

SOCIAL MEDIA PRESS RELEASES AS A TOOL FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: A STUDY OF POST-2023 GENERAL ELECTION AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENTS ON FACEBOOK

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Abstract

This research addresses the specific utilisation of social media press releases (SMPRs) on Facebook to enhance audience engagement by Nigerian political party's post-2023 general election. Grounded in the Transactional Model of Communication, the study employs a content analysis research design with a population of the study of 121 but with an inter-rater reliability of 112 or 92.5% formed the sample size of the study. The purposive sampling technique was adopted for this study focusing on major political entities such as the All Progressives Congress, Peoples Democratic Party, Labour Party, All Progressives Grand Alliance, African Democratic Congress, Peoples Redemption Party and the New Nigeria Peoples' Party. The findings reveal substantial variations in SMPR frequency across parties. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) emerged as the most prolific, emphasising SMPR themes such as National issues, Party affairs, Post-election judgments, Inter-party affairs, and party affairs. PDP also stands out with the highest audience engagement, measured through reactions, comments, and shares on Facebook. To address the identified low frequency of Social Media Press Releases (that is 112 from all political parties), the study recommended that political parties prioritise a more consistent release schedule. Additionally, diversifying SMPR themes and incorporating multimedia elements are suggested strategies to enhance audience engagement on Facebook.

Keywords: Audience Engagement, Digital Political Public Relations, Facebook, Political Communication, Political Parties, Social Media Press Releases

Introduction

Digital political public relations is a strategic method, as noted by Sweetser (2011), that utilises online platforms and tools to enhance communication and engagement between political entities and the public, involving political campaigns, candidates, government bodies, and activism efforts.

In recent years, social media, particularly platforms like Twitter (now X) and Facebook, have emerged as a vital channel for digital political public relations, allowing politicians and entities to directly engage with citizens and stimulate political discourse. This shift signifies the increasing

recognition of the role social media plays in facilitating direct communication between political figures and the public, as well as fostering broader political conversations. Facebook, highlighted by Jain and Gangai (2022), is a popular platform for digital political public relations, serving purposes such as promoting political organisations, building brand identity, and connecting with media outlets.

Digital political public relations, particularly on platforms like Facebook, employs diverse mediums to engage with the public, including the use of social media press releases. These specialised releases, designed for platforms such as Facebook and

Twitter, incorporate multimedia elements to facilitate easy sharing, discovery, and discussion of news, aiming to reach a wider audience and foster direct communication (Prezly, 2023).

Nigeria boasts a vibrant Internet landscape, with approximately 84 million users as of 2022, expected to grow to 117 million by 2027, and a Facebook user base of nearly 41.6 million, making it the platform's largest market in Africa (Statistica, 2022; Napoleoncat.com, 2022).

Also, Nigeria has a very robust political landscape. There are 18 registered political parties in Nigeria¹²³. These parties are approved by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The parties are: Accord A, Action Alliance AA, Action Democratic Party (ADP), Action Peoples Party (APP), African Action Congress (AAC), African Democratic Congress (ADC), All Progressives Congress (APC), All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), Allied Peoples Movement (APM), Boot Party (BP), Labour Party (LP), National Rescue Movement (NRM), New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Peoples Redemption Party (PRP), Social Democratic Party (SDP), Young Progressive Party (YPP), and Zenith Labour Party (ZLP) (Stears.co, 2022).

In Nigeria, where there is a robust political landscape and a vibrant internet presence with nearly 84 million users as of 2022, digital political public relations, particularly on platforms like Facebook, utilises various mediums, including social media press releases to promote engagement with political parties, capitalising on the country's significant Facebook user base of nearly 41.6 million.

The confluence of Nigeria's evolving political landscape, surging internet users, and the dominance of Facebook pose both

challenges and opportunities for political communication, necessitating an exploration of digital political public relations strategies, particularly the use of social media press releases. Despite the country's growing online presence, there exists a research gap in understanding how Nigerian political parties employ these digital strategies, their efficacy in engaging the public, and the broader implications for shaping political discourse in the digital era. The study aims to examine the follower count, frequency, themes, and audience engagement of social media press releases on the official Facebook accounts of selected political parties from June to November 2023.

The Statement of the Problem

A previous study by Ndinojuo, Ihejirika, and Mbazie (2015) reveals that political parties in Nigeria have not fully incorporated social media into their public communication strategies, emphasising a need for active adoption of digital communication methods. There is a noticeable gap in the research regarding the specific utilisation of social media press releases on Facebook by political parties to enhance audience engagement in the context of Nigeria. While the existing studies touch on the broader role of social media in political participation, the incorporation of social media into public communication strategies by political parties, and the potential of Facebook for political information and mobilisation among youth, none of them directly addresses the use and effectiveness of social media press releases on Facebook as a dedicated tool for promoting audience engagement by political parties. Therefore, the current study on social media press releases and audience engagement represents a critical research gap, as it delves into a specific aspect of social media use by political parties that has not been thoroughly examined in the existing literature.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following research objectives which are to:

1. Find out the online engagement levels of the selected Nigerian political parties on Facebook
2. Establish the frequency of social media press releases of the selected Nigerian political parties on Facebook
3. Understand the themes of social media press releases of the selected Nigerian political parties on Facebook
4. Assess the audience engagement with social media press releases of the selected Nigerian political parties on Facebook

Research Questions

1. What are the online engagement levels of the selected Nigerian political parties on Facebook?
2. What is the frequency of social media press releases of the selected Nigerian political parties on Facebook?
3. What are the themes of social media press releases of the selected Nigerian political parties on Facebook?
4. What are the audience engagement levels with social media press releases of the selected Nigerian political parties on Facebook?

