

ASSESSMENT OF VOTERS' RESPONSE TO GLOBAL SYSTEM MOBILE TELECOMMUNICATION POLITICAL ADVERTISING PLATFORMS USED IN 2015 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONEERING CAMPAIGNS IN DELTA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Global system mobile telecommunication political advertising is the use of mobile phone platforms to appeal to voters to elect one person rather than another or urge them to vote a specific way on a resolution or referendum. Several studies have provided useful insights into how GSM and political advertising affect voters separately but not much has been said about how both have interacted in a particular election in Nigeria in terms of level of exposure of voters to political advertisements on GSM platforms, attitude of the voters towards the GSM political advertisements, and how GSM political advertising impact on the voting decisions. The study adopted survey on a population of voters during the 2015 general elections in Delta State, using a sample of 300. Questionnaire return rate was 92%, and findings show that many voters received political advertising messages via GSM. Voters' attitude towards this was largely positive and the level at which these GSM political advertisements influenced voters was significant. The study recommends that political parties and candidates should make GSM political advertisement a continuous exercise and not just limited to election periods only.

Key words: *Global System Mobile Telecommunication, Nigeria*

Introduction

The word “advertising” was derived from the Latin word *ad vertere*, which is “to turn the mind towards”. It is therefore concerned with informing people about the existence of a product, service, idea, corporate body, and personality so as to draw attention to it. Advertising also presents persuasive reasons to encourage consumers of the advertisements to respond positively to that which is being promoted (Okoro, 2005).

Political advertising, on its part, entails the sponsorship of advertisements that urge prospective voters to elect one person rather than another or urge voting in a specific way on a resolution or referendum. Political advertising has therefore been described as a primary means through which candidates, political parties and issue advocacy groups communicate to the citizenry (Jamieson and Campbell, 2001). Put

differently, political advertising is the use of persuasive strategies to present and/or promote political parties, candidates, and issues during electioneering campaigns or other instances where public support is required in a political process (Mohammed and Mohammed, 2012).

The media of advertising generally has continued to evolve, as advertisers and advertising agencies continually respond to threats and competition posed to traditional media of advertising by the new media for digital communication such as the Internet and the Global System for Mobile Telecommunication (GSM) (Ezea, Ozibo and Hassan, 2013). Consequently, political advertisements were not limited to the conventional advertising media in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. It was observed that many people received political advertising messages through their mobile phones (GSM) as pre-

recorded voice calls, text messages, GSM chat applications, and posts on social networks and other Internet-facilitated platforms for personal communication. These are generally regarded as new media. New media are digital channels that easily combine texts, graphics, sound, and video, using computer technology to create messages that are similar to, but clearly different from the traditional media (Asemah and Edegoh, 2012; Uwakwe 2010). Digital media can be manipulated, and are networkable, dense, compressible and interactive. The advent of digital media into the realm of political advertising in Nigeria has put it on a whole new pedestal.

In Nigeria, a large percentage of the population who are of voting age, own GSM phones. This means that GSM is a fast way to reach prospective voters since they can be individually reached directly. The GSM therefore, conquers the problem of buying newspapers/magazines or having power supply to watch/ listen to political advertisements on television or radio. In the light of this, this study examined how voters responded to the use of GSM advertising platforms for political advertisements in the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Political advertising and GSM technology are not new issues in Nigeria. Consequently, a number of scholars have examined different aspects of these phenomena. Wheeler (1997) points out that the mass media (through political advertisement), provide powerful channels of information between the political elite and the electorate which facilitate the dissemination of full range of political opinions that enable the public to make political choices and contribute to national life. Uwakwe (2010) highlights the potency of the GSM by pointing out that GSM handsets have interactive facilities, can be carried about more permanently than any other media of communication, and can perform multiple tasks. On their part, Nwafor, Odoemelam, Orji-Egwu, Nwankwo, and Nweze (2013), point out that the potentials of mobile phones have made it appealing for people to apply it in business, commerce, evangelism, crime prevention and politics among others.

