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## From Hashtag to Political Force: The Obedient Movement and the Dynamics of Social Media-Driven Governance

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social media in good governance. No doubt how knowledge is shared in the 21st century has evolved and changes in media consuming habits have hitherto impacted several aspects of the society including politics and governance. The study specifically investigated how the social media served as a tool to amplify the yearning for good governance and also its implication on the #Obidient movement in the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. Through a qualitative research method, data was collected using focused group discussion. Anchored on the social movement theory, the study revealed that many people use the social media as a tool for political campaign and means of advocacy for good governance. Many respondents from the focused group discussions conducted also agreed that despite the shortfalls of social media, they are actually key in fostering good governance. Among others, the study recommended people to continue to find innovative ways of harnessing social media for good governance and social engagements.

### INTRODUCTION

The world was not as integrated as before until about two decades ago, following the popularity of the social media. The social media are platforms that spread wide across the internet, bringing together many people from around the globe and giving them an avenue to interact via cyber space. Scholars like Ethan Zuckerman (2018) are of the opinion that social media presents the opportunity to inform more people, amplify voices, and allow for an array of diverse voices to speak. On the other hand, social media is believed to be a catalyst for depression, anxiety, cyber bullying and unrealistic expectations (Stegner, 2023).

In October 2020, long before the 'Obidient' Movement began, mostly young Nigerians gathered around the country in large clutters. Some held placards, and others held bottled water, snacks, and branded T-shirts. Those with even a modicum of a following on social media went Live, transmitting to their followers and fans what was happening on the ground. For days, this went on across the country, with annexes in the UK, France, Canada, and the US. They had been protesting police brutality on social media through the hash tag #EndSARS (Mirilla, 2023).

#EndSARS became a decentralized social movement and protest that called for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police with a long record of abuse on Nigerian citizens (Uwazuruike, 2020). Within a few days of protests, on 11 October 2020, the Nigerian Police Force announced that it was dissolving the unit with immediate effect. The move was widely received as a triumph of the demonstrations (Danaan & Ifeanyi-chukwu, 2021).

Following the perceived victory by the Nigerian youth

with #Endsars, Young Nigerians became more aware of the fact that their number and their voices count after all. Most of these young Nigerians were determined to push further especially with the used of social media to not just ending SARS but also in ending the leadership reign of old, selfish and non-performing leaders in the country, starting from the presidency.

The Centre for Democracy and Development published a major study on the social media and the 2023 elections campaign that showed the number of active social media users in Nigeria rising from 27 million in 2019 to a whopping 36 million ahead of the 2023 general elections (Ibrahim, 2023). As the elections approached, the country witnessed renewed push on the social media especially by the so called Obidients to end bad governance.

The #Obidient movement which was mainly powered by the social media was influenced by the candidacy of Mr. Peter Obi, who represented the Labor Party in the 2023 Nigeria presidential elections. Obi was largely seen as a democratic alternative to the main APC and PDP which dominated Nigeria's political space since the end of military rule in 1999. He was also seen as a charming, engaging and energetic man that was open to media interviews and was able to use the social media to reach out to millions of Nigerians especially those under the age of 30. These young vibrant followers of Peter Obi largely constituted what we have today as the Obidients.

The average Nigerian, who is only 18 years old is eager to change his/her life to the better. Unfortunately, many young people with enough financial means do not see their future in the country and make plans to emigrate. Against this backdrop, young Nigerians especially, expressed their profound desire for radical change and good governance (Verena, 2023). This is why the #Obidient movement

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became more than a casual social media hash tag, but a kind of revolution.

### Statement of the Problem

The emergence of social media has unquestionably changed information consuming habits, leading to significant impact on important societal facets including politics and governance. However, concerns about the negative effects of social media have over time revolved around issues of cyber bullying, fake news and misinformation just to mention a few. With this in mind, it has become difficult to resolve that a social media hash tag/movement could drive a realistic and feasible political ideology given its limitations. More so, Laub (2019) has argued that the social media is now a space where negativity and toxicity are amplified. It is also a place where memes of violence are glorified and where recriminatory posts and hyperbolic conclusions are made. This work, having considered these issues, is premised on the possibility of a social media hash tag/movement driving a realistic political ideology giving its limitations.