Literature Review

Press Releases, Social Media and Political Communication

Analysing content from the 2007 national election campaign in Denmark, the

research by Hopmann, Elmelund-Præstekær, Albæk, Vliegthart, and Vreese (2010) considers the relationship between press releases from parties and their subsequent appearance in the news. The findings suggest that more relevant parties have greater success, indicating a positive spillover effect from other parties' press releases. However, there is also a negative interaction effect between a party's own press releases and those of other parties. The current study on audience engagement with social media press releases in post-2023 Nigerian elections explores a distinct context and medium (digital political public relations) compared to Hopmann et al.'s (2010) research emphasising traditional political public relations in political participation. Both study aim to show the effects between press releases and audience engagement.

Meyer, Haselmayer, and Wagner (2017) study underscores the importance of press releases as a strategic tool for political parties and politicians in shaping media coverage. It suggests that the likelihood of a party's message receiving media attention is influenced by factors such as addressing issues already deemed important by the media or other parties. In essence, crafting press releases that align with prevailing media concerns increases the chances of getting coverage, especially benefiting opposition parties and less prominent politicians seeking visibility. This highlights the role of press releases in influencing agenda setting, navigating gatekeeping processes, and ultimately enhancing political representation and fairness in the media landscape. Meyer *et al.*'s (2017) study emphasises the traditional role of press releases in shaping media coverage for political parties, without delving into the dynamics of social media engagement.

Bello and Kolawole-Ismail (2017) avers that pervasive influence of social media

on political participation carries significant implications. Firstly, it fosters increased accountability among political leaders and administrators, as citizens can scrutinise government activities through social media, potentially leading to enhanced transparency. Secondly, there is a heightened interest in political issues among the youth, potentially shaping future political leadership. The easy access to a vast amount of information on the Internet contributes to political consciousness and participation among the youth, impacting Nigeria, Africa, and the global political landscape, thereby establishing social media as a crucial element in contemporary politics, political education, governance, and sustainable democracy. Bello and Kolawole-Ismail's (2017) study provides a broader examination of the pervasive influence of social media on political participation without specifically addressing the interactive features of social media press releases.

Amenyeawu's (2021) study posits that social media, with its diverse features, has transformed political communication and campaigns, fostering dialogue among stakeholders and influencing democratic discourse. Its appeal to the younger generation, coupled with dual usage alongside traditional media, ensures wider coverage and increased engagement in political processes. Amenyewu's (2021) study provides a general overview of the transformative impact of social media on political communication and campaigns without delving into the specific dynamics of social media press releases.

Oyedokun, Amedu, and Azizi (2023) work show that social media platforms personalise information and content for users based on their profile configurations, tailoring political information to individual interests. This targeted approach facilitates quicker mobilisation of potential supporters

and contributes to the democratisation of political processes by enabling citizen interaction and participation in democratic society. The research gap lies in Oyedokun, Amedu, and Azizi's (2023) work which provides a broader examination of how social media platforms personalize political information for users without focusing on the distinct role of social media press releases in political engagement.

Matyek, Kaze, Ohaji, and Etumnu's (2022) research reveals that both national and sub-national governments in Nigeria maintain a minimum of two and a maximum of six social media accounts, yet their frequency of use varies from monthly to yearly. Despite this, e-participation (audience engagement) levels among online audiences are generally low. The authors suggests that governments should adopt, at a minimum, the top four social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram) for enhanced digital public relations. Additionally, the study recommends leveraging Facebook's e-participation advantages and emphasises the importance of weekly usage of official government accounts to boost e-participation levels in Nigeria. The research gap lies in the fact that Matyek, Kaze, Ohaji, and Etumnu's (2022) research provides a broader examination of governments' social media presence and e-participation levels without specifically addressing the role of social media press releases in political engagement.

Bello and Kaufhold's (2023) study aimed to investigate the influence of social media on civic engagement and political participation in Nigeria during a democratic transition. Utilising secondary data from Afrobarometer, the study predicted a positive relationship between using social media for news and both civic engagement and political participation. The results consistently supported these predictions, highlighting the

role of consuming news on social media in fostering civic engagement and political participation. The research gap lies in the distinct focus of Kaufhold's (2023) study which examines the broader influence of social media on civic engagement and political participation during a democratic transition without specifically delving into the role of social media press releases.

Mande, Mustapha, Omar, Mustapha, and Ahmed's (2022) study delves into the impact of social media content preferences on political participation in Nigeria's emerging democracy. Surveying 434 youths aged 18-35 in Kaduna metropolis, Nigeria, the research explores how various social media content types, particularly news and entertainment, affect political engagement. The findings suggest that both news and entertainment preferences positively influence political participation, with political efficacy moderating the impact of news preference. However, incidental news exposure does not mediate the influence of entertainment preference on political participation. The study recommends further exploration of content preferences and their role in shaping political engagement among Nigerian youths, a significant portion of the nation's electorate. The research gap between the current study and Mande *et al.*'s (2022) study is that the former focuses specifically on social media press releases, while the latter explores the broader impact of social media content preferences, including news and entertainment, on political participation among Nigerian youths.

