
Digital Media Invasion and Political Communication in Rivers State: A Meme-Based Analysis

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 3 | 2026 | Article Number: 071

Accepted: 02 August 2026 | Published: 10 August 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)



Crossref : <https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-GDCA8RDH>



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 **EGOM** [0009-0008-6765-6123](#), **OA** [0009-0006-9201-155X](#), **OPIN** [0009-0003-0194-2630](#)

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Abstract

The swift rise of digital media has dramatically transformed how political communication unfolds in various regions of Nigeria. This study examined the impact of digital media on political communication in Rivers State, using a meme-focused analytical approach. Grounded in Semiotic, Agenda-Setting, and Framing Theories, the research explored how internet memes serve as powerful tools for crafting political narratives, shaping public opinion, and boosting citizen engagement. A qualitative research approach was employed, utilising topical case sampling a purposive sampling method to collect thirty politically relevant memes from Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram that pertain to Rivers State. The analysis of the data was both semiotic and interpretative, aimed at uncovering the meanings and themes embedded in the political memes circulating on social media. The findings indicated that meme-based communication played a crucial role in political discussions, with prevalent themes such as political satire, the delegitimisation of political figures, distrust in elections, criticism of governance, youth involvement, and the spread of misinformation. The semiotic analysis revealed that memes often used symbolic imagery, humor, and cultural references to break down complex political issues while reinforcing ideological narratives like godfatherism, corruption, and political instability. Additionally, the study found that memes played a role in agenda-setting by highlighting specific political issues and framing them in ways that shaped how audiences interpreted them. The discussion pointed out that while memes have the potential to enhance political participation, especially among young people, they also bring challenges, such as the spread of misinformation, political polarisation, and the trivialisation of governance matters. In conclusion, the study suggested that meme culture presents both opportunities and risks in Nigeria's changing digital

political communication landscape. It recommended that stakeholders focus on promoting digital media literacy and fostering responsible political communication, and strengthen regulatory frameworks to mitigate misinformation while preserving freedom of expression.

Keywords: Keywords: Digital Media, Political Communication, Memes, Rivers State, Digital Discourse

INTRODUCTION

The rise and swift growth of digital media have dramatically reshaped how political communication works around the world. Today's political landscape is increasingly influenced by interactive, networked technologies that allow for a more decentralised approach to producing and sharing information. Unlike traditional mass media, digital platforms offer real-time engagement, user-generated content, and a space for participatory discussions, fundamentally changing how political figures and citizens interact. This shift is often viewed through the lens of a hybrid media system, where traditional media and digital platforms coexist and influence political narratives and public opinion (Chadwick, 2017).

In Nigeria, digital media have woven themselves into the fabric of political communication, especially regarding elections and governance. Social media platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram are widely used by political leaders, parties, and everyday citizens for campaigning, mobilising support, and engaging in political discussions. The growing availability of smartphones and internet access has broadened the reach of these platforms, encouraging more people to participate in political conversations. Research indicates that digital media played a crucial role in shaping political engagement and voter behavior during Nigeria's recent elections, including the 2019 and 2023 general elections (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020; Udeze & Chukwuma, 2023). These trends highlight the increasing significance of digital communication channels in influencing political outcomes and fostering democratic participation.

One standout aspect of digital political communication is the rise of memes as a potent tool for expression. Internet memes are dynamic digital creations that blend visuals, text, and cultural references to convey messages, often with a humorous or satirical twist. Their replicable and adaptable nature allows users to participate in the co-creation and circulation of political messages. Shifman (2014) points out that memes act as cultural units that carry our shared values, beliefs, and social commentary. In the realm of politics, they become powerful tools for framing issues, critiquing political figures, and shaping how the public perceives various topics in a way that's both engaging and easy to digest.

In Nigeria's socio-political landscape, memes have emerged as a popular way to voice political opinions and challenge prevailing narratives. During election seasons and times of political unrest, memes are often shared widely to criticise government actions, poke fun at political leaders, and rally public sentiment. Recent research shows that meme culture in Nigeria has transformed into a vital form of digital political engagement, especially among younger people who are active on social media (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2019; Yusha'u, 2021). This shift highlights a broader trend towards visual and participatory communication that resonates with today's audiences.

