

## Nexus Between News Media Negative Political Campaigns And 2015 Presidential Elections In Nigeria

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### Abstract

*The 2015 presidential election campaigns were characterised by unprecedented number of negative political campaigns on the social media that many watchers of politics were afraid that the election will lead to unimaginable crisis. This study examined the relationship between social media negative political campaigns and voting pattern during the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria. It is anchored on the selective perception theory which emphasizes that audience actively select, retain and react to the same message in different ways. Through multistage sampling technique, respondents were selected from two states. Findings revealed that 88.1% of the respondents said social media negative political campaigns did not influence how they voted during the 2015 presidential polls. The study concluded that social media political campaigns are necessary tool for soliciting for voters' votes; however, spreading negative messages would not make voters vote for such candidate and political party, except such candidate and their party offer the voters better options compared to the opponents. It was therefore recommended that political parties and candidates should build campaign messages through the social media around candidate's credibility and party programmes.*

**Keywords:** Smear/attack advertisement, electorate, election, political advertising, news media

### 1. Introduction

Prior to the 2015 presidential election, the People Democratic Party (PDP) had won every presidential election since 1999, and there were fears that with the upcoming election, the country was heading for a one-party state if nothing was done politically. To avert this, the leadership of some of the opposition parties such as the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) and All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP) and a splitter

group of All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) formed what they described as a mega party on Wednesday February 6, 2013. The new party, All Progressives Congress (APC) became the main opposition party and also a threat to PDP's position as the ruling party. This was as a result of the calibre of people in the new party including politicians that defected from PDP.

Although PDP, through one of its founding members; Dr. Dorncklaimz Enamhe, described the merger as a "marriage that will head for divorce soon without any issue" and "a gun powder that will soon explode" (Agbakwuru, 2013), however, the reality that APC was here to stay dawned on PDP when the party's Presidential flag bearer, Muhammad Buhari led PDP's presidential candidate, Goodluck Jonathan in most online polls conducted by different media platforms in the polity.

With the online polls out of the way, the parties embraced traditional media to outsmart one another in the hope of shaping public opinion and attitude, confirming Eze's (1988) observation that the politics of any nation depends heavily on the mass media as platforms of articulating and marketing ideas and issues on national problems to the people (Nworie, 2013:9). While many politicians have employed a subtle political attack in the past, political advertising consultants employed in 2015 by the different political parties blatantly anchored campaign strategies on issue or image attack, negating section 7.6.2 of the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission code which states that "all jingles shall conform to the standards of truth, decency, good taste and morality". For instance, Ekiti State Governor; Peter Ayodele Fayose sponsored an advert on the front page of a daily newspaper against the APC presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari (who later won the presidential elections), warning voters not to elect him into office stating that the presidential candidate was likely to die in office if elected.

While PDP made use of broadcast stations such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), Ray Power, Africa Independent Television (AIT), billboard and newspapers to attack its opponents, the opposition party, APC, employed other television and radio stations as well as billboards to retaliate. Examples of such attack messages between both parties include "...so, don't vote for 72 years old Buhari, he will be sleeping o! Vote wisely" (Vanguard, January 23, 2015) and "...to all GEJ fans, may God run your life the way GEJ has run this country (Daily Sun, January 21, 2015 back page). This paper therefore attempted to ascertain if smear political campaign in the news media sponsored by the different political parties in the 2015 presidential elections influenced the electorates' voting decision in favour of the sponsoring political party.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

1. Did negative political campaign in the news media influence voting decisions of electorates in the 2015 presidential election?
2. Are there other factors responsible for electorates' voting behaviour?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Negative Political Advertising and Voting**

Negative political advertising is acclaimed to be one of the most misunderstood concepts in the field of political communication (Johnson-Cartee & Copeland, 1997). As a result, it has been widely and critically looked into by scholars in terms of its effect on voting and election outcomes (Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Stevens, 2005; Cheng & Riffe, 2008). In terms of paying attention to negative political adverts, voters have been found to sight these adverts without paying attention to them because of the possibility of being disgusted by the sight of them (Wanta, Lemert & Lee, 1998 as cited in Lovejoy, Cheng & Riffe, 2010). Yet, voters

tend to remember the information in negative adverts more than that of positive adverts. As a result, negative political advertising has been considered effective in grabbing attention and being memorable (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995).

