

Online Political Advertising and Youths' Perceptions of Political Candidates: Evidence from the 2023 Kogi State Governorship Election

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
online political advertising,
youth,
candidate perception,
social media,
political communication,
governorship election,
Kogi State.

Vol. 01, No. 05, 2026

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23659334>

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of social media for electoral campaigns has transformed political advertising and the ways young voters encounter, evaluate and develop impressions of political candidates. This study examined online political advertising and youths' perceptions of political candidates during the 2023 Kogi State governorship election. Specifically, the study determined the effect of exposure to online political advertising on youths' perceptions of candidates, examined the effect of perceived credibility of online political advertisements on candidate perceptions, and assessed the effect of negative online political advertising on youths' perceptions of candidates. The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey design and collected primary data through a structured questionnaire administered to 400 purposively selected youths who were eligible voters and had been exposed to online political campaign content during the election. Data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modelling with robust maximum-likelihood estimation. The analytical results showed that exposure to online political advertising positively influenced youths' perceptions of political candidates, while perceived advertising credibility produced a stronger positive effect on evaluations of candidates' competence, integrity and leadership capacity. Conversely, negative online political advertising significantly weakened favourable perceptions of political candidates. The study concluded that online political advertising is an important component of contemporary candidate image formation among young voters, although its influence depends substantially on message credibility and advertising content. The study recommended credible issue-based digital campaigns, transparent verification of political advertising claims and stronger mechanisms for limiting deceptive and inflammatory negative advertising during elections.

Introduction

The transformation of political communication through digital technologies has altered how candidates construct political images and how electorates receive, interpret and evaluate campaign messages. Online political advertising now enables political candidates and parties to disseminate campaign promises, biographical narratives, policy positions, videos, photographs, endorsements and comparative political messages directly to voters through Facebook, X, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok and YouTube. The interactive, personalised and rapidly distributive character of these platforms makes them particularly important for reaching young voters who increasingly consume political information through digital channels. Recent Nigerian studies demonstrate that digital campaigning has become central to political communication by strengthening candidate visibility, voter engagement and political persuasion, although misinformation, negative campaigning and manipulative content simultaneously complicate its democratic value (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023; Ubong et al., 2024; Idris & Alabi, 2024). Social-media campaigns during the 2023 Nigerian elections were particularly significant because political candidates increasingly combined conventional campaigning with targeted digital content capable of circulating beyond physical campaign venues and established media organisations (Aideloje et al., 2024; Ubong et al., 2024). Online political advertising therefore provides more than campaign

information because repeated exposure to selected representations of candidates may shape perceptions of their competence, credibility, integrity, leadership capacity and policy orientation (Ubong et al., 2024; Nwadiuto, 2025).

The 2023 Kogi State governorship election provides a significant setting for examining this relationship because youths constituted a substantial share of the electoral population and political competition extended considerably into digital communication spaces. The election was conducted on 11 November 2023, with 1,932,654 registered voters in the State, while young voters constituted approximately 44 per cent of the electorate, amounting to about 850,000 registered voters (INEC, 2023). The major candidates included Ahmed Usman Ododo of the All Progressives Congress, Murtala Yakubu Ajaka of the Social Democratic Party and Dino Melaye of the Peoples Democratic Party, alongside candidates of other political parties (INEC, 2023). The demographic importance of youths made digital campaign communication particularly relevant because younger citizens represented a sizeable electoral audience whose political perceptions could potentially be influenced through repeated exposure to candidate-centred online content. Evidence from Nigeria's 2023 electoral cycle indicates that Facebook, X, WhatsApp and related platforms became important channels for campaign communication, candidate promotion and engagement with electorates (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023; Aideloje et al., 2024; Idris & Alabi, 2024). However, social-media visibility alone does not necessarily translate into favourable candidate evaluation, since audiences may interpret online advertisements differently depending on message credibility, political predispositions and whether advertisements employ positive policy-oriented appeals or negative attacks against opponents (Ubong et al., 2024; Nwadiuto, 2025).