Theoretical Framework

The Transactional Model of Communication is a theory that views communication as a dynamic and interactive process involving two or more parties who engage in creating and interpreting messages simultaneously (Durrant, 2023). Developed by communication theorists Dean Barnlund

in 1970, this model departs from earlier linear models by emphasising the bidirectional nature of communication (Bergman, Siebers, & Kirtiklis, 2018). The Transactional Model is particularly relevant in understanding complex and interactive forms of communication, such as interpersonal communication, group communication, and digital communication. It provides a more nuanced perspective that captures the dynamic nature of human interaction (Barnlund, 2017).

The Transactional Model of Communication, a dynamic and interactive framework, is highly pertinent to the study on social media press releases (SMPR) and audience engagement in Nigerian political parties. Reflecting the bidirectional nature of communication, the model elucidates the simultaneous encoding and decoding of political messages on platforms like Facebook. Feedback mechanisms, such as likes and comments, align with the model's emphasis on feedback, offering insights into audience perceptions. The model's consideration of diverse fields of experience proves crucial in understanding how political content is interpreted within Nigeria's socio-cultural and political context. Challenges, such as noise and contextual influences, resonate with the model, as does the dynamic and ongoing nature of social media communication. Ultimately, the Transactional Model provides a comprehensive framework for comprehending the complexities of political communication and audience engagement in the digital era.

Methodology

The research design used for this study was the content analysis. Content analysis serves as a research approach employed for the examination and comprehension of the attributes present in diverse communication mediums, including

text, images, or audio. This method entails the systematic scrutiny of the content within these materials, recognising patterns, themes, and other pertinent elements, ultimately leading to the derivation of inferences or conclusions from the discoveries (Hassan, 2022b). The purposive sampling was used as sampling procedure. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgmental or selective sampling, is a non-probability technique employed in research to intentionally select individuals or groups meeting specific criteria, particularly when the population is small, challenging to access, or heterogeneous for the application of probability sampling methods (Hassan, 2022a). The selected political parties include the All Progressives Congress (<https://web.facebook.com/OfficialAPC>), Peoples Democratic Party (<https://web.facebook.com/officialpdpnig>), Labour Party (<https://web.facebook.com/NigeriaLabourParty>), All Progressives Grand Alliance (<https://web.facebook.com/AllProgressivesGrandAlliance/>), African Democratic Congress (<https://web.facebook.com/ADCNATIONALHQ>), and Peoples Redemption Party (<https://web.facebook.com/PRPNig>).

The population of the study was 212 social media press releases of the selected political party but with the inter-rater reliability of 92.5%, the sample size of the study was 112 social media press releases of the Facebook pages of the selected political parties.

Three political parties, APC, PDP, and LP, were purposively chosen based on their ranking in the 2023 general elections. Three additional parties, APGA, ADC, and PRP, were randomly selected to provide a diverse representation. The primary units of analysis are the Facebook pages of the six selected political parties. The focus was exclusively on social media press releases

published during the specified period. The coding process encompass the following categories: *Themes*: Identifying the key topics and subjects addressed in the social media press releases. *Reactions/Emoticons*: Quantifying the number and type of reactions received (likes, loves, wows, etc.). *Comments*: Knowing the quantity and content of comments posted on the press statements. *Shares*: Assessing the extent to which press statements are shared across the Facebook platform. Only press statements (social media press releases) signed by official Executive Committee (EXCO) members, such as the National Chairman, National Publicity Secretary, National Organising Secretary, National Youth Leader, and National Women Leader, was included in the analysis. While the Facebook pages of the political parties encompass various content, including political news, party activities, schedules, candidate presentations, and member achievements, this study exclusively focused on social media press releases to maintain specificity. Quantitative content analysis method was employed to identify patterns, trends, and correlations within the coded categories. The research adhered to ethical standards, ensuring respect for privacy, accurate representation of data, and responsible use of social media content.

The Inter-Rater Reliability

Inter-Rater Reliability (IRR) serves as a metric to gauge the degree of concordance or consistency among two or more raters (or observers) assessing the same set of items or subjects. Widely applied across diverse domains such as research, psychology, education, and healthcare, IRR ensures that evaluations from different raters maintain reliability and uniformity (Bonnet, 2023). To establish the study's credibility, two statisticians proficient in coding and content analysis were involved, and an Inter-rater reliability test was executed using the

Percentage Agreement technique (Hassan, 2023) on the selected units of analysis. Inter-rater reliability reflects the extent of concurrence among raters or judges, with a score of 1 (or 100%) indicating unanimous agreement and 0 (0%) denoting complete disagreement. This approach was adopted to fortify both the reliability and validity of the study.

Number of ratings in agreement=112 (total number of social media press releases by all political parties in agreement) divided by total number of ratings= 121 (total number of social media press releases by all political parties rated by the two coders). (See table 2)

$$IRR = \frac{\text{Number of Agreements}}{\text{Total Number of Ratings}}$$

In your case:

$$IRR = \frac{112}{121}$$

$$IRR \approx 0.925$$

So, the Inter-Rater Reliability for your data, based on the provided numbers, is approximately 0.925 or 92.5.