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this research are to:

1. Ascertain if the social media are able to mobilise and engage citizens in the electoral process.
2. Determine the motivations behind the upsurge of the #Obidient Movement.
3. Examine the influence of #Obidient on voter behavior and call for good governance.

In view of a country and system that is badly affected by bad governance, misuse of the internet and voter apathy, the findings of this study and possible recommendations will be significant and beneficial to politicians, electoral educators and social media users.

The study will also contribute to knowledge by providing a reference material on the optimal usage of social media and how it could serve as a tool for societal transformation.

Furthermore, being one of the few studies to address social media and good governance, the findings and recommendation of this study will be useful to academics, especially the students of media studies and political science.

This study focused on examining the influence of social media and good governance in Nigeria. Only students of the University of Jos and residents of Kufang community in Jos South Local government area of Plateau state were interviewed. A total number of 24 people participated in the study, breaking down to 12 for each study site. Participants for the study were between the ages of 20 and 60.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The world actually got smaller and the theory of Frigyes gained even more significance with the introduction of social media (Das. 2016). Meanwhile, numerous personal websites, chat rooms, and discussion groups gained

popularity following the breakthrough of the Internet Relay Chat (IRC). But the public still did not have full access to the internet during the start of the 1990s. However, when private Internet service providers (ISPs) started operating in the US in 1994 or 1995, the situation completely shifted. Millions of users at home were able to enjoy it.

The range of social networking sites available today is astounding, and many of them may be linked together to enable cross-posting. Intimacy of one-on-one contact is maintained while reaching the greatest number of individuals possible thanks to this setting (Hendricks, 2013). Among these social media platforms, Facebook (established in 2004), Instagram (established in 2010), X (formerly Twitter, established in 2006), and WhatsApp (established in 2009) are the most well-known.

The essence of political participation in any society, either civilized or primitive, is to seek control of power, acquisition of power and to influence decision making (Arijenwa & Nwaoboli, 2023). Political participation is a means of contributing one's quota to the political system and overall development of the nation. Political participation is also one of the fundamental requirements of democratic governance (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023). Social interactions among members of the public have changed significantly since the advent of online social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. These platforms have proven valuable in fostering change and gaining competitive advantages in a multitude of fields. Additionally, it has become an essential tool for dissemination of propaganda and campaign strategies. (Bello *et al.*, 2019). Social media are now essential in aiding politicians in winning over voters in the political arena. For example, X (twitter) is increasingly influencing the formation of social phenomena, including politics. Users freely exchange ideas and take part in discussions that have a significant impact on society (Adam *et al.*, 2018). According to a study conducted in Sanne, (2014) on the usage of social media by candidates in the Dutch national election, candidates who used Twitter received more votes than those who did not. This is only a proof that social media use has greatly impacted democratic processes. Also, there is increased social media usage in the past few elections globally, particularly among young folks (Egbulefu & Nwaoboli, 2023). The surge in user-generated content creation, political opinion expression, and social media use for political information is of interest to this age group. Additionally, obtaining political news via social media platforms is becoming a far more popular option.

It's interesting to note that social media use has been identified as one of the key variables affecting politics and the political engagement of the public (Aleyomi & Ajakaiye, 2014; Ekwueme & Folarin, 2018).

Additionally, social media significantly increased citizen mobilization and involvement in the 2011 general elections, according to Aleyomi and Ajakaiye (2014). They came to the conclusion that one of the contributing

elements that made the 2011 general elections successful, which were deemed to be the most free and fair in Nigeria since the nation restored democracy in 1999, was the existence of internet and social media platforms.

In the past few years, social media have shown a rapid growth of user counts and have been object of scientific analysis (McAfee, 2006). For example, more than 3 billion people worldwide are members of the Facebook network (Backlinko, 2025) while Twitter counts over 335.70 million accounts in 2024 according to BankMyCell (2024). This development makes social media fantastic tools for any and every form of mobilization.