The problem is that although online political advertising has become increasingly prominent in Nigerian elections, there remains insufficient evidence regarding how different aspects of such advertising shaped youths' perceptions of candidates during subnational elections such as the 2023 Kogi governorship contest. Existing studies largely concentrate on presidential campaigns, general elections, voter mobilisation or national social-media participation rather than candidate image formation within Kogi State (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023; Aideloje et al., 2024; Idris & Alabi, 2024). Moreover, while digital advertisements may improve candidate visibility, credible issue-oriented advertisements may produce different effects from misleading or aggressively negative advertisements, meaning that treating online political advertising as a single uniform phenomenon may conceal important differences in its influence (Ubong et al., 2024; Nwadiuto, 2025). The present study therefore addresses this gap by examining three dimensions of digital campaign communication. Specifically, the study determines the effect of exposure to online political advertising on youths' perceptions of political candidates, examines the effect of perceived credibility of online political advertisements on youths' perceptions of political candidates, and assesses the effect of negative online political advertising on youths' perceptions of political candidates during the 2023 Kogi State governorship election (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023; Ubong et al., 2024; Nwadiuto, 2025).

Literature Review

Online political advertising and candidate perception constitute interconnected elements of contemporary political communication. Online political advertising refers to strategically designed political messages distributed through internet-based platforms with the intention of promoting candidates, parties, policies or political positions and influencing attitudes or electoral behaviour. Unlike conventional political advertising through television, radio and newspapers, digital advertising permits rapid circulation, audience targeting, multimedia presentation, feedback and continuous interaction between campaign organisations and voters (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023). Mohammed and Ogwuche (2022) argue that social media has transformed political marketing by providing candidates with tools for promoting identities, ideologies and political images while interacting directly with electorates. Candidate perception refers to the cognitive and affective evaluations through which voters form impressions concerning a candidate's competence, credibility, integrity, leadership ability, personality and policy responsiveness. Casey (2022) demonstrates that citizens can form competence evaluations even from limited visual information about political candidates, thereby indicating that image

presentation can influence political judgement. Relatedly, Tobias-Mamina et al. (2022) establish that digital-media exposure interacts with perceived candidate image in shaping political attitudes. Exposure to online political advertising therefore refers to the frequency and intensity with which youths encounter sponsored or strategically distributed political messages, whereas advertising credibility concerns the degree to which such messages are regarded as believable, accurate and trustworthy. Negative online political advertising differs by focusing substantially on an opponent's perceived weaknesses, failures, personality, competence or record rather than promoting only the sponsoring candidate. Nwadiuto (2025) argues that negative advertisements influenced Nigerian voters' assessments of candidate competence during the 2023 election, particularly in relation to leadership, decision-making and economic-policy perceptions. Thus, while Egbulefu and Nwaoboli (2023) present digital advertising as an increasingly indispensable means of projecting candidates and political agendas, Nwadiuto (2025) shows that its consequences depend significantly on advertising tone and message content.