The above submissions on the phenomena of political advertising and GSM have provided useful insights into how they can be combined in electioneering campaigns. However, not much has

been said about how GSM was specifically adopted for political advertising in a particular election in Nigeria, like the most recent gubernatorial elections in Delta State which held in 2015. What was the level of exposure of voters to political advertisements on GSM platforms during the Delta State 2015 gubernatorial elections? What was the attitude of the voters towards the GSM political advertisements? How did the GSM political advertisement impart on the voting decisions of the electorate in the said election? These questions represent obvious gaps in knowledge which this study of voters' response to GSM political advertising platforms used in 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State attempted to fill. The rationale for this study is that issues in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria are still open for analyses by all stake holders in a bid to discover areas that need improvements in the next general elections expected to hold in 2019.

Objectives of the Study and Research Questions

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Determine the level of exposure of voters to GSM political advertisements during the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State.
2. Examine the attitude of voters towards the use of GSM for political advertisements during the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State.
3. Find out the impact of GSM political advertisements on voting decisions of the electorate in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Delta State.

In pursuit of these objectives, the study was guided by search for answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent were voters exposed to GSM political advertisements during the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State?
2. What was the attitude of the voters to GSM political advertisements used during the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State?
3. How did the GSM political advertisements influence the voting behaviour of the electorate in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Delta State?

Scope of the Study

This study focused on the use of GSM as an advertisement platform during the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State. The study is therefore limited in scope to political advertisements on GSM platforms as well as voters in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Delta State. In addition, the scope of the study is limited in time frame to January-March, 2015 (the period of electioneering campaigns for the 2015 general elections).

GSM Technology and Advertising in Nigeria

The interaction between GSM technology and advertising in Nigeria is obvious. Advertising via GSM platforms have become popular in the country because Nigerian advertisers have responded to the opportunities presented by the new media of communication, to which mobile phones belong. The popularity of advertising through GSM stems from the fact that it is very ubiquitous. People carry their mobile phones with them, and use them any day, anytime, anywhere. With this, advertisements delivered on mobile phones tend to have wider coverage, great speed, flexibility, and greater audience targeting. They can also be less expensive than traditional advertising media (Ezea et al, 2013).

There are several communication platforms on GSM that can be exploited for advertising purposes. They include programmed voice calls delivering advertisement messages; Short Message Service (SMS) – popularly called “Text Message”; and Multi-Media Service (MMS), that allow for the sending and reception of texts, graphics, pictures, audio, and video messages, either individually or collectively. Mobile phones also have Wireless Application Protocol (WAP). This gives GSM subscribers' access to the Internet and exposes them to all forms of online advertisement available on Internet-enabled computers. WAP also enable GSM subscribers participate in social networking sites on the Internet where messages (including advertisements) are freely and widely shared. Another message sharing platform on GSM is Local Area Network (LAN). This allows GSM subscribers to exchange texts, graphics, pictures, audio, and video messages via Bluetooth; flash-share; Wi-fi; and hot-spot applications among others (Mohammed, 2011).

Many advertisers in Nigeria have come to realize the advertisement potentials of GSM. This is against the backdrop of the revelation by the

Nigerian Communication Commission (2016) that over One hundred and fifty million mobile phone lines were active in the country as at September 2015. This represents about 88% of the country's population estimated at One hundred and seventy million. With the above statistics, it can be assumed that GSM density in Nigeria is very high, even though some persons own more than one mobile line in Nigeria. This density can be taken to be higher than any other traditional media of advertising on the country for now. By extension therefore, GSM advertising in Nigeria may hold greater prospects than any other traditional advertising medium.