The prevalence of mobile phones in particular has given rise to a multitude of concepts for new media platforms that seek to close the information gap between the connected and the unconnected (Unwin, 2020). Furthermore, Internet-based communication has begun to become more significant throughout Africa, especially in Nigeria. There are exciting new options for one-to-many and one-to-one communication thanks to mobile phones and the internet.

Mali (2016) claims that there are plenty of chances on the social web for office holders and candidates to engage with voters, promote transparency, and even spar with rivals in the same manner that they have done for hundreds of years in the traditional media. Social media appears to have especially intriguing possibilities in the political arena since it can encourage greater participation and democracy. This position is further strengthened by thoughts of Castertrione and Pieczka (2018) who are of the opinion that the introduction of the social media to politics has influenced the level of public political participation in the democratic space. The social media draw their strength from their speed, ease of use, and universality that make them globally accessible at a relatively low cost. However, the danger is, unlike the mainstream media, there is virtually no control, code of ethics or gate-keeping on most social media platforms, thereby opening their use to the intentions and discretion of users (Ufuophu-Biri & Ojoboh, 2017). This unfettered latitude offered by the social media also seems to constitute their weakness. Thus, it has been hypothesized that the wrongful deployment of these digital technologies could result in information overload and spread of half-truth (Akpoghiran & Erubami, 2019), moral panic, invasion of territorial sovereignty and promotion of violence (Nwafor *et al.*, 2013).

### The #Obidient Movement

The Obidient Movement is a social and a political mass movement that evolved to ensure the electoral victory of Mr. Peter Obi, the presidential candidate of Labour Party in the 2023 general elections. The groups cut across every stratum of the Nigerian society and exist in all the geopolitical zones of the Country. Members of the Group also exist abroad among the Nigerians in the Diaspora. They see in Obi the most qualified, credible and best contender for the office of the president of Nigeria.

The membership of this group includes professionals/intellectuals who are tired of the recycled politicians that continued to lead the country to the brink of collapse. It also includes influential celebrities who have a lot of followers on different social media platforms, and whose endorsement of Mr. Obi encouraged their followers to develop interest in Nigerian politics, one more time. The Obidients further comprised of ethnic bigots who allegedly see in Mr. Obi the fulfillment of the Igbo presidency. To them, Peter Obi is running for the presidency to represent the Igbo nation. It also involves activists who have not forgiven the political class for their role in the botched #ENDSARS Movement, particularly, the killing at Lekki Toll Gate.

Moreover, several social media platforms have greatly aided in the success of political campaigns and ideologies throughout the globe (Okoro & Okoro, 2019). These platforms also assist in monitoring and empowerment of voters to make informed decisions about the parties and candidates they will support or vote for (Nwamara & Etumnu, 2022).

ICT seems to be rekindling hope for social and political change right now (Assibong & Oshanski, 2018). This has received praise from a number of sources, despite the fact that the spread of false information continues to drag the phenomena down. Unfortunately, social media is sometimes perceived as confusing the public and escalating ethnic and religious tensions in Nigeria, particularly during electioneering seasons.

In spite of all of these, the #Obidient movement in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria was arguably believed to be different. This is because Peter Obi's #Obidient movement motivated several youths and even older Nigerian citizens to register for the permanent voter's card and also participate in the 2023 elections. As it were, most young Nigerians were yearning for a new era and were set to demonstrate that through the motivation they got from the #Obidient movement (Chukwurah, 2022). The #Obidient movement, unlike other casual social media hashtags online built an army of mostly young intelligent individuals who were seen to be particularly independent-minded, strong-willed, and disdainful of elder politicians who they claim have done nothing for them.

The #Obidient movement opened up the space for several thought provoking political discussions as well as mobilized the electorate in the 2023 general elections in the country (Nwaoboli & Asemah, 2023). The movement also made voter education on voting process, while challenging several issues that has held the county back as a result of bad governance.