The relationship between online political advertising and candidate perception can be explained through Agenda-Setting Theory, Cultivation Theory and Elaboration Likelihood Theory. Agenda-Setting Theory proposes that media communication influences the importance audiences attach to political issues and candidate attributes through repeated emphasis, meaning that persistent online advertisements may direct youths' attention towards selected characteristics of candidates. This position is consistent with Ubong et al. (2024), who found that digital campaign communication influenced respondents' perceptions and candidate preferences during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. Cultivation Theory similarly argues that repeated exposure to consistent media representations may gradually influence audiences' perceptions of political reality, making the theory particularly relevant where digital campaigns repeatedly frame candidates as competent, trustworthy, corrupt, inexperienced or responsive. Olumuji et al. (2025) support this reasoning by showing that repeated exposure to political content such as social-media skits can influence youth political knowledge and behaviour. Elaboration Likelihood Theory, however, provides a more comprehensive explanation because it distinguishes between careful evaluation of message arguments and persuasion arising from peripheral cues such as attractiveness, endorsements, emotional language or repeated exposure. Under this perspective, youths who carefully scrutinise online political advertisements may evaluate candidates through the quality and credibility of policy arguments, whereas less involved audiences may depend more heavily on visual appeal, repetition, celebrity endorsement or emotional framing. The present study therefore adopts Elaboration Likelihood Theory as its principal theoretical framework because it explains why exposure alone may influence candidate perceptions while simultaneously recognising that credibility and negative advertising content can alter the direction and strength of persuasion. The theory consequently integrates exposure, message quality and audience judgement more effectively than perspectives that focus primarily on media salience or accumulated exposure (Tobias-Mamina et al., 2022; Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023; Ubong et al., 2024; Nwadiuto, 2025).

Empirical scholarship from 2021 to 2026 demonstrates that digital campaigning significantly affects political attitudes, although scholars differ concerning its magnitude and democratic implications. Iloh et al. (2026) argue that social media became a critical arena for persuasion, agenda-setting and participatory political communication during Nigeria's 2023 campaigns, while simultaneously amplifying emotional appeals, misinformation and polarising content. Similarly, Joy et al. (2026) associate digital political communication with voter mobilisation and citizen engagement, although their emphasis is broader political participation rather than candidate perception. In 2025, Ade-Johnson found that social-media political advertisements substantially influenced candidate choice during the 2024 Edo State governorship election, while also reporting that such advertising could reinforce political, ethnic and religious divisions. Nwadiuto (2025) similarly found that 68 per cent of surveyed respondents were exposed to negative political advertisements mainly through social media and that 66 per cent reported effects on their perception of candidate competence. Olumuji et al. (2025), however, emphasise youth political engagement and demonstrate that social-media skits improved political knowledge and behaviour while simultaneously raising misinformation concerns. In 2024, Ubong et al. found that

Facebook, X and WhatsApp were major platforms for Nigerian campaign communication and that social-media content shaped respondents' candidate preferences during the 2023 presidential election. Aideloje et al. (2024) similarly associate social media with voter mobilisation, while Idris and Alabi (2024) provide a more cautious interpretation by arguing that Twitter was important to campaigning but was not independently decisive because party structures, incumbency and other electoral factors continued to matter. Odon (2024) further maintains that social media influences campaign communication and voter behaviour while creating risks associated with misinformation. Earlier, Egbulefu and Nwaoboli (2023) found extensive deployment of digital political advertising during Nigeria's 2023 electoral cycle and argue that political actors increasingly regard digital platforms as indispensable for promoting their candidates and agendas. Tobias-Mamina et al. (2022) demonstrate that digital-media exposure interacts with perceived candidate and political-party images in explaining voting attitudes, while Casey (2022) shows that visual presentation alone can influence perceived political competence. Mohammed and Ogwuche (2021) similarly argue that social-media political marketing facilitates candidate-image construction and interaction between political actors and voters. Collectively, the literature supports a relationship between digital campaign communication and candidate evaluation but differs on whether digital influence is primarily informational, persuasive, emotional or conditional upon other political factors.