Additionally, the viral nature of memes boosts their impact within the digital media landscape. Social media algorithms tend to favor content that sparks high engagement, which in turn increases the visibility and reach of memes. While this can promote political awareness and involvement, it also raises concerns about the spread of misinformation, political polarisation, and the oversimplification of complex political issues (Wiggins, 2019). As a result, memes play a dual role as both instruments of democratic expression and potential sources of distortion in political communication.

Rivers State is a particularly interesting case for exploring these dynamics, given its lively political scene and high media engagement. The state has seen fierce political competition, frequent elections, and active citizen involvement in political discussions. The extensive use of digital media in Rivers State has created an environment where meme-based communication thrives, especially during election cycles and political controversies. Despite this, scholarly attention to the role of memes in shaping political communication within the state remains limited.

In this context, the idea of digital media invasion becomes really relevant. It refers to how deeply and often overwhelmingly digital technologies have seeped into political communication. This trend shows just how many digital platforms, especially meme culture, have changed the way political messages are crafted, shared, and understood. Analysing memes can offer a unique perspective on the relationship between digital media and political communication in today's world. This study aims to delve into these dynamics specifically within Rivers State, adding to the wider conversation about digital political communication in Nigeria and filling some of the gaps in existing research.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The rise of digital media has dramatically reshaped political communication in Nigeria, opening up new avenues for participation, engagement, and the exchange of information. However, this shift has also brought about complex challenges that we still don't fully grasp, especially at the sub-national level like Rivers State. While there's been a lot of research on how social media plays a role in political mobilisation and elections, there's a noticeable lack of scholarly attention on specific forms of communication, like internet memes, that are increasingly influencing political discussions in digital spaces (Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019).

This gap is particularly striking in Rivers State, where political activity is vibrant and digital engagement is on the rise.

One significant issue is that meme-based communication, despite its widespread use, is often dismissed as just entertainment rather than being acknowledged as a powerful tool for political expression and influence. Memes take complex political issues and break them down into easily digestible visual formats, which can shape how the public perceives things, reinforce stereotypes, and sway political opinions. Even though they're becoming more common, there's still not enough empirical research looking into how these memes impact political discourse. Diving into how meme-based messages shape political meaning, portray political figures, and influence audience perceptions in Nigeria (Yusha'u, 2021) reveals that the communicative power of memes in political contexts is still largely uncharted territory.

Moreover, the viral and interactive nature of digital media platforms boosts the spread of meme-driven content, often without proper fact-checking or context. This creates a ripe environment for misinformation, political propaganda, and the twisting of public discourse. Research indicates that Nigeria's digital media landscape can quickly spread misleading or divisive political messages, which can sway public opinion and potentially threaten democratic processes (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020; Udeze & Chukwuma, 2023). In Rivers State, where political tensions frequently run high, the unchecked flow of politically charged memes could deepen divisions and lead to greater political instability.

Another pressing concern is the lack of academic focus on how the invasion of digital media intersects with local political communication dynamics. The term 'digital media invasion' underscores the overwhelming impact of digital platforms on communication practices. Yet, there's a noticeable gap in context-specific research that looks at how this phenomenon plays out in Rivers State, especially through the lens of meme culture. Without this kind of analysis, it's tough to grasp how digital media are

transforming political narratives, citizen involvement, and power dynamics at the local level (Chadwick, 2017).

Additionally, much of the existing literature tends to zoom in on national-level political communication, often missing the unique socio-political nuances of individual states. Rivers State, with its rich political history, distinct media landscape, and unique patterns of civic engagement, deserves dedicated scholarly attention. The lack of such studies the development of contextually relevant insights and policy recommendations that could address the challenges posed by digital political communication in the state.

This study tackles a significant gap: our limited understanding of how meme-based digital communication impacts political discourse in Rivers State. It's crucial to explore how memes serve as instruments of political communication, how they shape public perception, and what this means for democratic engagement and political stability. By delving into this issue, the study aims to enrich the existing literature on digital media and political communication, while also offering valuable insights into the role of memes in Nigeria's current political landscape.

Research Objectives

- i. To examine the extent to which meme-based content is utilised in political communication in Rivers State.
- ii. To analyse how political memes construct and frame political actors, issues, and narratives in Rivers State.
- iii. To assess the influence of meme-based communication on citizens' political perceptions and engagement in Rivers State.

