individuals may employ various defence mechanisms. These include selective exposure and confirmation bias, whereby people tend to favour information that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes while avoiding or

dismissing contradictory information (Stroud, 2008). In the context of political campaigning, a voter may choose to believe a positive campaign message about their preferred candidate while rejecting a negative ad from an opponent as "fake news" or propaganda.

This theory is directly relevant to this research. Voters often hold strong, pre-existing opinions about contestants, whether based on fact or rumour. For example, Bola Tinubu was widely associated with alleged corruption due to his long-standing position within the political establishment and widely circulated rumours, such as the infamous "bullion vans" incident. According to cognitive dissonance theory, negative political advertisements that reinforced these pre-existing beliefs would have been readily accepted by some voters, solidifying their negative perceptions of his competence. Conversely, supporters may have dismissed these same ads to maintain a positive perception of their candidate. This study will utilise this theoretical lens to analyse how negative political advertisements influenced voters' perceptions of candidate competence during the 2023 general election.

Methodology

This study utilised a survey research method to gather data on the impact of negative political advertisements. This method was chosen because it allows for the collection of a broad range of opinions, attitudes, and beliefs from a large population, thereby enabling generalisations about the subject.

The research was conducted in Ekwulobia, a town in the Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria. This location was selected because the researcher was familiar with the community, which facilitated data collection. The study's population was comprised of 10,356 registered voters in Ekwulobia. Using Taro Yamane's formula for sample size calculation, a sample of 399 voters was determined to be representative of the population. A judgmental sampling technique was employed to select participants who were likely to have been exposed to political advertising and possess relevant information for the study.

Data was collected using a structured questionnaire. To ensure the reliability and consistency of the instrument, a pre-test was conducted on approximately 10% (40 copies) of the sample. This pre-test helped refine the questionnaire for clarity and effectiveness. The questionnaire copies were administered face-to-face to ensure high credibility and a high response rate. The collected data were analysed using percentages, frequency tables.

Data Collection and Response Rate

Out of 399 questionnaires distributed, 380 were successfully collected, resulting in a response rate of approximately 95%. This high rate ensures the reliability of the data. The remaining 19 questionnaires were either lost, not returned, or invalidated due to incomplete or incorrect responses.

Exposure to Negative Political Advertisements

The findings demonstrate a significant exposure to negative political advertisements among respondents, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Voter Exposure to Negative Political Advertisements

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	258	68%
No	122	32%
Total	380	100%

A majority of the respondents (68%) were exposed to political advertisements that portrayed opposing candidates in a bad light. Conversely, 32% of respondents indicated no such exposure. This finding confirms the widespread use of negative campaigning during the 2023 general election in Nigeria. When asked about the media platforms through which they were exposed to these ads, social media emerged as the most dominant channel, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Media Platforms for Negative Political Advertisements

Media Platform	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Social Media	190	50%
Television	118	31%
Billboard	38	10%
Newspapers	11	3%
Magazines	8	2%
Other	15	4%
Total	380	100%

A striking 50% of respondents identified social media as the primary source of negative political ads. This underscores the pivotal role of digital platforms, particularly in the 2023 election cycle. In contrast, other media platforms had significantly lower exposure rates, highlighting a notable shift from traditional campaigning.

Impact on Voters' Perceptions of Competence

The results indicate that negative political advertisements had a notable influence on how voters perceived candidates' competence, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Influence of Negative Ads on Perception of Competence

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes, it influenced my perception	251	66%
No, it did not influence my perception	129	34%
Total	380	100%

A substantial 66% of respondents stated that negative political advertisements influenced their perception of a candidate's competence. This figure highlights the significant impact of negative ads on shaping public opinion and, potentially, voter behaviour. Only 34% of respondents claimed that these ads did not influence their perceptions. The study also identified which specific aspects of competence were most affected by these negative campaigns, as detailed in Table 4.

Table 4: Aspects of Competence Influenced

Aspect of Competence	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Overall Leadership	182	48%
Economic Policies	61	16%
Decision-Making	46	12%
Security	30	8%
Foreign Policy	30	8%
Monitoring	15	4%
Other	15	4%
Total	380	100%

The primary aspect influenced was overall leadership, cited by 48% of respondents. These findings suggest that negative campaigns were particularly effective at casting doubt on candidates' ability to lead and manage the economy, which are critical concerns for the Nigerian electorate.