Converting to percentage $0.925 \times 100 = 92.5\%$ From the result, it shows that the findings are reliable since the percentage of agreement is 92.5%.

Data Presentation

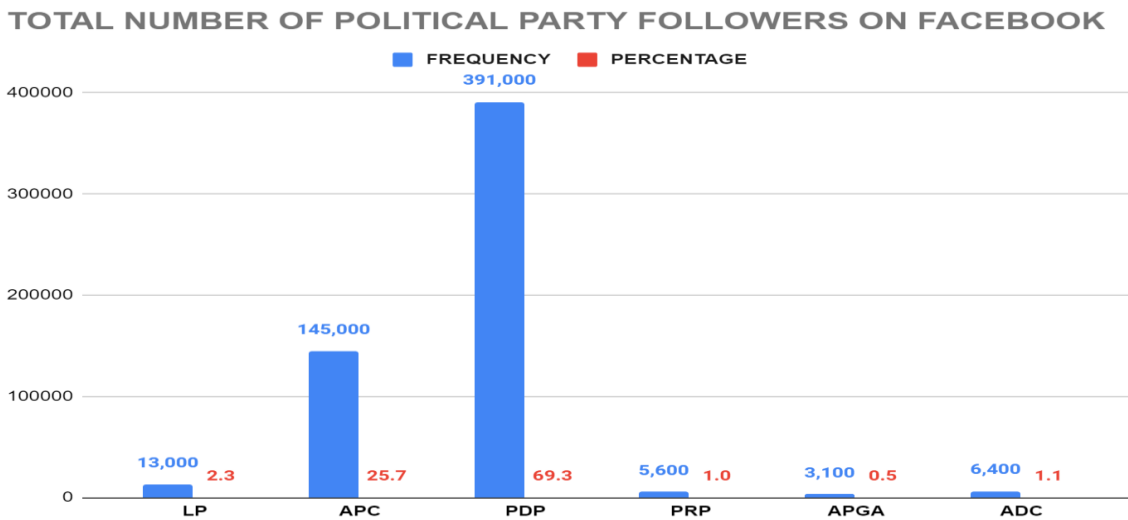


Table One: Showing the number of Facebook followers in the political parties under study

This data underscores the varying degrees of online influence and suggests the strategic use of social media platforms by

Nigerian political parties to connect with their supporters and disseminate political messages.

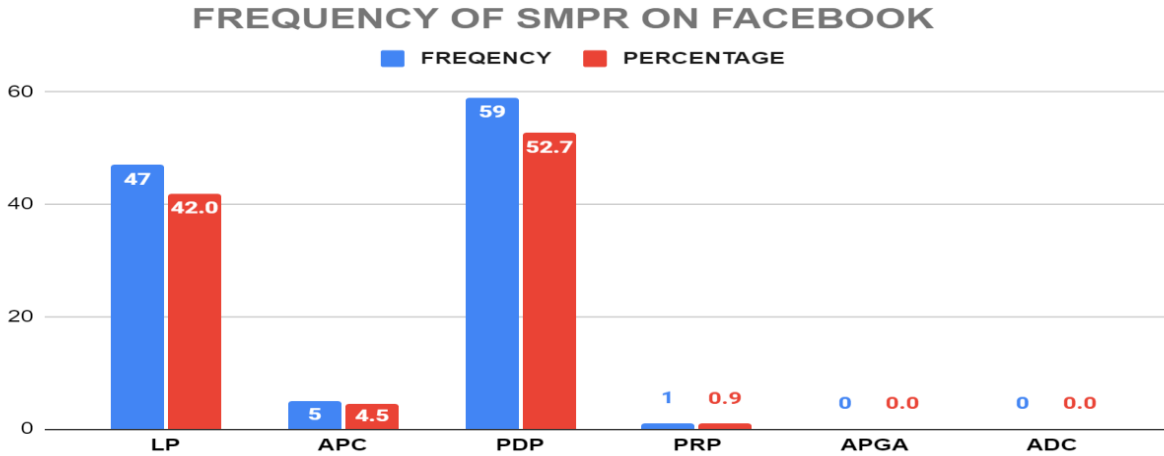


Table Two: Showing the number of SMPR by the political parties under study from June-November, 2023

This analysis underscores the varying levels of engagement and communication strategies employed by political parties on Facebook, with the PDP and LP

demonstrating more active use of social media press releases compared to the APC, PRP, APGA, and ADC.