Research Questions

- i. To what extent is meme-based content utilised in political communication in Rivers State?
- ii. How do political memes construct and frame political actors, issues, and narratives in Rivers State?
- iii. What influence does meme-based communication have on citizens' political perceptions and engagement in Rivers State?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Semiotic Theory: As presented by Peirce (1931) and Barthes (1977): The visual materials are best understood through the lens of semiotics, which studies signs and symbols in communication. This can be illustrated by Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of the sign, which includes the sign (representamen), object, and interpretant. Political memes that use images as signs can evoke feelings like urgency, calmness, fear, or hope, and audiences interpret these based on their cultural and psychological backgrounds (Peirce, 1931). Additionally, Roland Barthes' (1977) distinction between denotation (the literal meaning) and connotation (the emotional or cultural associations) is vital for unpacking how memes function on social media. Barthes argued that memes are not static; they are polysemous, meaning they can convey multiple meanings depending on culturally specific codes.

Agenda-Setting Theory: Introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, the Agenda-Setting Theory suggests that while the media may not dictate what people think, they play a significant role in shaping what people think about. Essentially, the media influence public priorities by highlighting certain issues over others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

In the realm of digital media, this theory has adapted to reflect the interactive nature of online platforms, where not just traditional media outlets but also everyday individuals play a role in shaping the agenda. Social media users are not just passive consumers; they actively create, share, and amplify content,

including memes, which in turn affects how political issues are perceived in public discussions (Chadwick, 2017).

In Rivers State, memes can act as a powerful tool for setting the agenda by drawing attention to specific political figures, controversies, or policy matters. When memes go viral, they often spotlight certain narratives, making them more prominent in the digital public sphere. This study, therefore, leans on Agenda-Setting Theory to illustrate how memes help determine which political topics take center stage in online conversations and public awareness.

Framing Theory: This theory was linked to thinkers like Erving Goffman and later expanded by Robert Entman, explored how media content is crafted in ways that shape audience interpretation and understanding. As Entman (1993) points out, framing involves highlighting certain aspects of reality and making them stand out in a communication piece, which in turn promotes specific definitions, interpretations, and evaluations of issues.

In the world of digital political communication, memes serve as potent framing tools. By blending images, captions, humor, and satire, memes can distill complex political situations and present them in ways that influence how audiences view political figures and events (Shifman, 2014). Memes often tap into cultural symbols and shared knowledge, making their frames easily recognisable and widely accepted among viewers.

In Rivers State, political memes can frame candidates as either capable or inept, portray policies as either advantageous or detrimental, and depict political events in a positive or negative light. These frames can significantly sway public opinion and reinforce existing beliefs. These frames have the power to shape public opinion and reinforce our existing beliefs or biases. That's why Framing Theory is so important for this study; it offers a way to analyse how meme-based messages create meaning and influence political narratives in the digital realm.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Digital Media and Political Communication

Digital media encompasses internet-based platforms and technologies that allow for the creation, sharing, and exchange of information in interactive and participatory ways. The rise of digital media has dramatically changed the landscape of political communication by decentralising the flow of information and empowering citizens to engage actively in public discussions (Chadwick, 2017). Unlike traditional media, which typically operate on a one-way communication model, digital platforms promote dialogue, feedback, and user-generated content, creating a more inclusive environment for political communication (Yusha'u, 2021).

Political communication itself involves the creation, sharing, and exchange of political information among various actors, including politicians, the media, and the public. In today's digital age, this process has become more dynamic and less controlled, with individuals and non-state actors playing crucial roles in shaping political narratives (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2019). In Nigeria, digital media have become essential for political campaigns, governance, and civic engagement, especially during election periods.

Internet Memes as Political Communication Tools

Internet memes are culturally rich digital artifacts that spread quickly across online platforms, often through imitation and adaptation. As Shifman (2014) points out, memes are units of popular culture that users circulate, imitate, and transform, reflecting shared social experiences. In political contexts, memes act as tools for commentary, satire, and critique, allowing users to express their opinions in concise and

visually appealing formats.

Memes are a fascinating blend of text and images that distill complex political messages into easily digestible bites, making them relatable to a broad audience. Their humorous and relatable nature not only boosts engagement but also makes them highly shareable, which is a big reason why they go viral (Wiggins, 2019). Consequently, memes have become a powerful tool in shaping political conversations, especially among younger folks who are the driving force behind social media.