In many parts of the world today, individuals, groups, organizations and even nations are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the new media platforms to mobilize millions of people to support and advance their cause (Nwafor et al, 2013). This can be by direct advertising or other forms of persuasive communication. With features that are comparable with the Internet, mobile phone advertising and information dissemination enable business owners, politicians, and entertainers to reach their prospective audience from every corner of the globe in a fraction of a second. Asemah (2011) observes that one major advantage of formulating advertisement and campaigns through mobile phones is that the sender is able to reach the receivers, while they are traveling, regardless of the area or time of the day. The application of mobile phones to political advertising in Nigeria is not strange. Adeyanju and Haruna (2012) point out that politicians and other groups are taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the new media for campaigns and propagation of ideologies. This is because GSM has the potential of passing messages to large heterogeneous users almost simultaneously, and it has also proven to be effective in mobilizing votes.

Political Advertising on GSM Platforms in Nigeria

Political advertising has been defined as the application of the principles of advertising to serve political interests (Ijeh, 2012). It is also seen as a form of marketing communication that is aimed at selling the candidate of a party to the electorate (Asemah and Edegoh, 2012). On his part, Ezeudu (2003) describes political advertising as an indispensable element in electioneering campaigns which can be extensively relied on to contend with the ever mercurial and changing citizenry's political behaviors, attitudes and

demands in the complex and dynamic-environment of politics. Politicians have come to realize that communication is an essential part of their trade, especially during elections, where one has to first of all win the communication aspect. The decision to vote any candidate depends on the level of political awareness of a people at a given time, hence the need for political communication to enlighten voters on the electoral process (Udende, 2011). It has been observed that political advertising provides political parties and their candidates with channels to attract the much needed support, and votes from the electorate (Obot and Batta, 2012).

Election periods in any nation generate a lot of interest among the political candidates in particular and the civil society, in general. This is because; the destiny of the people and the nation rests squarely on the shoulders of the successful candidates at the polls. It is no wonder, then that both political actors and their supporters deploy different persuasive strategies to elicit support and win voters in order to gain control of political power (Opeibi, 2005). To do this, present day politicians fine-tune their strategies to create more comprehensive media mixes intended to give them the edge in the competition for voters' acceptance and support (Ijeh, 2011). This quest for a more comprehensive media mix has led political advertisers to explore GSM advertising platforms. The use of GSM for political advertising in Nigeria was evident in the 2015 general elections, where political parties and candidates employed the use of GSM communication platforms to campaign and mobilize support from the electorate. Notable among the GSM platforms used for political advertising in the 2015 general election in Nigeria were programmed voice calls, text messages, multi-media messages, WhatsApp, and other Internet-enabled social media networks receivable on GSM handsets.

The presence of GSM and other the new media technologies in the last few years have brought tremendous changes in citizens' involvement in political processes. This is because the GSM technology is open, participatory, interactive, and cost-effective. It belongs to the new genre of media that focuses on social networking, allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends, share personal information as well as publish their own views on the internet (Nwafor et al, 2013).

The use of GSM for political advertisements allows politicians to gain insight into the reactions of the masses to political advertising messages. It also helps political parties/politicians to understand the

pressing needs and concerns of the people that should be addressed (Asemah and Edegoh, 2012). Another benefit of the use of GSM in political advertising is that people can now consume the messages in more convenient ways, rather than allowing media producers to schedule consumption time and content (Nwafor et al, 2013). Political advertisements on GSM communication platforms are also less expensive than the political advertisements on the conventional media. This is partly because advertising on GSM platforms are flexible, accessible and affordable. On GSM platforms, it is possible for anyone to create, modify and share contents with others, using relatively simple tools that are often free or inexpensive (Asemah and Edegoh, 2012).

Efficient use of GSM platforms for political advertisement with the intent to persuade citizens to vote in favour of a particular party and/or candidate is undoubtedly an inexpensive and fast means of communication (Nwafor et al 2013; Asemah and Edegoh, 2012). However, such activities should be closely monitored to prevent the spread of inciting hateful messages that cause religious or ethnic schism (Adeyanju and Haruna, 2012).

