

**Impact of Social Media Messages on Nigerians' Perception of Candidate's Ideology, Competence and Policy Direction During America's 2024 Presidential Election**

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## **Abstract**

**Background:** Because of the United States's global influence, America's presidential election usually generates global attention. Issues related to the 2024 presidential elections were heavily discussed on social media.

**Objective:** This study aimed to determine the influence of social media messages on Nigerians' perceptions of political ideology, competence, and policy direction during the 2024 American presidential election.

**Methodology:** The researchers used a descriptive survey research design for the study. The population was 36,7500 social media users in Nigeria, from which a sample size of 385 was drawn using the respondent-driven chain-driven sampling technique. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data for the study. The results were presented in two tables and one chart.

**Results:** The study showed that the social media platforms through which Nigerians got exposed to messages on the 2024 American presidential election were WhatsApp, followed by Facebook, YouTube and X (formerly Twitter) in that order. The result of the study also revealed a broad spectrum of engagement patterns that range from sharing messages, clicking the like button to show approval of messages, writing comments to express an opinion and state the position of the user, tagging others to such comments, engaging others with similar views and engaging those who sharing a different opinion. Finally, the study found that while social media messages influenced participants' perception of political ideology to a moderate extent, they influenced their perception of competence to a low extent and policy direction to a large extent.

**Conclusion:** Social media platforms effectively influence perceptions about political candidates and their policy direction.

**Contribution:** This study has provided empirical evidence that could guide future debates on the role of social media in international politicking.

**Recommendation:** Future studies should extend to include the contributing role of participants' demographics in their responses to the subject matter.

**Keywords:** competence; Presidential election; Perception; political ideology; policy direction; Social media; United States of America

## **Introduction**

The United States of America's presidential elections usually draw public attention globally. This is understandable because of the role of the US as a world power and its influence on international politics. America is considered a global power because of its economic, military, political, geopolitical, and cultural power. As a result of these four broad capabilities that the US possesses, it is difficult to ignore its influence on the international community. Singh (2022) avers that the US influences issues and policies in many other countries in the world. As a result of the power of America, who becomes its president is usually a matter of global interest. Consequently, the

presidential elections in the United States generate attention and interest from people in different parts of the world.

The 2024 America's presidential election and the campaigns that followed generated a lot of attention from the Nigerian public. Many Nigerians got involved emotionally from afar, showing support for their preferred candidate in an election they did not have a vote. The Google search results for 2024 for Nigeria showed that the three top news searches for the year were America's presidential election, Nigeria's national anthem and the national grid (Johnson, 2024). This result shows that America's elections dominated the Internet search among Nigerians, highlighting the importance that Nigerians placed on the election and who occupied the most influential position in the world.

During the election, Nigerians were divided between the Republican candidate (who eventually won the election), Donald Trump and the Democratic candidate (who was the Vice President then), Kamala Harris. Nigerians used social media platforms and other Internet-powered media to voice their views and support their preferred candidate. Adeosun (2024) notes that the 2024 American presidential election created two camps in Nigeria. Those supporting Trump, those supporting Kamala. Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, X and YouTube were used as venues for Nigerians to express their support for their preferred candidates. See the below screenshot:

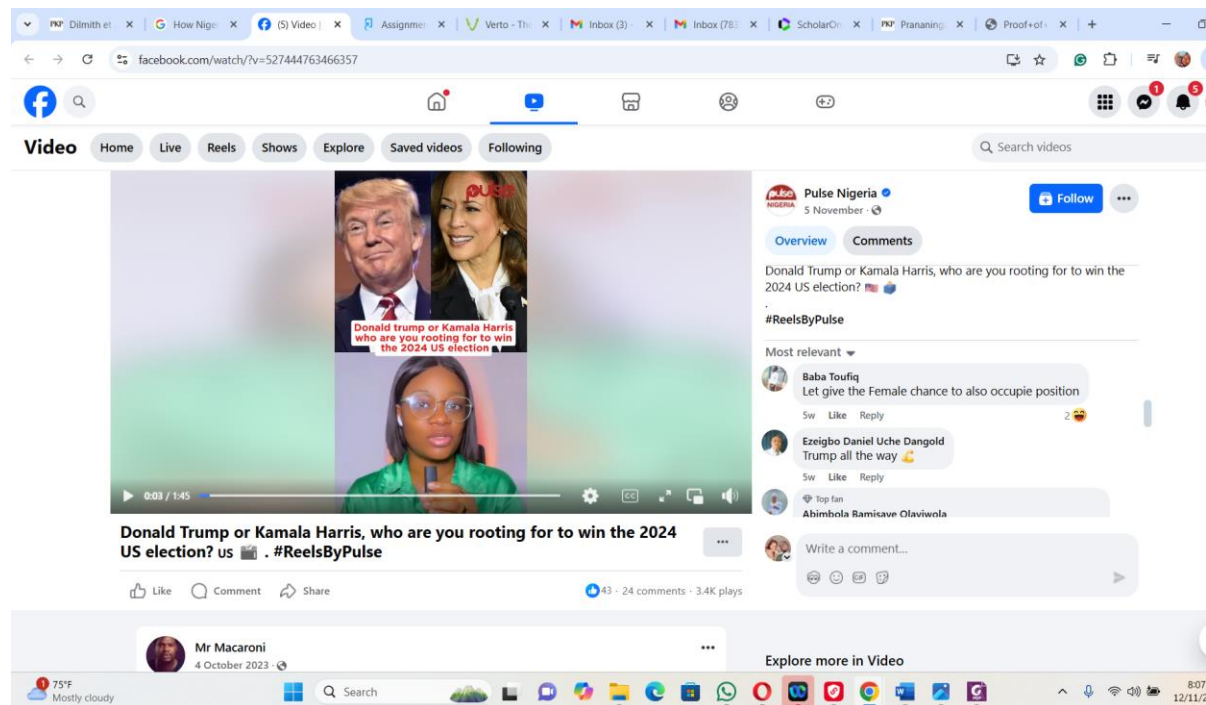


Figure 1: A screenshot of Nigerians expressing their support for their preferred candidate

The Screenshot, as shown in Figure 1, shows a video clip of a social media user who asked Nigerians to choose between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. Before asking the users to make a choice, the user outlined the advantages for Nigeria that could come with Kamala Harris winning the presidency and the disadvantages of Trump winning. The five key issues raised in the video in

favour of Kamala and against Trump include trade policies and tariffs, foreign direct investments, oil market dynamics, remittances from Nigerians abroad and geo-political alliance. Users also responded both in favour and against each of the candidates. This suggests the critical role that social media played during the election and how Nigerians were interested in the outcome.

Social media are internet-powered communication platforms that support two-way communication between users. It allows for user-generated content in different formats like texts, video, photos, illustrations and audio (Efebeh et al., 2024). Examples of social media platforms include Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), and Podcast, among others. Social media platforms have become crucial in many people's lives, and Nigerians are no exception. Social media platforms have also become important vehicles for political communication and participation. Researchers like Gever et al. (2020), Wogu et al. (2019) and Ugwuanyi et al. (2019) have reported that social media platforms have become valuable tools for politicking. For example, Gever et al. reported that social media users' responses to persuasive political messages is dependent on their self-presentation. Wogu et al. reported that citizens' engagement in political messages on social media influences their perception of political parties, the government and politicians. Ugwuanyi et al. (2019) in a study reported that social media platforms have become important vehicles for users to use visual techniques and express their views.

During electioneering campaigns, voters look at three critical factors: the candidate's political ideology, competence, and policy direction. These factors are important because they directly impact performance and how the government's activities will impact citizens. In the case of an American election, these factors determine how an American president will impact the global community. These three factors are crucial in studying how Nigerians relied on social media information to develop a perception of the two leading candidates during the 2024 American presidential election. People do not just form perceptions; they do so based on the information available to them. Social media platforms give them the information they need to develop such perceptions.