Digital Media Invasion

The term 'digital media invasion' captures the overwhelming presence of digital technologies in our daily lives, particularly in the realm of political communication. This trend underscores how deeply digital platforms have woven themselves into our social, cultural, and political landscapes, fundamentally changing the way we produce and consume information (Chadwick, 2017). In political communication, this invasion is evident in the relentless stream of information, the dominance of social media, and the growing dependence on digital tools for political engagement. While this opens up new avenues for accessing information and participating in discussions, it also brings challenges like information overload, the spread of misinformation, and the decline of traditional gatekeeping (Wiggins, 2019).

Meme Culture and Political Participation

Meme culture encompasses the shared practices of creating, sharing, and interpreting memes within online communities. It's marked by humor, intertextuality, and active participation. This culture has become a vital part of political engagement, allowing people to tackle political issues in fun and informal ways (Shifman, 2014). Through memes, users can critique political figures, voice their dissent, and rally support for various causes. This type of engagement is especially important for younger individuals who might shy away from conventional political activities. However, it's worth noting that meme culture can also facilitate the spread of misinformation and reinforce existing biases, complicating its impact on democratic processes (Yusha'u, 2021).

Empirical Review

A number of empirical studies have looked into how digital media interacts with political communication, but there's been a noticeable lack of focus on meme-based analysis, especially in specific regions like Rivers State. Ojebuyi and Salawu (2020) took a closer look at how social media impacts political participation in Nigeria through a survey research design. Their findings showed that social media platforms significantly boost political awareness and engagement, particularly among the youth. However, they cast a wide net over social media without diving into specific content types like memes.

Udeze and Chukwuma (2023) examined the influence of social media on electoral behavior during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. By employing a mixed-methods approach, they uncovered that digital platforms were pivotal in shaping voter perceptions and decision-making. Yet, despite the importance of their findings, they didn't delve into the communicative strategies at play, including the role of meme-based messaging.

Olorunnisola and Martin (2019) focused on how media impacts social movements across Africa, pointing out that digital platforms are key in facilitating mobilisation and collective action. Their research highlighted that social media creates spaces for alternative narratives and grassroots involvement. However, they didn't specifically tackle how memes serve as instruments of political communication.

Yusha'u (2021) investigated the relationship between digital media and political communication in Nigeria, stressing the growing significance of online platforms in shaping political discussions. The study

acknowledged that while digital media allows for quick information sharing, it also plays a role in spreading misinformation. Although it recognised the presence of visual content, it fell short of providing a thorough analysis of meme culture.

Wiggins (2019) explored the discursive power of memes within digital culture, illustrating that memes act as vehicles for ideological expression and meaning-making. Shifman (2014) took a deep dive into the world of memes within digital culture, shedding light on their significant role in political engagement and public discussions. The findings underscored that memes are at the heart of how we communicate today. However, the study didn't specifically target the political landscapes of Africa or Nigeria. Chadwick (2017) explored the hybrid media system and its effects on political communication. Through various case studies and theoretical insights, this research illustrated how digital and traditional media come together to influence political outcomes. While it offers valuable perspectives, it falls short of addressing meme-based communication at a local level.

The literature reviewed shows that, despite extensive research on digital media and political communication, there's a clear gap when it comes to studies focusing on meme-driven political discourse, especially in specific regions like Rivers State. Most existing research tends to generalise the effects of digital media without delving into the unique communicative forms that foster engagement and sway opinions. Additionally, many empirical studies are either national in scope or rooted in Western contexts, which limits their applicability to Nigeria's local political scene.

This study aims to bridge that gap by providing a meme-focused analysis of how digital media influences political communication in Rivers State, ultimately enriching our understanding of modern political dialogue in the digital era.

METHODOLOGY

This research was a qualitative approach, it utilised a semiotic analytical framework to dissect meme-based political content. The study was rooted in semiotic analysis, a fascinating method that examined the world of signs, symbols, and how we make meaning. This was employed to decode the visual and textual elements of political memes that were making the rounds in Rivers State. Each meme was examined on three levels: 1. Denotative level: the straightforward description of the image and text. 2. Connotative level: the implied meanings, cultural references, and emotional nuances. 3. Myth/ideological level: the larger political messages, beliefs, or ideologies that are woven into the meme. The study focused on political memes related to Rivers State that were shared on platforms like Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, and WhatsApp. To gather data, the study used a topical case sampling technique, a specific type of purposive sampling, resulting in a selection of thirty (30) memes.