Among the three leading candidates for the presidency, the presidential candidate from the Labour Party was by far the youngest and The Obidients found it easy to relate to Mr. Obi. Also, his skill and astute utilization of Anambra State's resources as governor, his deep comprehension of the requirements of contemporary governance, and his emphasis on issue-based campaigns were often praised. Moreover, The Obidient Movement helped the

Labour Party to emerge 3rd in the presidential election (inecnigeria.org, 2023). Of particular interest was the party's victory in Lagos, Katsina, Nasarrawa, Plateau, Federal Capital Territory (FCT) which were the strongholds of the ruling APC leaders (Tinubu, Buhari, Adamu, Lalong, etc). The Labour Party, with no prior elected members of the National Assembly, smiled home with six senators, 34 House of Representative members, a governor (Abia State) and several House of Assembly members (inecnigeria.org, 2023).

### Empirical Review of Related Studies

The empirical review covers researches that have been made in relation to the subject of this study. First, Onyekachukwu *et al.* (2023) in their work titled Obidient Movement and Political Change in Nigeria: The Journey So Far said that there has been a growing awareness and new level of consciousness among the Nigerian populace on the crucial role they play in the decision-making process of governance and in the sustenance of democratic rule. According to the Authors, prior to the #ENDSARS Movement of 2020, Nigerian youths were divided mostly along ethno-religious lines and this was to the advantage of shrewd politicians. But the #ENDSARS protest galvanized the Nigerian youth, particularly from the southern part of the Country. According to them, the laudable achievements recorded during that protest was an 'eye opener' to the youths on the enormous power at their disposal to effect lasting change in the polity. This was amply reenacted in the most nonviolent way during the 2023 general elections. The Nigerian youths, who were regarded as lazy and insignificant in the scheme of things hitherto, became a strong and potent force for change in the elections.

Following recourse to unethical means to secure electoral victory in the past, the voting public became apolitical. The waning interest of the people in the electoral process was accentuated by the active connivance of the electoral umpire and the courts of law, which in most cases, give favorable judgment to the highest bidder. But following the assurances of conducting credible elections by INEC and the emergence of Mr. Peter Obi as the presidential candidate of the Labour Party, many Nigerians returned to the voting cubicle with the hope of finding a president that can provide good governance.

Another study by Erubami (2020), titled Public Perception of Social Media Contributions to Political Participation Processes in Delta State, Nigerians showed that the social media are popular means through which people get exposed to political news and information in Nigeria and using online communication platforms has become a daily ritual. However, most users perceive the political contents shared on social media platforms to be false, unreliable and often woven around mundane issues. Consequently, the perceived positive contributions of the social media to political processes in Delta State, Nigeria are being undermined by the impact of the perceived negativities associated with online media political contents. In the light

of the researcher's findings, they recommend that social media users should act responsibly, be more sensitive to public needs and expectations, and where possible, adopt a self-censoring technique to check the correctness and appropriateness of the political information they share and receive online.

From the submissions of the works reviewed, social media's function currently transcends a casual platform used for only catching fun. They have the ability to mobilize and influence key decisions that relate to politics and good governance. Also, there are several concerns regarding fake news, misinformation and the appropriate usage of the social media. But despite their limitations, they still have a role to play in matters that relate to politics and governance.

### Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Social Movement Theory. Social movement theory is an interdisciplinary study within the social sciences that generally seeks to explain why social mobilization occurs, the forms under which it manifests, as well as potential social, cultural, political and economic consequences. The postulators of the theory maintained that social movements comprise of interlocking networks of groups, social networks and individuals who try to promote societal change by non-institutionalized tactics (Rosenthal *et al.*, 1985).

As suggested by the social movement theory, the obidient movement became a socio-political movement that pooled many Nigerians, (especially youths) who were looking up to a leader that will address the significant challenges of insecurity, poverty, nepotism, economy, education, basic infrastructure such as roads, electricity, water supply, healthcare facilities and weak governance. The movement undeniably came along with increased voter and civic education (Aboh & Okoi, 2023).

More so, in a country that seems to always be on the lookout for a messiah to solve its myriad problems, young social media-savvy supporters were quick to elevate Mr Peter Obi to sainthood, backing his largely unknown Labour Party against two septuagenarian political heavyweights (Ndubuisi & Orjinmo, 2023). During the campaigns his name was often trending on social media on the back of numerous conversations sparked by his supporters who were instantly recognizable by their demands for cerebrally-tested Nigerians as leaders. The Obidients were also against the idea of recycling 'mentally fatigued' apologists who have allegedly through their actions and inactions plunged the country into its current doldrums.