Three major conflicting hypotheses have dominated the discourse on the effect of negative political advertising on the electorate and voting outcomes. The first hypothesis posits that negative political adverts can adversely affect voters' turnout thereby leading to demobilization (e.g. Ansolabehere & Jyengar's, 1995). In contrast, the second hypothesis emanates from studies revealing that negative political advertising can invigorate voter's participation in the voting process (e.g. Freedman & Goldstein, 1999; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002; Jackson & Carsey, 2007). Finally, the third hypothesis emanates from studies stating that there is no concrete evidence on whether or not negative political advertising works to the advantage or disadvantage of either the targets or the sponsors (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, & Babbitt, 1999; Lau & Sigelman, 2000).

Research has also revealed that there are factors that mediate the influence of negative political advertising on the voting intention and decisions of the electorates. Yoon, Pinkleton and Ko (2005) for example, found that the effect of negative political adverts on the voting intention of members of the electorate is dependent on the credibility of the candidate as a highly credible source can increase the effectiveness of negative political advertising. The electorate's level of involvement and attention to the media as a source of information during the election campaign has also been found to influence negative political advertising on the voting intentions of the electorate (Faber, Tims, & Schmitt, 1993). Research has also shown that the users of negative political advertisements are usually victims of campaign tactics as it creates more support for targets of such negative political campaign tactics ((Roddy & Garramone, 1988 as cited in Yoon, Pinkleton & Ko, 2005). Nevertheless, negative political advertisements have been successfully used by candidates over the years.

## **2.2 Smear Political Campaign and 2015 Nigerian Presidential Election**

One of the strategies political candidates employ to gain public acceptance - apart from debates and open air campaigns- is the use of the mass media to sell ideas and programmes through advertising. Political advertising of course, is the use of paid media (newspaper, radio, television, internet etc.) to influence the political decisions made for and by groups (Sunny & Uwem, 2013); and unlike brand advertising that is a long-term project, political advertisement is expected to yield results within a short time. Again, the media of choice, the method of presentation and the frequency of exposure to the message will of course go a long way in helping the electorates identify and interpret the content of the advertisement and possibly help in the decision making process.

In a bid to obtain results quickly however, advertising consultants have been known to anchor their campaigns on issue or image attack, mainly to reduce the chances of the subject of the attack at the polls. As Onuorah (2008) observed, this trend as a global phenomenon commonly known as negative political campaigns (Yoon, Pinkleton & Ko, 2005), adding that "it is reported that a single trend obvious to most American political communication consultants is the increasing proportion of negative political advertising". Again, as observed by Onuorah (2008), content of the campaign can sometimes be true, he was however quick to note that even when advertising is used to communicate political truth, the truth can be negatively packaged to attack the opponents' character and recall rather than support one's own.

In Nigeria, the use of the media for political campaign can be traced to the nationalist era when politicians who established them began to use the media for sectional politics. Uche (1989) stated that when political crisis occurred, the three regions used the media in

protecting the political, economic, cultural and social interests of the regions. ImamImam (2010) agrees with Uche's (1989:41) assertion and added that:

Campaign of calumny is not new to Nigerian political scene. In the First Republic, the leading parties at the three regions namely Northern Peoples Congress (NPC), Action Group (AG) and the National Council for Nigerian Citizens (NCNC) have all engaged in not-so clean campaign methods with a view to out do one another at the polls. The same scenario was replicated during the Second Republic, where the leading parties, populated by the actors from the First Republic, renewed their rivalries and elevated the smudge campaign to higher level.

In 1993, Social Democratic Party (SDP) and National Republican Convention (NRC) emerged from the two- party introduced by the then Head of States, Ibrahim Babangida, and in no time, the parties immediately began preparation for elections at all levels. The late chief M.K.O Abiola emerged as the presidential flag bearer of SDP, while Alhaji Bashir Tofa emerged as NRC's presidential flag bearer. Although both candidates used the media to sell their programmes, Chief Abiola's media campaign of "Hope 93" was well publicized across various media. His 'Hope 93' campaign literally meant his ascension to the office of the president will bring succour to Nigerians after protracted military rule. Nwosu (2006:6) underscore how the two flag bearers used advertising in the Third republic:

The political parties in the Third Republic, SDP and NRC, engaged the services of Advertising/ PR agencies to develop campaigns for their parties. The governorship hopefuls and Presidential aspirants such as Chief M.K.O Abiola for the Social Democratic Party and Alhaji Bashir Tofa of the National Republican Convention made use of Advertising and PR in their political campaigns.

Also writing on the impact of the 1993 political campaign, Onuorah (2008) stated that "the highly creative advertising campaigns of Chief MKO Abiola and Alhaji Bashir Tofa had significant impact on the popularity of the candidates and perhaps on the outcome of the presidential election that was unfortunately annulled by the government of Gen. Ibrahim Babangida".