Data analysis was conducted using a semiotic template to uncover the interpretative meanings hidden within the chosen political memes. Screenshots and archived versions of the memes were preserved for analysis to maintain their original form and context. Each meme was scrutinised to identify its signified meanings and the underlying ideological messages. The analysis followed a thematic approach, highlighting recurring patterns, symbols, and narratives are identified and categorised. The findings were shared in a descriptive manner, featuring detailed examples of memes that were thoroughly analysed to showcase how meaning is created and conveyed. This approach provided a deep understanding of how memes function in the realm of political communication.

To ensure the study's validity, triangulation was used by examining memes from various platforms and sources, which helped capture a wide range of perspectives and minimise bias. The researcher also kept a consistent analytical framework by applying the same semiotic principles to all the chosen memes.

Reliability was bolstered by meticulously documenting the data collection and analysis processes, promoting transparency and the ability to replicate the study. Utilising established semiotic theories further enhanced the study's credibility. Ethical standards were strictly followed; ensuring that all data collected came from publicly accessible sources. User anonymity was preserved by not revealing any personal identities linked to the creation or sharing of the memes.

Data Presentation

Table: Rivers Based Political Memes

Meme ID	Meme	Connotation	Ideological Meaning	Caption
M1		(satire, criticism)	Rivers people are not Collateral Damage	Rivers State: Two men one State (Source: Face Book 2026).
M2		(satire, criticism)	Save Rivers or finish Fubara	Wike Vs Uzodima (Facebook 2025).
M3		(satire, mockery)	Endless ambition	Wike Vs Fubara (x & Facebook 2023)
M4		(Excessive Desire)	The throne isn't empty...it's controversial	The Godfather War (Source: Social media, 2024).
M5		Electoral Manipulation and Distrust	Justice for sale, Democracy on auction	Wike buys Judgement in Judiciary (Source: Facebook & Instagram 2025).
M6		(satire, criticism)	Confused & convenient	Rivers Assembly: confused & lost (Source: Facebook & X, 2026).

M7



Delegitimisation
of Political
Actor

Political
relevance

Rivers State Control
(Source: Facebook, 2024)

M8



Delegitimisation
of Political
Actor

Obsession for
power

Ownership for APC &
PDP in Rivers State
(Source: FB, 2025).

M9



Delegitimisation
of Political
Actors

The master
palace

Rivers State resource
(Source: x & Fb, 2023)

M10



(satire, criticism)

President's
interventions

Wike's Reasons for
outing Fubara (Source:
Fb & X, 2024).

M11



(satire, criticism)

Support shift

Why SIM won public
support (Source: Fb,
2025).

M12



Delegitimisation
of Political
Actors

Underlying
political
ideology/messa
ge

I remain the leader of
PDP & APC in Rivers
State (Source: Fb &
Instagram, 2023).

M13



(satire, criticism)

Political tension
in Rivers

APC is now a serious
threat to me in Rivers
State (Source: Fb, 2026),

M14



(satire, criticism)

Bola on rescue mission

Rivers State (Source: Fb, 2025).

M15



(satire, criticism)

Wike recovered Rivers' restructure

Choose the next president of Nigeria (Source: Fb, 2023)

M16

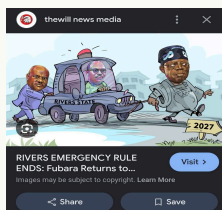


Delegitimisation of Political Actors

Fubara runs to Tinubu for help using support.

Fubara backs Tinubu for 2027(Source: Fb, 2024).

M17



(satire, criticism)

Fubara returns to power

Rivers State emergency rule end (Source: Fb, 2025).

M18

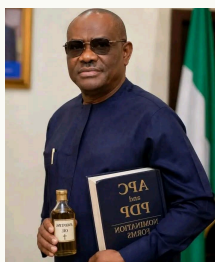


Delegitimisation of Political Actors

Confidence in leadership

Keep leading the way...(Source: Fb, 2026).

M19



Delegitimisation of Political Actor

The king maker

APC and PDP nomination forms (Source: Fb & X, 2025).

M20		(Grace)	Divine anointing	The man of grace (Source: X & Fb, 2026)
M21		Delegitimisation of Political Actors	Aso Rock anointing	The man of grace (Source: Fb & Whatsapp, 2024).
M22		Extended grace)	Reward faithfulness	for The man of grace (Source: Fb & Whatsapp, 2024).
M23		Political Actors	Crisis advantage	Thank you Rivers (Source: Fb & Instagram, 2026).
M24-30		(satire, criticism)	Underlying political ideology/messa ge	Figure 24-30: Meme illustrating political discourse in Rivers State (Source: Fb, X & Whatsapp, 2024-2026).