Theoretical Framework (Agenda Setting Theory)

The Agenda setting theory advances the argument that the mass mediated messages (which include political advertisements) have the potential to set the agenda in the political sphere, by influencing attitudes of members of the public towards political issues. They can force attention to certain issues and therefore succeed in building up the public images of political figures by laying emphasis on advertising themes that suggest what members of the public should think about, know about, and have feelings about (McComb and Shaw, 1995, cited in Ijeh 2009). The theory postulates that the media set agenda for the public to follow. This is because the pictures we store in our heads, most of the things we think or worry about, and most of the issues we discuss, are based on what we have consumed in different media. The media make us think about certain issues. They make us feel that certain issues are more important than others in our society.

In the views of Yahaya (2008), the mass media including the phenomenon of political advertising via GSM) suggest the issues, individuals, and groups that are important by the way they are publicized. In the realm of political advertising

through GSM, the level of attention given to political parties and candidates during electioneering campaigns, help to determine how important the electorate would see them. The efficacy of political advertising is captured by Ozuru and Ekeanyanwu (2013) when they averred that mass communication can be used to project to the public what the mass media managers want people to perceive as important as well as to think or talk about, and at the end of the day, such issues actually appear important in the public's eyes as people begin to think and talk about them. With the popularity of GSM in Nigeria, using it to deliver political advertisements during electioneering campaigns suggests that the messages would be widely received. This, coupled with the fact that the initiators of the political advertisements have the power to deliberately focus on themes, issues, parties and candidates for elections, which they want the electorate to consider important, think and talk about, indicate that the electorate could actually be influenced by political advertisements delivered to it through GSM.

Methodology

The study adopted survey. The study population was made up of voters during the 2015 general elections in Delta State, from which a sample of 300 respondents were selected with a multi-stage sampling technique combining proportionate cluster and purposive sampling. Respondents were in clusters of 100 respondents from each of the three senatorial districts in Delta State (Delta North, Delta Central and Delta South). In each senatorial district, only voters who agree that they have GSM handsets were given questionnaire to fill. The questionnaire return rate was 92%, as 276 copies of the questionnaire out of the 300 copies distributed were found usable for the study. Emanating data are presented in tables and charts, and analyzed in simple percentages below.

Data Presentation and Analyses

The first research question in this study sought to determine the extent to which voters were exposed to GSM political advertisements during the Delta State 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns. Majority of the respondents (271 [98.2%]) indicated that they received political advertising messages for the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State on their GSM handsets. This is against 5 (1.8%) of them who

reported that they did not. The data is shown in the pie chart below.

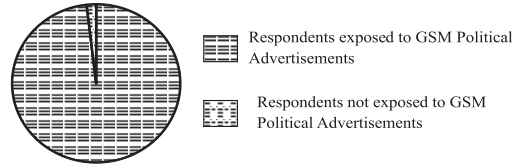


Figure 1: Pie chart showing Respondent's exposure to GSM Political Advertisements

Out of the 271 respondents who received political advertising messages during the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State on their GSM handsets, more than half of them indicated that they got such advertisement messages daily (e.i. 149 [55%]), while another 62 (22.1%) and 20 (7.4%) of them reported that they received such messages on their GSM handsets weekly and fortnightly respectively. 40 (15.5%) of them were not sure of the frequency at which they received political advertising messages for the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State on their GSM handsets. The distribution is presented in the bar chart below.

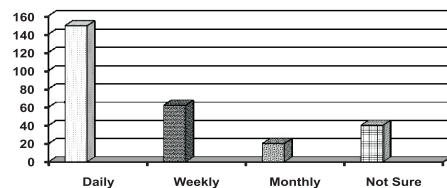


Figure 2: Bar Chart Showing Frequency of Respondents' exposure to GSM Political Advertisements

The above clearly shows that the level of exposure of voters to political advertising messages for the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State on GSM handsets was high.