A candidate's political ideology describes his or her perspective on political issues. It encompasses the belief system, principles and values that influence how an individual understands political issues. Such an understanding also influences the behaviour and attitudes of such an individual. Researchers (Gyawali, 2020; Newton & Deth, 2005) argue that political ideologies change over time, and as people gain new information, they can shift their political ideology. Jayeon and Young-shin (2014) examined 520 participants to examine how social media information influences their perception of political candidates. Their result showed that information from social media plays a crucial role in influencing the perception of political candidates. Marcos-Marne et al. (2019) in a study reported that political ideology is an important consideration when voters are deciding which political candidate to vote for. The researchers, however, did not examine how social media messages influence the perception of the political ideology of candidates in an election.

Candidate's competence describes the ability of a politician seeking an election to deliver on the expectation of the office. Typically, voters do not want a candidate who cannot perform the function of his or her office to be elected into such an office. McGraw (2003) notes that competence is a critical character requirement that voters expect from political candidates. Kyle et

al. (2010) conducted a study and reported that competence judgement significantly influences the actual outcome. The overall implication is that competence is an important character requirement that voters look out for in candidates. However, the formation of the perception of the competence of candidates is usually determined by the information available to the general public. Many people who formed perceptions about Donald Trump and Kamala Harris had either met them or travelled to the United States of America.

Policy direction is the last variable that was considered in this study. Policy direction can be defined as the overall course of action that a candidate is likely to pursue or that is being pursued by the government of the day. Policy direction entails selecting and implementing clearly outlined strategies, guidelines, and rules meant to guide decision-making and impact the behaviour of individuals or groups (Kandogan et al., 2011). Policy direction is determined by a number of factors: the nature of the problem being addressed, the values and priorities of the policymakers, the available resources and constraints, and the political and social context in which the policy is being formulated and implemented. (Natesan & Marathe, 2015). When political candidates campaign, they try to educate the general public on their policy direction and try to convince them why those policies are important to pursue. Sometimes, the information that people have influenced their perception of the policy direction of such candidates. Social media could offer an important source of information that could guide the general public on the policy direction of a political candidate.

A study of social media's impact on Nigerians' perceptions of candidates' political ideology, competence, and policy direction is important for three broad reasons. First, such a study will provide empirical evidence for understanding the role of social media in people's views during political seasons, even when they are not in the exact geographical location. Therefore, this study will provide information that will enrich debates on the role of social media in politicking. In the second place, this study could help understand how America's presidential elections generate interest from people from different countries. Finally, this study could offer clues essential for understanding how social media shapes local elections in Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the study**

The general objective of this study is to understand the impact of social media in shaping the perceptions of Nigerians of the candidates during the 2024 American presidential election. The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. To determine the social media platforms that Nigerian used the most to consume information on the 2024 America's presidential election.
2. To determine the pattern of engagement with messages on the 2024 Presidential elections among Nigerians.
3. To examine the extent to which social media influenced Nigerians' perception of a candidate's political ideology, competence and policy direction.

### **Methodology**

**Study Design:** The researchers used a descriptive survey to examine the influence of social media on Nigerians' perceptions of the 2024 presidential election. The choice of descriptive survey research design was because it is usually suitable for studies that examine or explore phenomena.

**Target Population:** The study's target population was all social media users in Nigeria. Nigeria has 36.75 million social media users (Veriv Africa, 2024). This population was considered helpful for the study because they will likely be exposed to social media messages during America's 2024 presidential election.

**Sample size:** This study's sample size was 385 social media users in Nigeria. The researchers arrived at the sample size using the Survey Monkey Online sample size determination calculator. The confidence level was 95%, the error margin was 5%, and the population was 36,7500 social media users (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/sample-size-calculator/>).