Similar to the tenets of the social movement theory, the Obidients were also crusading for equal opportunity for all, and the reengineering of a nation where all citizenry is given unfettered access to governance without denial on sentimental grounds of tribalism and sectarian considerations. These so called Obidients were mostly urban under-30s who refer to themselves as the "Coconut-head generation", because they are strong-

willed, independent-minded and contemptuous of older politicians who, they say, have done little for them (Ndubuisi & Orjinmo, 2023).

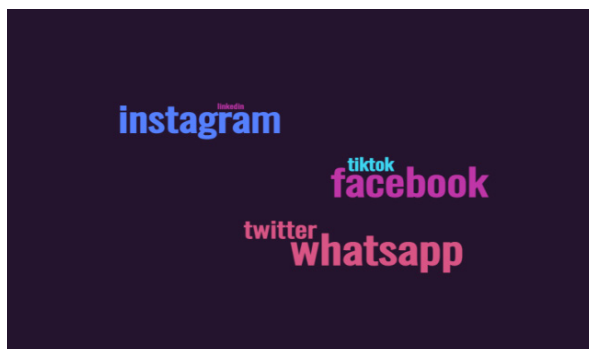
### MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed the Focus Group Discussion a qualitative research method, which is a scientific method of observation used to gather non-numerical data. The Plateau State capital was the site for this study. Participants for the study were drawn from Naraguta campus of the University of Jos, while the second research site was Kufang area of Jos South local government area.

The target population for this work consisted of students of the University of Jos and residents of Kufang community in Jos South Local government area of Plateau state. A total number of 24 people participated in this study, breaking down to 12 for each study site. Each set contained 6 females and 6 males to give a gender balance. Furthermore, participants for this study were between the ages of 20 and 60. The duration for each focus group discussion was between 30 and 45 minutes. The purposive sampling method was employed to select the participants for this study. It is also known as judgmental selection or subjective sampling. The participants were selected based on the idea that they are social media users and have an idea of the #Obidient movement.

Data for this study were collected using focus group discussions (FGDs). The researcher interviewed simultaneously the participants, leading them in a relatively unstructured discussion about the topic under investigation. The qualitative method of data analysis was used to collate, analyze, evaluate and interpret both primary data collected from the focused group discussions and secondary data gotten from documented sources such as books, journals articles, newspapers and other related materials

### Data Presentation and Analysis



**Figure 1:** Word Cloud. Presence of participants on different social media platforms

The researcher undertook a word search which produced the cloud from the responses of participants on RQ1 which sought to know which social media platforms the

participants are active on. The words in the cloud include LinkedIn, instagram, tiktok, facebook, twitter, whatsapp. The dominant words in the cloud are WhatsApp, facebook and instagram which means those platforms have more user than the others.

From the first research question and other follow up questions, it became obvious that social media in Nigeria has over time become a catalyst for citizen engagement and the researcher drew up the theme, Social Media as a Catalyst for Citizen Engagement. This theme corresponds with the position of scholars like Unwin (2020) who said that the prevalence of digital technologies has given rise to a multitude of concepts for new media platforms that seek to close the information gap between the connected and the unconnected. Furthermore, Internet-based communication has begun to become more significant throughout Africa, especially in Nigeria. There are exciting new options for one-to-many and one-to-one communication thanks to mobile phones and the internet.

### RQ 2: Are You Confident that the Social Media Are Able to Mobilize and Engage Citizens in Electoral Processes?

Most of the participants acknowledged the social media, in spite of their limitations are already serving as a powerful tool for political mobilization. This agrees with the argument of scholars like Nwaoboli (2023) who said the use of social media in recent elections, worldwide, has significantly intensified, especially among young adults. Moreover, the popularity of getting political news from social media platforms is greatly increasing.