However, the political campaign for the 2007 presidential election in Nigeria was a different ball game as the Yar'Adua/Goodluck campaign "forward ever, backward never" was a sign that the team will continue from where the outgoing president, Chief Obasanjo stopped. The Fresh party with its presidential flag bearer, Chris Okotie, chose the slogan "the people comes first", while the leading opposition parties, Action Congress (AC) and All Peoples Party (APP) chose to smear the image of the PDP by highlighting the failures of the party while at the same time presenting their parties as the best alternatives.

In retaliation to the smear campaigns of the AC and APP, the PDP and the outgoing Obasanjo administration developed political campaigns to attack the flag bearers of both parties, Alhaji Atiku (who was Obasanjo's Vice President until he ran out of favour to join

the AC) and APP's Gen Muhammadu Buhari (rtd.), who was referred to as a former dictator. Again Onuorah (2008) writes:

....PDP was to cease the initiative in the series of smear advertisements launched towards the end of the campaign period which tended to highlight negative aspects of the character and pedigree of General Buhari and to becloud the essential qualities and merits of his candidature (discipline and integrity) which he appeared to have taken for granted. A similar advertisement which portrayed the Action Congress' Atiku Abubakar as a corrupt politician was deployed by the PDP.

The 2015 presidential political campaign became more volatile with the Goodluck-led government leading the smear campaign. African Independent Television (AIT) and Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) network aired series of smear campaigns against Buhari. Top among the sponsored campaigns was PDP's sponsored documentary which Oparah (2015) said stunned him when the same AIT churned out a recriminatory smear documentary against Buhari as the campaigns progressed. According to him, the documentaries along with other messages were full of bile, hate, lies, smear, tar and muck.

The leading opposition party, the All People's Congress (APC) began its own hate campaign by displaying across the nation an advert with the slogan "VOTE GOOD GOVERNANCE NOT GOODLUCK" - suggesting that Nigerians should, through their votes, reject the then incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan. PDP retaliated with its own billboard "VOTE DEMOCRAT NOT DICTATOR".

A more outrageous advert sponsored by the governor of Ekiti State, Ayodele Fayose, a member of PDP was placed on the front pages of *The Sun*, and *The Punch Newspapers*. The advert opened with: "Nigerians be warned! Nigeria... I have set before thee life and death. Therefore choose life that both thee and thy seed may live Deut. 30:19". The advert also displayed pictures of past Nigerian leaders who died in office. It included that of Murtala Mohammed, Sani Abacha and Umaru Yar'Adua while the picture of Buhari came last with a huge question mark on it with his age conspicuously displayed. Fayose finished off the advert by asking readers: "will you allow history to repeat itself? Enough of state burials". The advert then asked Nigerians to vote Goodluck Jonathan (Ejiofor, 2015). By putting the picture of Buhari with other late leaders, Fayose was implying that Buhari might die in office given his age and speculation of ill health.

There were several reactions that followed the advert. Ex-president Olusegun Obasanjo, while reacting to the advertisement described Fayose as nothing but a "celebrated hooligan". Obasanjo further stated that:

Ayo Fayose mocked the death of our great past heroes. This is too much of politics to play. I hope Nigerians now know the right camp to vote. Ayo Fayose is nothing but a celebrated hooligan; his offensive advert should provoke and strengthen Nigerians to vote for change (Yisa, 2015).

A coalition of 60 Civil Society Organisations, CSOs, under the aegis of the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, in a statement maintained that Governor Fayose's advertisement was in "extreme bad taste," saying it fell within the category of hate speech prohibited under the Electoral Act and other known international laws that forbade the publication of hate speech (Alade, 2015).

### **2.3 Are there laws regulating political advertisements in Nigeria?**

Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria APCON laid down laws guiding political advertisement in Nigeria. Article 71, 72, 73 and 74 which guides political advertisements is presented below:

Article 71: Political advertisements shall be issue- oriented and devoid of abusive statements or reference. They shall not employ false, distorted, or unsubstantiated claims, or contain misrepresentation.”

Article 72: Every political advertisement shall clearly identify the sponsoring organization or individual, visually and/or orally.

Article 73: Political advertisements shall not explicitly nor implicitly exploit ethnicity, religion or any other sectional interest.

Article 74: Media houses, agencies, political parties and politicians and their agents shall ensure that political advertisements are in consonance with the provisions of this code as it relates to political advertising and of the oath of advertising practice and the Nigerian Broadcasting code as it relates to advertising.

APCON does not work in isolation. The NBC in its code also highlights guidelines for the acceptance of political advertising on any broadcast station in Nigeria. The code states that:

Section 7.6.1: A political advertisement shall be guided by an extant law(s), the code and other relevant regulations.