Notwithstanding these contributions, substantial gaps remain. Iloh et al. (2026), Aideloje et al. (2024), Idris and Alabi (2024) and Egbulefu and Nwaoboli (2023) concentrate largely on general political communication, participation, mobilisation or presidential campaigning rather than youths' perceptions of governorship candidates within Kogi State. Ade-Johnson (2025) provides important subnational evidence from the Edo governorship election but does not establish whether the same relationships apply within Kogi's distinctive political and socio-cultural environment. Nwadiuto (2025) focuses specifically on negative advertising and candidate competence in Anambra State, but candidate perception encompasses broader dimensions including credibility, integrity and leadership evaluation. Similarly, Ubong et al. (2024) examine digital campaign strategies during the presidential election rather than the Kogi governorship election, while Tobias-Mamina et al. (2022) provide useful evidence on digital exposure and candidate image outside the immediate Kogi electoral setting. Conceptually, many existing studies examine social-media campaigning as a broad construct without simultaneously separating exposure, perceived advertisement credibility and negative advertising. Methodologically, several employ frequencies, percentages and conventional correlations without first validating multidimensional measurement structures or estimating competing advertising effects within a single latent-variable model. The present study therefore fills geographical, conceptual and methodological gaps by focusing specifically on youths exposed to campaign messages during the 2023 Kogi State governorship election and simultaneously estimating how advertising exposure, message credibility and negative advertising influenced perceptions of political candidates through Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modelling (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023; Ubong et al., 2024; Ade-Johnson, 2025; Nwadiuto, 2025).

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative cross-sectional survey research design because it seeks to obtain primary information from young voters concerning their exposure to online political advertisements and their perceptions of political candidates during the 2023 Kogi State governorship election. Survey research is suitable for examining attitudes, perceptions and communication exposure across comparatively large groups because respondents can provide standardised responses to identical questionnaire items. Recent Nigerian studies on digital campaigns and electoral communication have similarly employed quantitative survey designs to examine the relationship between campaign exposure, candidate evaluation and electoral behaviour (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023; Ubong et al., 2024; Nwadiuto, 2025).

The study population consists of youths resident in Kogi State who were eligible to vote and were exposed to online political campaign communication during the 2023 governorship election. INEC

recorded 1,932,654 registered voters for the election, while young voters represented approximately 44 per cent of the registered electorate, demonstrating their importance to political communication within the State (INEC, 2023). The Kogi State Development Plan further confirms the State's predominantly youthful demographic structure and reports substantial populations within adolescent and young-adult age categories (Kogi State Government, 2024). The study concentrates on politically eligible youths because the objective is not simply to measure social-media use but to investigate perceptions formed by individuals capable of participating directly in the governorship election.

Purposive sampling is adopted because meaningful participation in the study requires respondents to satisfy specific inclusion criteria. Participants are selected on the basis that they were youths resident in Kogi State during the 2023 governorship campaign, were eligible voters at the time of the election and recalled exposure to online advertisements or campaign messages relating to governorship candidates. The purposive technique is preferable to indiscriminate population sampling because respondents without exposure to online campaign content would be unable to provide valid assessments of the principal independent variables. A total of 400 respondents is selected across Kogi East, Kogi Central and Kogi West Senatorial Districts to provide geographical diversity. The sample is sufficiently large for the proposed Structural Equation Model because it considerably exceeds common minimum requirements for models containing a limited number of latent constructs and multiple indicators.

Primary data are collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of respondents' demographic characteristics and five-point Likert-scale statements ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Exposure to online political advertising is measured through frequency of encountering candidate advertisements, campaign videos, sponsored political content, online posters and political endorsements. Perceived advertising credibility captures believability, accuracy, trustworthiness, consistency and perceived factual quality of campaign messages. Negative online political advertising measures respondents' exposure to advertisements criticising opponents' personalities, competence, records, integrity or political suitability. Candidate perception is measured through respondents' assessments of competence, credibility, integrity, leadership capacity, policy understanding and responsiveness. The operationalisation corresponds with recent literature establishing that digital campaign messages can influence perceptions of candidate competence, political image and electoral preference (Tobias-Mamina et al., 2022; Ubong et al., 2024; Nwadiuto, 2025).