**Sampling Approach:** The researchers used a respondents-driven chain referral approach to sample the participants for the study. The link to the study was shared in social groups, and participants were requested to share it with other groups for potential participants. An introductory question asked if participants were exposed to social media messages on America's 2024 presidential elections. Only participants who answered in the affirmative proceeded. Those who answered in the negative were not allowed to proceed. This continued for two weeks until all the participants were sampled.

**Instrument for data collection:** The researchers used a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was helpful for the study because it can collect large amounts of data (Gever, 2024; Monday & Gever 2024). The questionnaire was administered to the participants through WhatsApp and Facebook. Three participants determined the content validity of the study with specific reference to logicity, clarity and relevance of content. A pilot study with 30 participants was done using a test-retest with two intervals, and the result showed a correlation coefficient of .76, suggesting that the instrument was reliable.

**Data analysis and presentation:** This study's results were analysed using percentages, mean, and standard deviation. They were presented in tables and one chart for graphical illustration.

### Results and Discussion

Among the 385 copies of the questionnaire administered to the participants, 356 copies were returned. This means that the response rate was 92, which was considered sufficient for data analysis. The result of the study also showed that the mean age of the participants was 22 years. The sample was 56% male and 44% female. The result of the study is further presented below:

**Table 1: Social media platforms that participants were exposed to messages on America's 2024 presidential election**

S/N	Social media	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Facebook	3.5	.56	Accepted
2	WhatsApp	3.8	.45	Accepted
3	X (Twitter)	2.8	.23	Accepted
4	YouTube	2.9	.67	Accepted
5	TikTok	2.2	.78	Rejected
6	Instagram	1.5	.90	Rejected
7	Telegram	1.3	.54	Rejected
8	LinkedIn	1.0	.34	Rejected

In Table 1, the researchers examined the social media platforms through which Nigerians got exposed to messages on the 2024 American presidential election. The result of the study showed that WhatsApp recorded the highest mean score, followed by Facebook, YouTube, and X

(formerly Twitter). The implication is that WhatsApp and Facebook were the two leading social media platforms that provided the most of information on the election. This result has extended that of Gever and Okoro (2022), who examined the influence of Facebook users' self-presentation tactics on their response to persuasive politics without looking at other social media platforms through which users get exposed to political messages. Their study examined only the Facebook. Wogu et al. (2019) examined the usefulness of social media in promoting political engagement among Nigerians but also did not consider the different social media platforms on which users receive information.

**Table 2: Engagement patterns among participants with social media messages on the 2024 America’s presidential election.**

S/N	Social media	Mean	SD	Decision
1	Sharing the messages	3.0	.67	Accepted
2	Clicking the like button	3.1	.34	Accepted
3	Tagging other users	2.9	.55	Accepted
4	Writing a comment	3.0	.23	Accepted
5	Engaging others with different views	2.8	.90	Accepted
6	Engaging others with similar views	2.7	.54	Accepted

In Table 2, the researchers examined how the participants engaged with content on the 2024 American presidential election. The result of the study revealed a broad spectrum of engagement patterns that range from sharing messages, clicking the like button to show approval of messages, writing comments to express an opinion and state the position of the user, tagging others to such comments, engaging others with similar views and engaging those who are sharing a different opinion. In this aspect, the researcher extended the study of Ugwuanyi et al. (2019), who examined the use of social media to express political views without focusing on the engagement pattern of the study participants. The result of the current study has also extended the study of Efebeh et al. (2024), who examined the use of social media for voter education but did not examine the engagement pattern of the participants.