In attempting to determine the level of exposure of voters in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Delta State to GSM political advertisements, the data generation also focused on GSM platforms commonly used and respondents were allowed to indicate more than one. It was discovered that the Short Message Service (SMS), commonly referred to as "Text Message" was the most widely employed with a frequency of 144 (28.24%). This is followed by Facebook – 96 (18.82%); Pre-recorded voice calls – 78 (15.29%); and WhatsApp – 72 (14.12%). Others are Twitter – 48 (9.41%); as well as Instagram and Black Berry Messenger (BBM) with 36 (7.06%) each. The data is set out in the table below

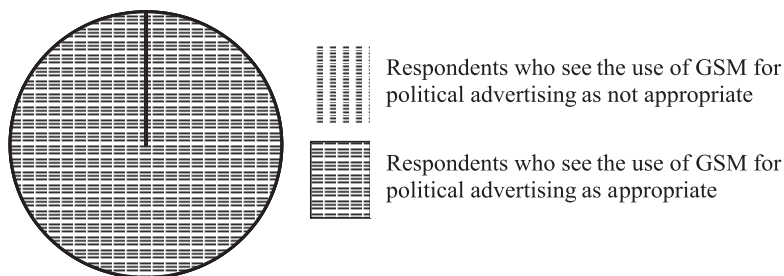
Table 1: GSM Platforms Commonly used for Political Advertising

s/n	Platform	Frequency	%
1	Text Message	144	28.24
2	Facebook	96	18.82
3	Pre-recorded voice calls	78	15.29
4	whatsApp	72	14.12
5	Twitter	48	9.41
6	Instagram	36	7.06
7	Black Berry Messenger	36	7.06
	TOTAL	510	100

Source: Field Work, 2015.

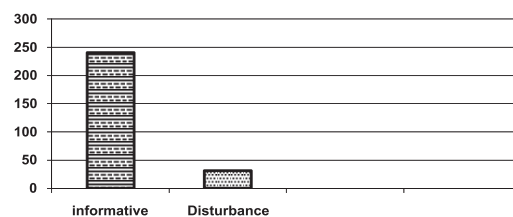
Research Question 2 focused on what was the attitude of the voters to GSM political advertisements used in the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State. Emanating data (See Pie Chart below) indicate that majority of the voters (182 [67.2%]) agree that it was good to use GSM platforms for political advertising in the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State, as against

89 (32.8%) of them who indicated that it was not an appropriate medium for political advertisements. g data (See Pie Chart below) indicate that majority of the voters (182 [67.2%]) agree that it was good to use GSM platforms for political advertising in the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State, as against 89 (32.8%) of them who indicated that it was not an appropriate medium for political advertisements.



However, some of the respondents who hold the view that GSM platforms are inappropriate for political advertising agree that such advertisements could be informative. This is because 240 (88.6%) of total respondents said so, as against 31 (11.4%) who described the use of GSM platforms for political advertising during the

electioneering campaigns as a disturbance. The distribution is set out in the bar chart below.



From the above analysis, it is safe to conclude that voters' attitude towards the use of GSM platforms to deliver political advertising messages in the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State was positive.

The third research question in this study probed

into how the GSM political advertisements influenced the voting decision of the voters in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Delta State. Emanating data indicate that out of the 271 respondents exposed to GSM political advertisements, 197(72.7%) of them reported that

they helped them to decide on who to vote for, while 74 (27.3%) say that the GSM political advertisement did not influence their voting decisions (See bar chart below).