Face and content validity are established through assessment by specialists in political communication, mass communication, political science and quantitative research. The instrument is pilot-tested among youths outside the final sample to identify ambiguous statements and improve reliability. Internal consistency is evaluated through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability, while convergent validity is examined through standardised factor loadings and Average Variance Extracted. Data are subsequently analysed with frequencies, percentages, Confirmatory Factor Analysis and Structural Equation Modelling using robust maximum-likelihood estimation. CFA is employed because the principal concepts are multidimensional latent variables that require measurement validation before testing causal paths, while SEM allows the simultaneous estimation of the effects of exposure, credibility and negative advertising on candidate perception while accounting for measurement error. Hypotheses are tested at the 5 per cent significance level, and model fit is evaluated using the Comparative Fit Index, Tucker-Lewis Index, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation and Standardised Root Mean Square Residual.

The study tests three null hypotheses. Exposure to online political advertising has no significant effect on youths' perceptions of political candidates during the 2023 Kogi State governorship election. Perceived credibility of online political advertisements has no significant effect on youths' perceptions of political candidates during the 2023 Kogi State governorship election. Negative online political advertising has no significant effect on youths' perceptions of political candidates during the 2023 Kogi State governorship election.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Table 1: Respondents' Level of Exposure to Online Political Advertising

Level of Exposure	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	61	15.3
Moderate	141	35.3
High	198	49.5
Total	400	100.0

Source: Field Survey Analysis, 2026.

Table 1 shows that 198 respondents representing 49.5 per cent recorded high exposure to online political advertising during the Kogi State governorship campaign, while 141 respondents representing 35.3 per cent reported moderate exposure and 61 respondents representing 15.3 per cent reported low exposure. The predominance of moderate and high exposure suggests that digital political advertising constituted a substantial component of the communication environment encountered by young voters. This finding agrees with Egbulefu and Nwaoboli (2023), who found extensive use of digital advertising during Nigeria's 2023 electoral cycle, and with Ubong et al. (2024), who found substantial voter exposure to campaign communication through Facebook, X and WhatsApp.

Table 2: Respondents' Assessment of the Credibility of Online Political Advertisements

Level of Perceived Credibility	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	92	23.0
Moderate	171	42.8
High	137	34.3
Total	400	100.0

Source: Field Survey Analysis, 2026.

Table 2 indicates that 171 respondents representing 42.8 per cent assessed the credibility of online political advertisements as moderate, while 137 respondents representing 34.3 per cent recorded high perceived credibility and 92 respondents representing 23.0 per cent reported low credibility. The distribution suggests that respondents did not accept all online political advertisements unquestioningly, as approximately one-quarter expressed relatively low confidence in campaign messages. This interpretation corresponds with Olumuji et al. (2025), who identify misinformation as an important challenge associated with social-media political content, and with Nwadiuto (2025), whose findings indicate that the persuasive influence of political advertising depends substantially on the information communicated about candidates.

Table 3: Respondents' Exposure to Negative Online Political Advertising

Level of Negative Advertising Exposure	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Low	77	19.3
Moderate	145	36.3
High	178	44.5
Total	400	100.0

Source: Field Survey Analysis, 2026.

Table 3 demonstrates that 178 respondents representing 44.5 per cent experienced high exposure to negative online political advertising, while 145 respondents representing 36.3 per cent reported moderate exposure and 77 respondents representing 19.3 per cent recorded low exposure. The result indicates that critical or opponent-focused campaign messages formed an important aspect of the online political environment. This pattern is comparable with Nwadiuto (2025), who establishes considerable

exposure to negative political advertising during Nigeria's 2023 election and demonstrates its relevance to evaluations of candidate competence.

Table 4: Youths' Overall Perceptions of Political Candidates

Candidate Perception	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Unfavourable	89	22.3
Moderately favourable	168	42.0
Favourable	143	35.8
Total	400	100.0

Source: Field Survey Analysis, 2026.

Table 4 shows that 168 respondents representing 42.0 per cent recorded moderately favourable perceptions of political candidates, while 143 respondents representing 35.8 per cent reported favourable perceptions and 89 respondents representing 22.3 per cent reported unfavourable perceptions. The distribution suggests that candidate evaluation among youths was not uniformly positive or negative. Such variation supports the argument that online campaign exposure does not mechanically determine candidate attitudes because message credibility, content, political predispositions and other electoral considerations may influence interpretation, as observed by Idris and Alabi (2024).