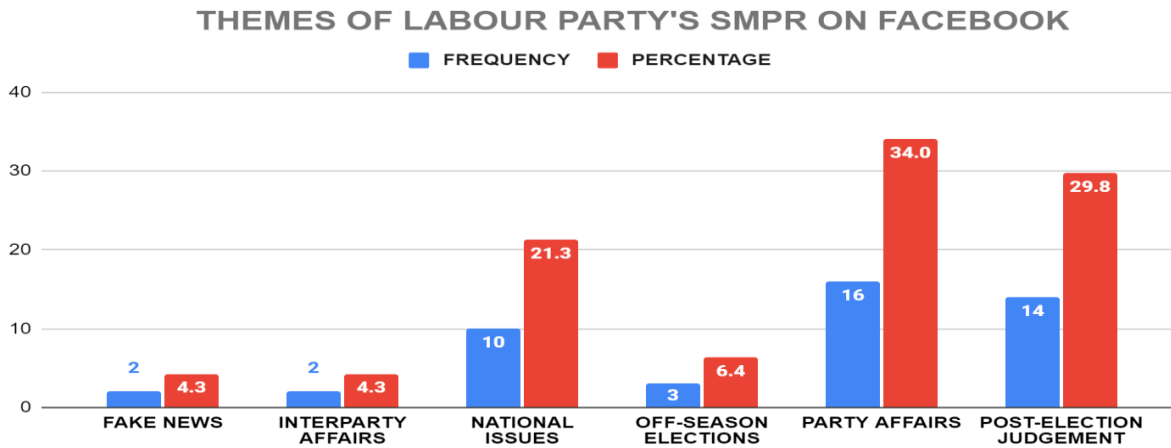


Table Three: Showing the themes of SMPR by LP from June-November, 2023

This analysis indicates the LP's strategic use of SMPRs to communicate and emphasise certain themes, providing insights

into the party's priorities and areas of focus in its social media communication strategy.

THEMES OF ALL PROGRESSIVES CONGRESS' SMPR ON FACEBOOK

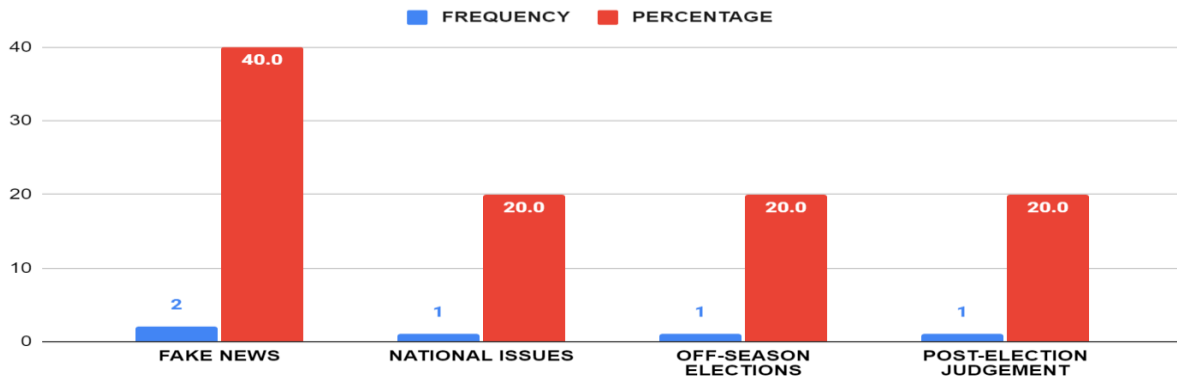


Table Four: Showing the themes of SMPR by APC from June-November, 2023

This analysis reveals the APC's use of SMPRs to address specific themes, particularly emphasising countering fake

news and addressing key national issues, providing insights into the party's strategic communication priorities on social media.

THEMES OF PEOPLES' DEMOCRATIC PARTY'S SMPR ON FACEBOOK

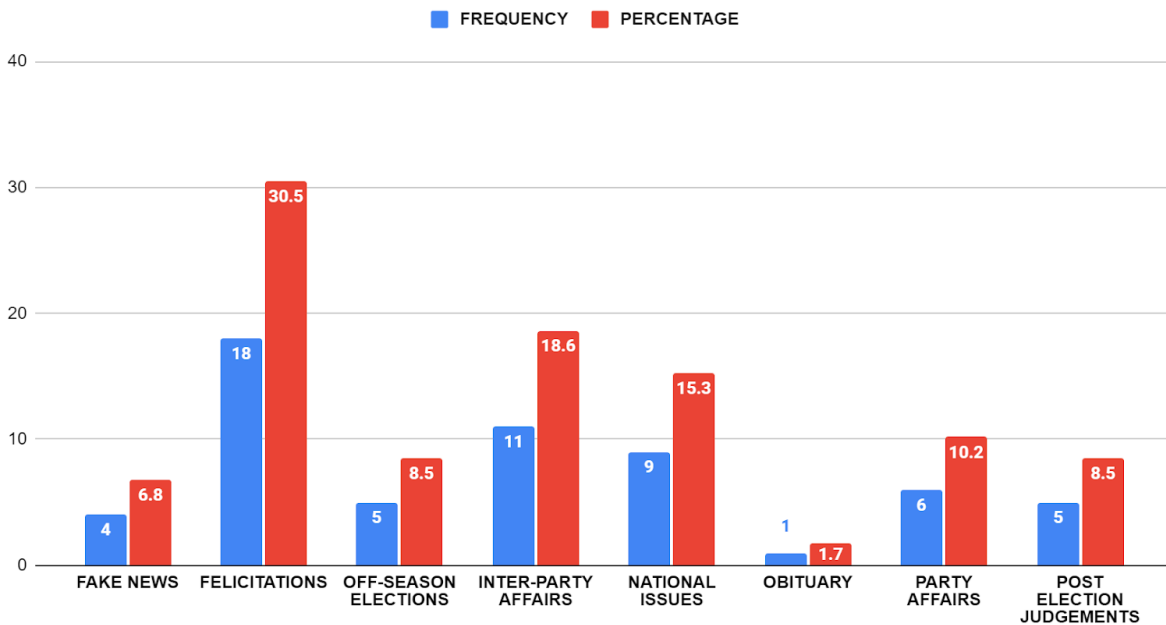


Table Five: Showing the themes of SMPR by PDP from June-November, 2023

The PDP's SMPR themes demonstrate a strategic mix of positive messaging, internal and external political

engagement, and responses to contemporary issues.