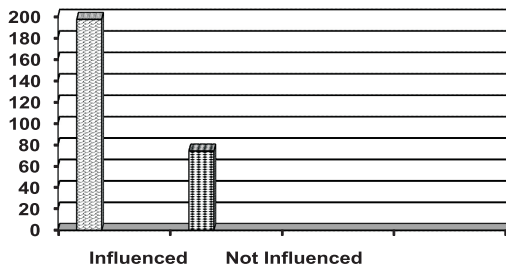


Figure 5: Bar Chart Showing Level of Influence of GSM political advertisements on Respondents' voting Decisions

Discussion of Findings

The first finding reveals that 98.2% of the respondents were exposed to GSM political advertisement. This suggests that GSM communication platforms succeed in enlightening many people about elections, political parties and candidates for elections in Nigeria today. Findings in this study also indicate frequent exposure of majority of the voters to GSM political advertisement (55% daily). This certainly confirms the fact that GSM advertising can reach many people with ease especially with text messages, which recorded the highest frequency of GSM platforms delivering political advertisements to the study population (See Table 1). The reason for this high occurrence of text messages may not be unconnected to the fact that it appears to be the only message reception channel for GSM subscribers that delivers messages to them at no cost and whose messages can be assessed over and over again at the convenience of the recipient. Pre-recorded voice calls are also received free but most times, they interfere with the subscribers' concentration in other activities as they must

answer the call and keep listening to the prerecorded voice message. The other communication platforms (i.e. Facebook; WhatsApp; Twitter; Instagram; and BBM) require data subscription on the part of the message destination and these additional costs to subscribers shut out many GSM users.

Another finding in this study indicates that majority of voters liked the use of GSM to reach them with political advertisements, which they see as educative. This mind set among voters in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Delta State appeared to have contributed to the success recorded by GSM political advertising in influencing their voting decisions

Conclusion

The use of GSM for political advertising in Nigeria is no longer strange. This is because political parties and candidates for elections have responded to the need to devise more efficient ways to reach voters with electioneering campaign message soliciting their support and votes. This study confirms this submission by revealing that majority of the study population was adequately reached by GSM political advertisements on a regular basis. The platforms through which GSM political advertisements get to voters are mainly Short Message Service (Text Message); Pre-recorded voice calls; multi-media social networks on GSM such as Facebook; WhatsApp and Black Berry Messenger among others.

The attitude of voters toward GSM political advertising is positive as majority of the study population sees it as an appropriate medium to reach voters with political education messages that

are healthy for democratic practices in Nigeria. Above all, GSM political advertising succeeded in influencing the voting decisions of the electorate during the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Delta State, Nigeria.

There has always been need for political advertising during elections to inform citizens of the candidates available and the manner in which they may be elected. In a democracy, political advertising is crucial if citizens are to make intelligent judgments about the policies and activities of politicians and political parties. Similarly, communicating with voters in the hope of influencing their voting decisions is not new in Nigeria. This study has shown that the GSM readily serves as a vehicle through which political advertisement can be directly extended to the prospective voters. GSM political advertisements during the 2015 gubernatorial electioneering campaigns in Delta State succeeded in playing a pluralistic role in political communication by keeping voters educated and informed, thereby helping them to make enlightened decisions. This also indicates a correlation between the above stated GSM function and the agenda setting theory of mass communication. In the context of this theory, GSM political advertisements had influence in determining what voters thought about. And what they thought about helped to shape their voting behaviour.

However, it is obvious that efficiency of any communication platform depends on whether it is carefully and routinely employed. To reap maximum benefit from the use of GSM communication platforms for political advertising in Nigeria, there is great need to put them to optimal use.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following as measures to enhance the effectiveness of GSM political advertisements during elections:

- i Political parties and candidates should make GSM political advertisement a continuous exercise and not just limited to election periods only. This will help the electorate to play more active roles in political processes and governance in the society.
- ii Voters should develop more interest in political activities and not just rely on certain people to dictate their political direction for them. A politically enlightened citizen will make a more informed choice in the elections, and will not fall prey to false information and unverified facts.
- iii Political parties and candidates should employ a combination of several platforms on GSM so as to reach a wider audience with GSM advertising messages.
- iv Regulatory measures should be put in place to monitor the use of GSM for political advertisement so as to prevent misuse.

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