Thematic Analysis

Using an inductive approach, the analysed memes were coded and grouped into key themes that reflect how political realities in Rivers State are constructed and communicated through digital media.

- **Theme 1: Political Satire and Mockery**

One of the standout themes in the dataset is the clever use of humor and satire to poke fun at political figures. Many memes take exaggerated facial expressions, gestures, or statements from politicians, painting them as incompetent, deceitful, or out of touch with the everyday person. This aligns perfectly with the idea that memes act as tools for ridicule and symbolic resistance, giving citizens a way to challenge authority in a more casual manner (Shifman, 2014). By framing complex political issues in a humorous light, these memes make them easier to digest and more engaging for the public.

These memes act as a form of digital dissent, allowing people in Rivers State to voice their frustrations without having to confront anyone directly. However, it's worth noting that this oversimplification of issues might also stifle more nuanced political discussions.

- **Theme 2: Delegitimisation of Political Actors**

Another prominent theme is the delegitimisation of political leaders and institutions. Memes often depict politicians as corrupt, ineffective, or self-serving, frequently using symbolic imagery like crumbling infrastructure, broken promises, or exaggerated displays of wealth. This reflects a framing process where political figures are negatively constructed to sway public opinion (Entman, 1993). Such portrayals contribute to a growing distrust in governance and political institutions. The constant sharing of these memes reinforces skepticism towards leadership and may deepen political cynicism among the populace.

- **Theme 3: Electoral Manipulation and Distrust**

A number of memes shine a light on electoral processes, raising alarms about rigging, voter suppression, and a lack of transparency. Common visual symbols include chained ballot boxes, altered result sheets, or compromised electoral officials. These representations resonate with broader concerns about electoral integrity in Nigeria and illustrate how memes can depict elections as flawed or manipulated (Udeze & Chukwuma, 2023). Such memes play a significant role in shaping public discourse by amplifying distrust in electoral systems, which may discourage participation or fuel political tensions.

- **Theme 4: Governance Failure and Socio-Economic Critique**

A notable number of memes take aim at the poor governance and socio-economic challenges in Rivers State. They often showcase the stark contrast between campaign promises and the reality on the ground, using 'before-and-after' images to highlight issues like infrastructure, job opportunities, and public services. This theme underscores how digital media plays a crucial role in shaping public discourse, consistently bringing attention to pressing matters such as unemployment, insecurity, and underdevelopment (Chadwick, 2017).

These memes serve as tools for holding leaders accountable, shining a light on the gaps in governance. However, they can also amplify public frustration, especially when clear solutions seem elusive.

- **Theme 5: Political Identity and Group Polarisation**

Memes also highlight the strong currents of political identity and polarization, often aligning with particular parties, leaders, or factions. Supporters create memes to celebrate their favorite candidates while undermining their rivals. This reflects the idea that digital media can reinforce echo chambers and deepen ideological divides (Wiggins, 2019). In this context, memes become symbols of group identity, clearly marking “us” versus “them” in political discussions. While these memes can boost engagement, they also risk widening the gaps and stifling meaningful conversations across different political views.

- **Theme 6: Youth Engagement and Digital Activism**

The data shows that memes are a popular tool among young people for political participation and digital activism. Their informal, humorous, and creative style resonates with younger audiences, who might not connect as much with traditional political communication methods (Yusha’u, 2021). Memes make it easier for more people to join the political conversation. However, if this engagement doesn’t lead to real political action, it might end up being just surface-level involvement.

- **Theme 7: Misinformation and Narrative Distortion**

Another significant theme that emerged is the prevalence of misleading or exaggerated content. Some memes twist facts, throw around unverified claims, or pull statements out of context just to get a laugh or make a point. This raises bigger worries about how digital media can spread misinformation and create biased political narratives (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020). While memes can be powerful communication tools, their ability to mislead can threaten informed democratic participation and public understanding.

The thematic Summary of analysis shows that meme-based political communication in Rivers State is marked by:

1. A strong use of satire and humor
2. Ongoing negative portrayals of political figures
3. Deep-seated distrust in electoral and governance systems
4. Active involvement of youth through digital culture
5. Growing risks of polarisation and misinformation

In essence, memes serve as both instruments of political engagement and tools for shaping narratives, influencing how citizens perceive and react to political realities in our digital world.