Studies have shown that 62% of web users turn to facebook to find political news. This social phenomenon allows for political information to spread quickly and easily among people. Furthermore, social media sites are now encouraging political involvement by uniting like-minded people, reminding users to vote in elections, and analyzing users' political affiliation data to find cultural similarities and differences (Udoka, 2015). From responses and literature gathered, the researcher developed the theme Power of Social Media Hashtags (3) in political Advocacy.

From all the responses gathered, only 2 respondents seem to disagree with the idea of social media being a major political mobilization tool. All the others hold firmly that social media are viable tools that politicians can use to sell themselves and their manifestos during elections.

### RQ3: In Your Opinion, What Motivated the Upsurge of the #Obidient Movement?

In response to this question, several participants believe that the #Obidient movement became popular due to the track records of Mr. Peter Obi as a former governor in Anambara State. Also, some believed that the ability of Peter Obi and his followers to leverage on the social media gave the movement the needed momentum. Also,

a number of participants claimed that the #Obidient movement was influenced by the desire for Nigerians to change their corrupt political leaders who have held unto power for a long time.

Moreover, the #Obidient movement tally with the philosophy of the Social movement theory which this study is anchored on. The theory generally seeks to explain why social mobilization occurs, the forms under which it manifests, as well as potential social, cultural, political and economic consequences (Danaan & Ifeanyichukwu, 2021). In the light of the proposition of the theory, the #Obidient movement undoubtedly became a social mobilization mechanism with a defined goal and objective of ousting bad leadership, and political parties that many Nigerians believed to have done the country more harm than good. Though Mr Peter Obi did not win the election at the long run, his first attempt under a minor political party was commendable and his influence on young people and voters was impressive.

From the word search conducted by the researcher on the motivation of the #Obidient movement, words such as change, track record, corruption and hardship kept coming up. Many of the respondents believed Peter Obi's candidacy was something that will bring the needed change Nigerians yearn for.

Most of the participants believed the person and past antecedents of Mr. Peter Obi influenced the #Obidient movement. Moreover, others believe because he is younger than the other major contenders in the election, he would have something better to offer Nigerians. Also, his ability to incorporate emerging technologies and the social media in his campaigns was personal to most of his supporters. This explains why the respondent (FP9) said The use of social media by Mr. Peter Obi and his supporters are commendable and their campaign messages appealed to most Nigerians especially the youth.

From the responses above, the researcher came along with the theme, Drive for Good Governance via past antecedence and Emerging Technologies

Nearly all participants in the FGD believed that emerging technologies and the social media have enabled citizens of Nigeria to push for good governance. It's interesting to note that social media use has been identified as one of the key variables affecting politics and the political engagement of the public (Aleyomi & Ajakaiye, 2014; Ekwueme & Folarin, 2018). Also, Chukwurah (2022) has claimed that most young Nigerians were yearning for a new era and were set to demonstrate that through the motivation they got from the #Obidient movement. On their part FGP 5, 11, 13, 15 and 20 all believe that there is so much people can do with emerging technologies, especially social media in advocating for good governance. This study revealed that the role of social media goes beyond chatting. If properly harnessed, it can drive a feasible political ideology and also put non-performing politicians on the edge. Among other things, the study discovered that social media was instrumental in the famous #Obidient movement.

## Recommendations

Every research work involves an investigation geared towards increasing knowledge and providing ideas to solve problems. Arising from the research findings, the researcher wishes to make the following recommendations

1. As a catalyst for social engagement, Politicians and governments should explore more innovative ways of using the social media to create compelling content during electioneering campaigns to mobilise participation and canvassing for votes.

2. Political parties, politicians, governmental agencies and ministries should create a robust and effective social media presence to inform and educate youths, especially on social media platforms which have a high concentration of Nigerian youths for engagements.

3. Politicians should learn to leave good legacies whenever in leadership position as electorates will use that to make their choices in future elections

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this work have shown that the social media is pivotal in addressing key challenges in governance if used appropriately. It also has a great potential in democratization. Through empirical review and data arising from this work, it is evident that the social media has gone past a casual chatting platform to a viable powerful campaign tool. It has also become a medium of selling various forms of political ideologies and a means of holding public office holders to account.

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