Table 5: Reliability and Convergent Validity of the Measurement Constructs

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE	Loading Range
Online Political Advertising Exposure	6	0.871	0.901	0.604	0.701–0.852
Advertising Credibility	6	0.896	0.920	0.658	0.739–0.873
Negative Political Advertising	6	0.882	0.909	0.626	0.718–0.861
Candidate Perception	6	0.904	0.926	0.677	0.752–0.884

Source: Field Survey Analysis, 2026.

Table 5 indicates satisfactory internal consistency across the four constructs. Cronbach's alpha coefficients range between 0.871 and 0.904, exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.70, while composite reliability values ranging from 0.901 to 0.926 provide further evidence of reliable measurement. Average Variance Extracted values are all above 0.50, indicating satisfactory convergent validity, while the factor-loading ranges show that the questionnaire indicators contribute substantially to their respective constructs.

Table 6: Confirmatory Factor Analysis Model-Fit Statistics

Model-Fit Indicator	Obtained Value	Interpretation
Chi-square/df	2.281	Acceptable
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	0.954	Good fit
Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI)	0.947	Good fit
RMSEA	0.057	Good fit
SRMR	0.044	Good fit

Source: Field Survey Analysis, 2026.

Table 6 demonstrates satisfactory fit between the measurement model and the dataset. The CFI value of 0.954 and TLI value of 0.947 indicate strong incremental fit, while the RMSEA value of 0.057 and SRMR value of 0.044 indicate acceptable residual fit. The measurement model therefore provides a

satisfactory basis for estimating the structural relationships among online advertising exposure, perceived credibility, negative political advertising and candidate perception.

Table 7: Structural Equation Model and Test of Hypotheses

Hypothesis and Structural Relationship	Standardised β	Robust S.E.	z-value	p-value	Decision
H ₀₁ : Advertising Exposure → Candidate Perception	0.294	0.057	5.158	<0.001	Reject H ₀₁
H ₀₂ : Advertising Credibility → Candidate Perception	0.417	0.060	6.950	<0.001	Reject H ₀₂
H ₀₃ : Negative Advertising → Candidate Perception	-0.263	0.054	-4.870	<0.001	Reject H ₀₃

Model Statistics: ($R^2 = 0.512$); CFI = 0.950; TLI = 0.942; RMSEA = 0.059; SRMR = 0.047.

Source: Field Survey Analysis, 2026.

The first hypothesis shows that exposure to online political advertising has a positive and statistically significant effect on youths' perceptions of political candidates, with $\beta = 0.294$ and $p < 0.001$. The first null hypothesis is therefore rejected. The result indicates that greater exposure to online political campaign messages is associated with stronger candidate-image formation among young voters. Repeated exposure provides opportunities for candidates to communicate their personalities, policy positions, achievements and leadership claims to electorates. The result supports Egbulefu and Nwaoboli (2023), who contend that digital political advertising has become an important instrument for projecting political candidates and their agendas, and Ubong et al. (2024), who establish that social-media campaign content influenced respondents' candidate preferences during Nigeria's 2023 elections. The finding also corresponds with Elaboration Likelihood Theory because repeated exposure increases opportunities for both detailed processing of political messages and peripheral persuasion through visual presentation, endorsement and repetition.

The second hypothesis reveals that perceived credibility of online political advertisements has the strongest positive effect on candidate perception, with $\beta = 0.417$ and $p < 0.001$. The second null hypothesis is consequently rejected. The finding implies that youths' candidate evaluations depend more strongly on whether political advertisements are considered believable and trustworthy than merely on how frequently they are encountered. This is particularly significant because online communication environments contain competing campaign narratives, misinformation and partisan claims. The finding agrees with Tobias-Mamina et al. (2022), whose analysis demonstrates the relationship between digital-media exposure, perceived candidate image and voting attitudes, while also extending the findings of Ubong et al. (2024) by showing that message quality and credibility provide an important mechanism through which digital campaigns influence candidate evaluations. From the perspective of Elaboration Likelihood Theory, credible policy information is more capable of generating enduring candidate evaluations where politically interested youths process campaign arguments through the central persuasion route.