Section 7.6.2: A broadcaster shall be free to sell airtime for the purpose of political campaigns provided that:

- a) No broadcaster shall be involved in the production of such announcements or jingles;
- b) No voice of any broadcaster shall be used in political jingles;
- c) All jingles shall conform to the standards of truth, decency, good taste and morality.

Section 7.6.3: No advertisement shall be accepted in a partisan political programme.

The laws by APCON and NBC are expected to guide not only political parties and candidates in their campaign activities but also the advertising agencies and media organizations. It also suggests by implication that any unapproved advertisement cannot and should not make the airwaves, billboards, newspapers, magazines and even the Internet. Article 140 spelt out the penalties for defaulters.

Furthermore, NBC also by its section 7.6.14 of its code states that:

Any broadcaster that contravenes the provisions of section 7.6.6 to 7.6.13 above shall be liable, in the first instance to a fine of N500,

000 and N1, 000, 000 for subsequent breach (es) or revocation of license.

From the above analysis of the existing law, it is clear that there are laws guiding political advertisements. However, the argument among scholars, observers and analysts is that if these laws exist why then do smear adverts find its way into the media. This argument is based on the fact that stations like AIT and NTA transmitted documentaries and campaigns that strictly attacked Mohammed Buhari's personality, but according to the former chairman of APCON, Chris Doughudje:

The ideal thing is for the adverts to be cleared by APCON but council, knowing the political atmosphere in Nigeria has decided not to dabble into political advertising. It is a sensitive area just like the religious ones. But political advertising is controversial anywhere in the world. You can only control the veracity in the advertising contents (Anyacho, 2008:14).

There are some scholars who argued that since both APCON and NBC are parastatals under the federal ministry of information, it would be hard to bite the fingers that are feeding them and that the only way these agencies can truly wild the big wand is for them to be independent of the Federal Government.

#### **2.4 Theoretical Framework: Selectivity Theory**

The theory of selectivity avers that mass media audience is active in the interpretation and integration of media messages into their lives. The idea of selectivity theory negates the idea of audience passivity that had been promoted by theories like the stimulus-response, rather selective perception theory presents a more dynamic participatory audience.

The theory found its tenets in related studies like selective exposure, attention, perception and retention. Selective exposure states that 'people seek out information that caters to their own interests, confirms their beliefs, and boosts their ego, while avoiding those that are contrary to their predisposition and attacks their self-image,' (Folarin 2002:70).

Selective attention suggests that people will selectively attend to messages that are also in congruence with their beliefs, selectively perceive messages coming from the media and selectively retain messages that are favorable to their desire or aspiration. This theory is relevant to this study because it helps explain what people do to mass media messages and it help explain whether the smear campaigns in the news media influence the voting behaviour of the electorates.

### **3. Methodology**

For the purpose of this study, a sample size of 300 respondents was drawn from 6 local government areas in Lagos and Ogun States of Nigeria. The choice of these two states is the fact that most major news media in the country have their head offices in these two states. To give every element of the population an opportunity of being selected, the multistage sampling and simple random sampling techniques were adopted. The first stage of this method involves breaking the States into senatorial districts. Lagos was divided into three senatorial districts: Lagos Central Senatorial District, Lagos East Senatorial District, and Lagos West Senatorial District. Ogun State was also divided into three senatorial districts: Ogun Central Senatorial District, Ogun East Senatorial District, and Ogun West Senatorial District.

The next stage was to randomly select local government areas that made up the selected senatorial districts. The Lagos Central Senatorial District and Lagos East Senatorial District is made up of five local government council areas respectively while the Lagos West Senatorial District is made up of ten local government areas. Hence, the senatorial districts in Lagos comprises of twenty local government council areas in total. On the other hand, Ogun Central Senatorial District is made up of six local government council areas, Ogun East Senatorial District is made up of nine local government council areas, and Ogun West Senatorial District consists of five local government council areas. In total, Ogun state comprises of twenty local government council areas.

From the list of local government council areas in Lagos state, Ikeja local government area was randomly selected from Lagos West using the ballot format, Surulere local government area was selected from Lagos Central, and Ikorodu local government area was randomly selected from Lagos East. Also, from the list of local government council areas in Ogun State, Ado-Odo/Ota local government area was randomly selected using the ballot format from Ogun West; Sagamu local government area was randomly selected from Ogun East, and Ifo local government was randomly selected to represent Ogun Central.

#### 4. Discussion of Findings

Three hundred copies of the structured questionnaire were distributed to respondents but 295 questionnaires were retrieved and properly filled; which puts the response rate at 98.3%. 150 (51%) were returned by respondents in Lagos and 145 (49%) were returned by respondents in Ogun state, while 175 (59.3%) and 120 (40.7%) represented male and female from both states.