DISCUSSION

This study's findings highlight that meme-based communication has become a vital part of political discourse in Rivers State, mirroring broader changes in digital political communication. The prevalence of satire and humor in the memes analysed supports the idea that digital culture has transformed how political messages are crafted and received. Echoing Shifman (2014), memes are not just for entertainment; they are also powerful means of political expression and civic involvement. The results show that citizens use memes to critique leadership, challenge authority, and voice their frustrations with governance in ways that are easy to access and share.

Additionally, the study revealed that memes play a key role in undermining the legitimacy of political figures, often depicting them as incompetent or corrupt. This aligns with framing theory, which posits that the way information is presented can shape audience perception (Entman, 1993).

Repeated exposure to negatively framed memes can lead audiences to form strong opinions about political figures, which in turn can influence their voting behavior and shape public opinion. This aligns with earlier research that emphasises the significant role of digital media in crafting political narratives (Wiggins, 2019). Moreover, the recurring themes of electoral distrust suggest that memes play a crucial role in shaping how people view democratic processes. When elections are portrayed as rigged or untrustworthy, it reflects wider concerns about electoral integrity in Nigeria (Udeze & Chukwuma, 2023). From an agenda-setting standpoint, the regular sharing of these memes brings these issues to the forefront of public conversation, making them more relevant to citizens (Chadwick, 2017). This indicates that while memes may not directly dictate how people think, they certainly influence the political topics that capture their attention.

The study also shed light on how memes can foster youth engagement and digital participation. Their accessibility and relatability make memes powerful tools for drawing younger audiences into political discussions. This supports the idea that digital media have broadened avenues for political participation beyond the traditional methods (Yusha'u, 2021). However, it's worth noting that this engagement might often be more symbolic or expressive, raising questions about its actual impact on concrete political actions.

Another significant finding is the widespread issue of misinformation and narrative distortion in meme-based communication. While memes can boost engagement, their tendency to oversimplify or misrepresent complex issues can hinder informed political participation. This finding echoes previous research that shows how digital media environments can facilitate the spread of misleading information (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020). The takeaway here is that while meme culture democratizes communication, it also brings along challenges related to accuracy and trustworthiness.

Overall, the findings highlight that meme-based communication in Rivers State thrives within a hybrid media landscape, where digital platforms play a crucial role in shaping political discussions. Memes act as instruments for setting agendas, framing narratives, and encouraging public participation, but they also contribute to division and the spread of misinformation.

CONCLUSION

This study delved into the impact of digital media on political communication in Rivers State through the lens of meme analysis. The results reveal that memes have become potent tools for communication, influencing political dialogue, shaping public opinion, and fostering citizen involvement. By blending visual and textual elements, memes break down complex political topics, making them more relatable and engaging for a wider audience, which amplifies their effectiveness.

The study concludes that meme-based communication serves a dual purpose in political processes. On one side, it encourages democratic engagement by offering a space for expression, critique, and interaction, especially among younger demographics. Conversely, it also presents significant challenges, such as the proliferation of misinformation, the reinforcement of existing biases, and the trivialisation of serious political matters.

Moreover, the research indicates that digital media have fundamentally reshaped political communication in Rivers State, creating a vibrant environment where citizens are not just passive consumers of information but active contributors to political narratives. However, the absence of regulation and a lack of critical media literacy in this realm raises concerns about the quality and trustworthiness of political discussions.

In summary, while meme culture marks a significant shift in political communication, its effects on democracy are multifaceted and warrant thoughtful examination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the insights of this study, the following recommendations are put forward:

- i. It's essential for government agencies, educational institutions, and civil society organisations to step up and promote digital media literacy among citizens. This will empower individuals to critically assess meme-based content and tell the difference between trustworthy information and misinformation.
- ii. Political figures and stakeholders need to embrace ethical standards when using digital media, steering clear of spreading misleading or manipulative meme content that could skew public perception and threaten democratic processes.
- iii. Regulatory bodies should craft policies that tackle the spread of misinformation on digital platforms while also safeguarding freedom of expression. This means working together with social media companies to keep an eye on and manage harmful content.
- iv. We should harness the popularity of memes to foster more positive forms of political engagement. For instance, civic organisations can leverage memes to boost voter education, raise awareness about policies, and spark discussions on important issues.

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