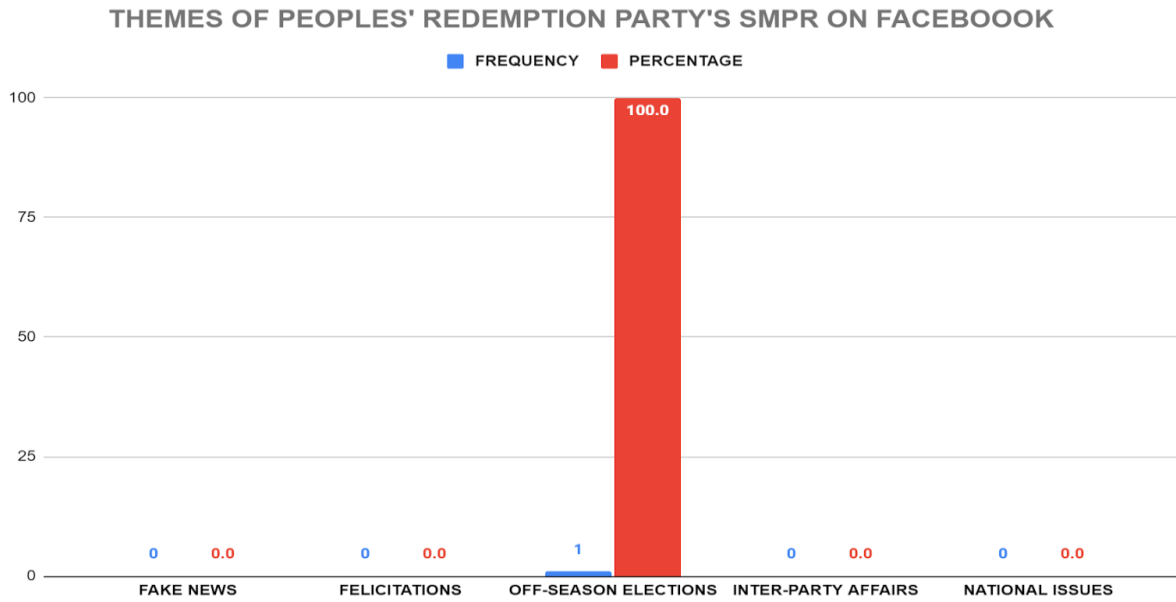


Table Six: Showing the themes of SMPR by PRP from June-November, 2023

The PRP's SMPR themes reveal a concentrated effort on communicating its positions or engagements concerning off-

season elections, showcasing a strategic emphasis on specific political events.

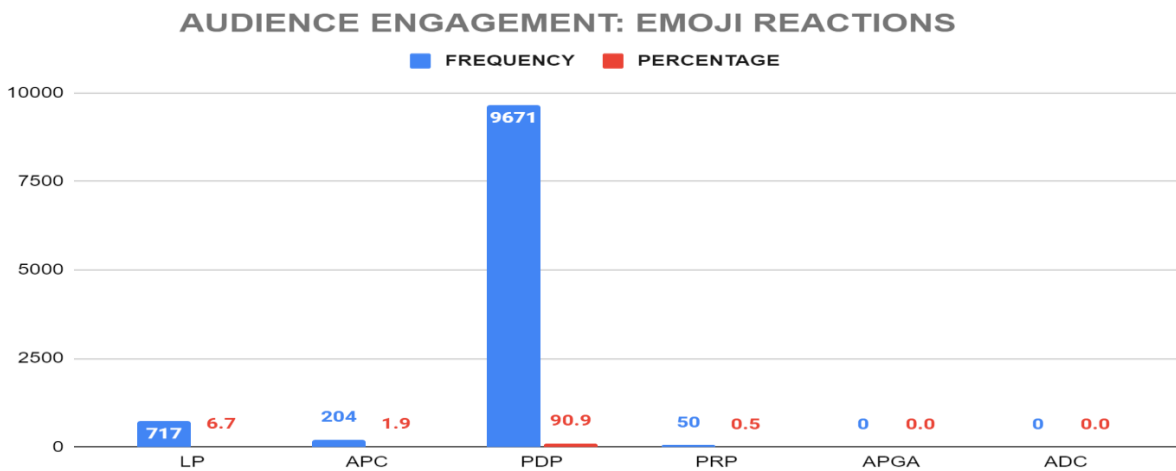


Table Seven: Showing the emojis (audience engagement) of SMPR by all political parties

The variation in engagement levels underscores differences in the effectiveness

of SMPR strategies among political parties on Facebook.