Voter Interest and Negative Ads

Interestingly, the study also found a connection between political advertising and voter interest, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Influence of Political Advertising on Voter Interest

Response	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Strong Agreement	236	62%
Agreement	144	38%

Total	380	100%
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As shown in Table 5, 62% of respondents strongly agreed that political advertisements enhanced their interest in the 2023 election, with an additional 38% in agreement. This suggests that while negative ads may influence perceptions of competence, the overall volume of political advertising may also serve to increase voter engagement and attention to the electoral process.

Discussion of Findings

Consistent with the increasing prevalence of digital media in political communication, this study confirms that social media platforms have emerged as dominant channels in Nigeria. Our finding that 50% of respondents were exposed to negative ads on social media aligns with recent research, which has long emphasised the critical role of online platforms in shaping political discourse in Nigeria. For example, scholars have noted the significant influence of platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook in disseminating political messages and shaping voter perceptions (Akinola & Adebayo, 2022). Furthermore, Egbulefu and Emeke (2023) correctly noted the multi-platform approach used by politicians, a trend this study confirms, with voters reporting exposure to content across both digital and traditional media. However, the 2023 election cycle strongly suggests a significant shift towards digital platforms, reflecting a global trend in political communication (Chadwick, 2017).

The results demonstrated that negative advertisements significantly impacted public opinion, with 66% of respondents reporting that these ads influenced their perception of a candidate's competence. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on negative political advertising, which suggests that such messages can be potent tools for shaping perceptions (Lau et al., 2007). Our study supports the theoretical framework of cognitive dissonance by showing that these advertisements often resonated with and reinforced pre-existing biases. The ads frequently targeted candidates' integrity, leadership, and economic policy competence, which respondents identified as the key aspects of competence most affected.

This study also highlighted the complex relationship between political advertising and voter engagement. While the negative ads influenced perceptions of competence, the overall volume of political advertising was found to increase voter interest in the election. However, the potential for unintended consequences, such as increased voter cynicism and political disengagement, remains a critical concern. As noted by Egbulefu and Emeke (2023), referencing Gana (1992), while political advertising aims to influence public perception, negative messaging can erode public trust.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of negative advertising was contingent on various factors, including voters' demographic characteristics, political rivalry, and the intensity of electoral competition. This aligns with the understanding that the impact of political communication is context-dependent (Holtz-Bacha & Just, 2017). The Nigerian political landscape, characterised by intense rivalries and diverse demographics, provides a unique context for examining these effects. The findings reinforce that the overall health of the political system can be impacted by the tone of political messaging (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of negative political advertisements on voters' perceptions of candidate competence in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The findings conclusively show that digital media, particularly social media platforms, were the primary channels through which voters encountered negative political advertisements. The study also revealed that these negative advertisements had a significant influence on voter perceptions, often reinforcing existing biases and shaping public opinion. While these advertisements were memorable and contributed to increased voter interest, they did not always enhance the perceived competence of the sponsoring candidates; in some cases, they even contributed to voter cynicism and distrust in political institutions.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are made to promote a healthier political communication environment in Nigeria:

1. *Regulation of Digital Media Platforms:* Since digital platforms were the dominant channels for negative political advertisements, regulatory bodies such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) should collaborate to implement clear policies that promote responsible political advertising on social and traditional media. These policies should include mandatory ad disclosures and consequences for the spread of misinformation.
2. *Promoting Ethical Political Campaigns:* Given that negative advertising influences public perception but also leads to political distrust, political parties and candidates should be encouraged to focus on issue-based campaigns that highlight leadership qualities and policy proposals rather than character attacks. This shift would improve the quality of political discourse and build voter confidence in the electoral process.
3. *Voter Awareness and Critical Engagement:* As negative advertisements often reinforce biases or sway undecided voters, media organisations and civil society groups should initiate voter education programmes to help citizens critically analyse political messages, differentiate between genuine critiques and propaganda, and make informed decisions during elections.
4. *Understanding Contextual Influences on Political Advertising:* As the study established that factors such as demographic characteristics and political rivalry influence the impact of negative political advertising, future research should further explore these variables to develop more targeted voter education initiatives and improve political communication strategies.

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