#### ***RQ 1: Did negative political advertisements in news media influence voting decision of electorates in the April 2015 presidential election?***

Table 1: Influence of smear campaign on Voting Decision

RESPONSES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
YES	35	11.9%
NO	260	88.1%
TOTAL	295	100%

In table one above, 88.1% (260) of the respondents said that the smear campaigns did not influence their voting decision. Respondents were also asked which party sponsored more attack adverts; 62.4% (184) of the respondents said PDP, this was followed by APC 37.6% (111). According to research findings, majority of the respondents believed that the candidates of APC; General Mohammed Buhari, was attacked most in the April 2015 presidential election.

From the responses therefore, it is clear that attack political campaign did not influence the electorates' decision as majority of the respondents (88.1%) said that negative political adverts did not influence their voting decisions. This is because, the candidate that was attacked the most - Mohammed Buhari (APC) - still emerged the eventual winner.

Again, the statement by the National Working Committee (NWC) that PDP failed at the polls because of hate campaign (<http://pulse.ng/politics/nigeria>, 2015), indicates that PDP's goal

was not achieved which further strengthens Onuorah’s (2008) earlier comment that “even when advertising is used to communicate political truth, the truth can be negatively packaged to attack the opponents’ character. Again, the statement by the National Working Committee (NWC) that PDP failed at the polls because of hate campaign indicates that PDP’s goal was not achieved. By concentrating on smearing Buhari’s image, PDP failed to use its various campaigns to strengthen party programmes and success.

***What perception do electorates have of negative political advertising?***

Respondents were asked three vital questions to ascertain: (i) if smear campaigns provided more information during the presidential elections; (ii) if smear political adverts were essential in electioneering; and (iii) if negative political adverts should be discouraged in any election.

Research findings showed that respondents have a negative perception of negative adverts. 60% of respondents strongly said electoral candidates should not be allowed to attack one another, 46.1% of the respondents also stated that negative political adverts should be discouraged in any election while 20% said they see nothing wrong with smear campaign. However, 33.9% maintain a neutral stance. On whether 2015 smear political campaign provided more vital information, most (55%) respondents said the way the campaigns were presented were too malicious to take the contents as the truth. Summarily, respondents do not see negative adverts as a necessity in canvassing for votes and most of the reasons provided in their comment falls under the manner of presentation and language use were too injurious to the image of the target candidate.

**RQ2: Are There Other Factors Responsible For Voting Behavior?**

Table 2: Other Factors Affecting Voting Behaviour

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Quality of Programme to offer	57	19%
Change	129	44%
Party loyalty	50	17%
Undecided	35	12%
Experience	24	8%
Total	295	100

Table 2 shows the various factors that respondents said influenced their voting decision apart from political adverts. Majority 44% (129) of the respondents said they voted based on the fact that they wanted a change in power, 6% (24) of the respondents said they voted based on the level of experience of the electoral candidate, 17% (50) of the respondents voted based on party loyalty, and 12% (35) of the respondents were undecided about what factor(s) affected their voting decision.

One can conclude based on the response in table 2 that majority of the electorate wanted a change of government. This is also in line with the statement of Former Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria and the current Emir of Kano, Lamido Sanusi that President Goodluck Jonathan lost because of the mood of voters which was determined by the economic conditions and level of poverty across the country (Ejiofor, 2015). By implication therefore, 2015 smear political campaign did not influence voting in the 2015 presidential elections.

This confirms the assumptions of the selective perception theory which posits that individuals pay attention to those parts of media message that are consonant with strongly held attitudes, beliefs and behaviours (Anaeto, Onabajo and Osifeso, 2008). The mass media may present information that may trigger discussion but how individual is influenced would depend on how he/she perceives the. In other words, people will selectively attend to messages, perceive the message and selectively retain the messages and avoid those that are contrary to their ideas (Folarin 2002:70). Furthermore the findings supported the thesis of limited effect model which states that the media (in this case smear political campaign) do not serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effects, but rather function among and through a nexus of mediating factors and influences such as party loyalty, change among others.

## 5. Conclusion

Political advertisements are necessary tools for electioneering campaigns; using attack advertisements did not influence the voting behaviour of electorates. On the basis of this, it is recommended that:

- 1) Political parties/candidates should do more of political adverts that reflect the personality of the candidate rather than attack the opponent of the candidate;
- 2) Political parties should also note that the credibility of their candidates is important as it is also a deciding factor that influences electorate voting decision; and
- 3) APCON and NBC would only be effective in regulating political advertisements, only if it is independent of the federal government.

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