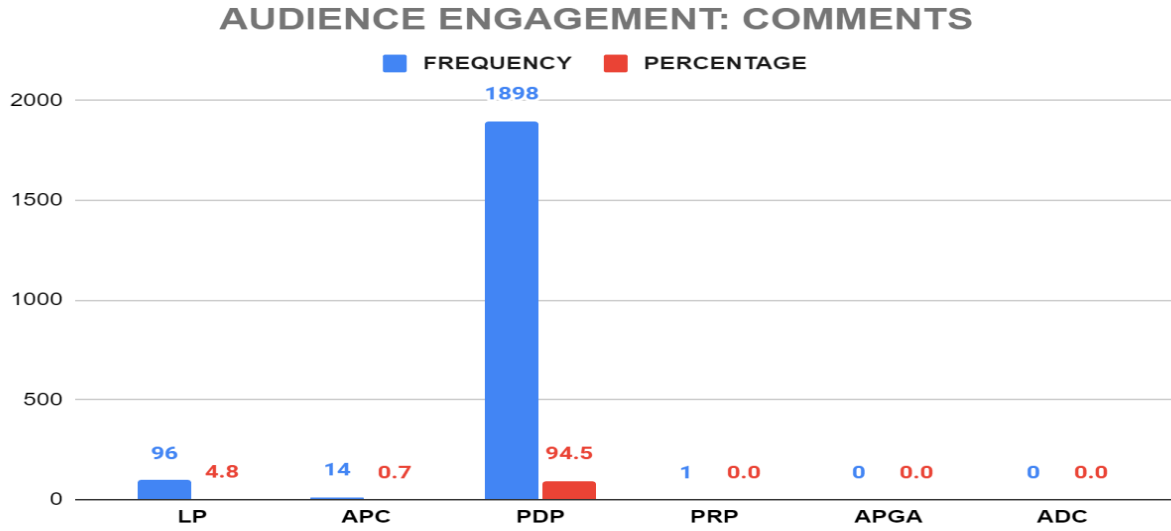


Table Eight: Showing the comments (audience engagement) of SMPR by all political parties

The significant disparity in comment percentages highlights variations in the level of audience engagement and interactive

discussions triggered by SMPRs among these political parties on Facebook.

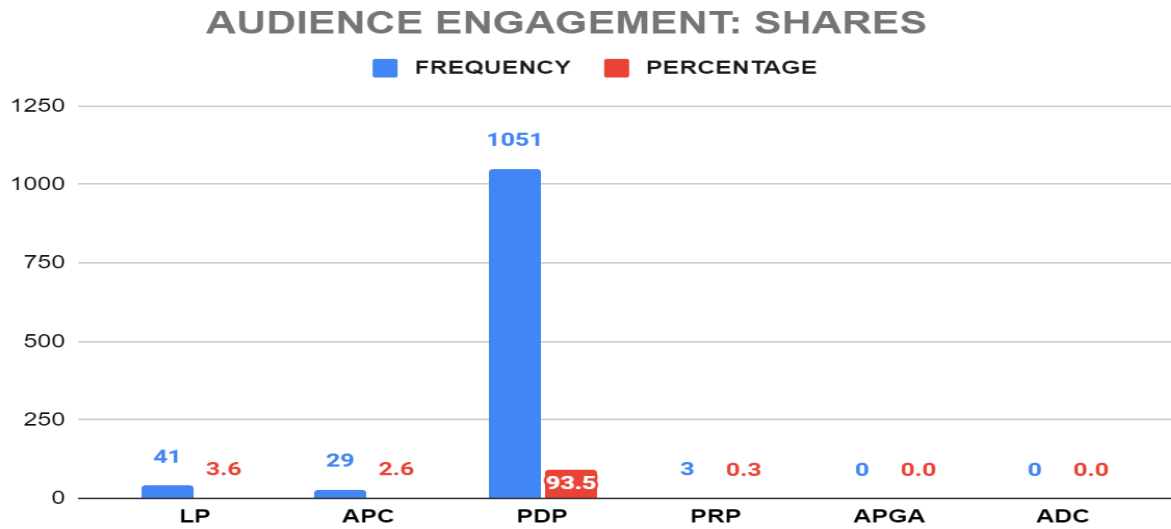


Table Nine: Showing the shares (audience engagement) of SMPR by all political parties

The disparities in share percentages highlight variations in the extent to which the audience actively participates in amplifying and spreading SMPRs, with the PDP garnering the highest level of shares.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis of social media press releases (SMPRs) on Facebook by various Nigerian political parties provides a comprehensive understanding of their digital political public relations strategies and audience engagement. The data reveals distinct patterns and trends that shed light on the parties' online presence and the effectiveness of their SMPRs. These findings underscore the dynamic landscape of political communication in the digital age. The parties' varying strategies and levels of success in engaging the online audience highlight the importance of an adaptable approach. The PDP's success suggests a holistic strategy that encompasses diverse themes and resonates emotionally with the audience. This aligns with Amenyewu's (2021) study that provides a general overview of the transformative impact of social media on political communication. Other parties may benefit from reevaluating their content strategies, leveraging thematic diversity, and fostering a more interactive and shareable online environment. This analysis offers valuable insights for political parties seeking to enhance their digital political public relations effectiveness, engage their audience more effectively, and navigate the complexities of the contemporary political communication landscape.