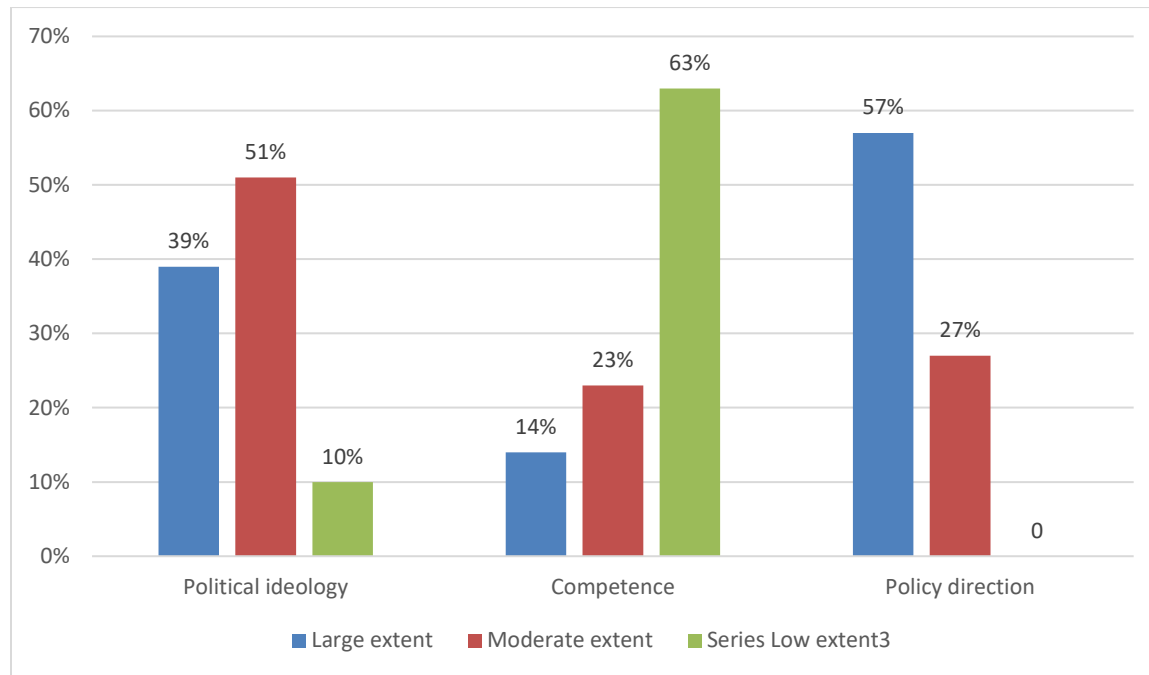


Figure 2: *The extent to which social media influenced Nigerians' perception of candidate's political ideology, competence and policy direction.*

In Figure 2, the researchers determined the extent to which social media messages influence the Nigerians' perception of candidates' political ideology, competence and policy direction during the 2024 American presidential election. The result of the study showed that while social media messages influenced participants' perception of political ideology to a moderate extent, they influenced their perception of competence to a low extent and policy direction to a large extent. This result has extended the study of Kyle et al. (2010) who examined the role of voter perception of candidate on election outcome but did not do so in the content of people who were not eligible to vote in an election. The study also extends that of McGraw (2003) who reported that the impression that voters hold about candidate in an election influences the actual election outcome. In the current study, the result has shown that social media are crucial in influencing the perception of candidate policy direction and political ideology but not competence.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study examined how social media messages influenced Nigerians' perceptions of political ideology, competence, and policy direction during the 2024 American presidential election. Based on the result of this study, the researchers conclude that social media messages were effective in influencing the perception of political ideology and policy direction of presidential candidates during the 2024 American presidential elections. The researchers also conclude that the top social media platforms where the participants received messages on America's presidential election were WhatsApp, Facebook and X (Formerly Twitter). This study has contributed to the literature by providing empirical evidence that could contribute to understanding the role of social media in politics. The result of this study could be useful in changing agents' and political parties' efforts to use social media platforms for education. Despite the contribution of this study, it has some limitations. First, the researchers did not examine the contributing role of demographics like gender and age on the participants' responses. In the second place, the researcher did not examine



the support each of the two leading presidential candidates received during the elections. It is recommended that future studies should take care of the identified limitations.

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