The third hypothesis establishes a negative and statistically significant effect of negative online political advertising on candidate perception, with $\beta = -0.263$ and $p < 0.001$. The third null hypothesis is therefore rejected. The negative coefficient indicates that increased exposure to hostile or opponent-focused digital advertisements is associated with deterioration in favourable candidate evaluations. The result substantially agrees with Nwadiuto (2025), who found that negative political advertisements influenced respondents' perceptions of candidates' competence during Nigeria's 2023 election. It also corresponds with Ade-Johnson (2025), whose study of the Edo governorship election acknowledges that

social-media political advertising can influence candidate choice while contributing to political division and tension. Nevertheless, the result does not imply that every negative advertisement produces the intended effect, since audiences may reject advertisements perceived as dishonest, excessive or malicious.

The (R^2) of 0.512 indicates that exposure to political advertising, advertising credibility and negative advertising jointly account for 51.2 per cent of the variation in youths' perceptions of political candidates. This represents substantial explanatory capacity but equally demonstrates that candidate perception is influenced by additional factors including party identification, ethnic and community attachments, candidates' political records, offline campaign encounters, endorsements, policy preferences and interpersonal political discussions. This qualification supports Idris and Alabi (2024), who contend that social media became important during Nigeria's 2023 electoral campaigns but did not operate independently from party structures and wider political conditions.

Overall, the findings support Elaboration Likelihood Theory because youths' candidate perceptions appear to develop through both exposure and qualitative evaluation of political messages. Advertising exposure increases opportunities for political persuasion, whereas perceived credibility strengthens the persuasive effect by providing arguments that audiences can evaluate more carefully. Negative advertising, by contrast, can reduce favourable evaluations through critical information and emotionally negative cues. The results consequently demonstrate that the political influence of digital advertising depends not merely on volume but on the credibility, tone and informational quality of campaign communication.

Conclusion

The study concludes that online political advertising played an important role in shaping youths' perceptions of political candidates during the 2023 Kogi State governorship election. The findings demonstrate that exposure to digital political advertisements positively influences candidate perceptions by increasing opportunities for young voters to encounter candidates' images, campaign promises, policy positions and political narratives. More importantly, perceived advertising credibility produces the strongest positive effect, demonstrating that young voters do not respond simply to the quantity of political communication but also evaluate its believability and informational quality. Negative online political advertising, conversely, exerts a significant negative effect on favourable candidate perceptions, indicating that opponent-focused campaign communication can alter evaluations of political competence, integrity and leadership suitability. The findings support Elaboration Likelihood Theory by demonstrating that candidate perceptions are shaped through both repeated exposure and deeper evaluation of campaign-message quality. Online political advertising should therefore be understood not merely as an instrument for maximising visibility but as an important process through which political images and electoral judgements are constructed among young voters.

Recommendations

In relation to the first objective, political candidates and parties should prioritise consistent, issue-based online campaign communication that provides young voters with substantive information about policies, leadership records and proposed programmes rather than relying principally on slogans, repetition or visual publicity.

In relation to the second objective, political campaign organisations should strengthen the credibility of online advertisements through verifiable claims, accurate statistics, transparent sourcing and clear distinctions between factual campaign information and political opinion, while media-literacy initiatives should help young voters evaluate political advertising critically.

In relation to the third objective, INEC, relevant regulatory institutions, political parties, civil-society organisations and digital platforms should strengthen mechanisms for identifying deceptive, defamatory and inflammatory negative political advertisements while encouraging comparative campaigning based on candidates' records, policies and programmes rather than unsubstantiated personal attacks.

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