The frequency of SMPRs varies significantly among the political parties. The People's Democratic Party (PDP) emerges as the most prolific, with a diverse range of themes covered, including felicitations, inter-

party affairs, and national issues. This suggests a multifaceted approach to digital political public relations, allowing the party to address various aspects of political discourse. The findings align with Sweetser (2011) who underscores the strategic use of digital tools in political public relations, utilising online platforms to engage with various public segments and enhance communication between political entities and the public. On the other hand, the Labour Party (LP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) exhibit lower frequencies, indicating potential gaps in their digital political public relations strategies or a more selective approach to content generation. Simon, Bass, Boelman, and Mulgan (2017) advocate that political parties must acknowledge the significance of online engagement, undertaking measures to enhance their digital presence through strategies like creating compelling content, employing effective social media utilisation, and leveraging digital tools to connect with constituents.

Examining the themes of SMPRs provides insights into the priorities and focus areas of each political party. The analysis of Social Media Press Releases (SMPRs) from various Nigerian political parties reveals a consistent emphasis on five primary themes. National issues take center stage, demonstrating a shared commitment to addressing matters of overarching significance. Party affairs follow closely, with parties keen on sharing internal updates and organisational activities. Post-election judgments feature prominently, suggesting sustained interest in legal developments related to past elections. Inter-party affairs reflect a focus on the broader political landscape beyond individual party boundaries, fostering engagement in the political sphere. Additionally, felicitations emerge as a recurring theme, demonstrating efforts to connect with the audience on positive occasions. These diverse themes

collectively underscore the communication strategies employed by political parties, encompassing internal organisational matters, engagement with national concerns, and interactions within the political landscape. PDP's SMPRs cover a wide spectrum of topics, showcasing a comprehensive strategy. This agrees with the study by Erfort, Stoetzer, and Klüver (2023) that posits press releases offer parties considerable freedom in shaping their communication to the public, as they are not confined by the parliamentary agenda, allowing independent selection of issues for discussion; additionally, they serve as an optimal tool for parties to present themselves to their constituents.

The audience's response to SMPRs, measured through reactions, comments, and shares, is a crucial metric for evaluating the impact and resonance of political content on social media. PDP stands out with the highest engagement, indicating a robust and interactive online community. The absence of shares for some parties, such as PRP, raises questions about their ability to mobilise followers to amplify their content. It suggests that while certain parties may generate content, turning their audience into advocates who share their messages requires further attention. According to Rayson (2015), critics argue that the "like" button is perceived as a facile and relatively insignificant option compared to commenting or sharing, requiring minimal effort. While shares may be more challenging to obtain, the convenience of the "like" button appeals to busy users, allowing them to share more content than they might otherwise engage with. Individuals were eight times more inclined to use the "like" option compared to sharing or commenting.

The use of emojis in audience reactions provides a basic understanding of sentiment. PDP's significant emoji-based

engagement suggests a positive and emotionally resonant connection with its followers. However, the limited use of emojis by other parties, especially APC and LP, may indicate a potential area for improvement in creating more emotionally compelling content. Aboulhosn (2020) suggests that leveraging emoji-based engagement is an effective strategy for connecting with audiences on social media platforms. Citing a study by WordStream, it is noted that incorporating emojis in tweets can boost engagement by 25% compared to messages without emojis. Additionally, using emojis in Facebook posts can lead to a 33% increase in shares and a 57% increase in overall interactions with the post.

The distribution of comments and shares further accentuates the variations in audience interaction. PDP commands a significant share of both, indicative of a highly engaged and participatory audience. The comparatively lower figures for other parties underscore the challenges they face in mobilising their followers to actively participate in online conversations and share party content. According to Tasente (2020), in the context of political communication on Facebook, audience comments play a crucial role in enhancing engagement, fostering a two-way communication model, and expanding the reach and impact of political parties.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the dynamics of social media press releases (SMPR) by political parties on Facebook, providing insights into their themes, frequency, and audience engagement. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study primarily focuses on quantitative analyses, and a more in-depth qualitative exploration could provide richer insights into the context and nuances of SMPRs. Additionally, the study is confined to

Facebook, neglecting other social media platforms that might contribute significantly to political communication. Furthermore, the findings may be subject to the ever-evolving nature of social media, and the study's timeframe might not capture emerging trends. Future research could delve into the qualitative aspects of SMPRs, exploring the language and framing strategies employed by political parties. Comparative studies across various social media platforms and over different election cycles could enhance the generalizability of findings. Additionally, investigating the impact of SMPRs on public opinion and electoral outcomes would be a valuable avenue for future exploration in the evolving landscape of digital political communication.

Recommendations

To address the observed low frequency of Social Media Press Releases, political parties are advised to prioritize a more consistent and regular release schedule. Establishing a predictable cadence for SMPRs can contribute to sustained audience engagement and bolster the parties' digital

presence. This recommendation suggests developing an editorial calendar, aligning releases with key events, and leveraging current affairs to ensure a steady flow of SMPRs. An increased and regular frequency of SMPRs is crucial for building trust, keeping the audience informed, and establishing a continuous and impactful online presence for political parties.

Political parties in Nigeria should consider diversifying their Social Media Press Release (SMPR) themes. While maintaining a focus on national issues and party affairs, exploring a broader range of topics could enhance audience engagement. Introducing content related to governance, policy proposals, and grassroots initiatives may contribute to a more comprehensive and appealing communication strategy.

To boost audience engagement on Facebook, political parties should create diverse and engaging content, including multimedia elements. Actively responding to comments is an essential strategy for fostering a vibrant and participatory digital political landscape.

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