
ADOPTION AND USE OF SPIN DOCTORING IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC OPINION MANAGEMENT DURING THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN NIGERIA

Monday ADEJOH

Department of Mass Communication, Achievers University,
Owo, Ondo State/Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State
mondadayadejohinfo@gmail.com or adejoh.m@achievers.edu.ng, 08067324837

&

Umar Omachi JIBRIN PhD

Department of Mass Communication, Glorious Vision University,
Ogwa, Edo state
Jibrinumarmachi97@gmail.com, 07031302677

Abstract

The study examined the adoption and use of spin doctoring in political communication and public opinion management during the 2023 presidential election campaign in Nigeria. The objectives of the study were; to determine the adoption and use of spin communication in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria; analyse the use of spin doctors by the various political candidates in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria; examine the public opinion due to spin communication in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Social Judgment Theory of Public Relations and Framing Theory were adopted to guide the study. Survey design with quantitative method, using both the probability and non-probability techniques was used, the population of the study was the total number of eligible voters which according to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), is; ninety-three million, four hundred and sixty-nine thousand and eight (93,469,008). Three hundred and eighty-four samples (384) were drawn from the population, using Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination table. The study found that there was adoption and use of spin communication by all the political parties and their candidates; spin doctors were used by various candidates; spin communication led to poor voters' engagement and apathy with its consequences on the general outcome of the presidential election. Recommendations were based on the use of excellent model of communication which encourages multi-stakeholder engagements or robust public participation in politics. Journalistic tenets based on truth, accuracy, fairness and objectivity were also emphasised.

Keywords: Adoption/use, spin doctoring, political communication, public opinion, Presidential election

INTRODUCTION

Spin doctoring, propaganda, political communication, marketing communication, behavioural change communication and public relations are all forms of communication that aim to influence public opinion, behaviour and attitudes of the media audience. Spin doctoring refers to the practice of presenting information in a way that creates a favourable impression, often by manipulating or distorting facts (Asemah, 2019). Spin doctors use techniques such as selective disclosure, omission or exaggeration to shape public opinion and maintain a favourable image (Maloney, 2007). Historically, the term “spin doctoring” originated in the 1980s in the United States, specifically in the context of politics. It referred to the advisors and consultants who helped politicians present their messages in a more favourable light. Over time, the term has expanded to encompass various fields, including public relations, marketing and corporate communication (Kurtz, 1998). Although, to many, the term is often pejoratively used as one, tending to connote such things as deceptions as deployed during the world wars I and II and the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. It is a reminiscent of countless instances of false, manipulative and misleading advertising (Kapoor, 2010; Lin, 2017; McCombs and Reynolds, 2002).

Observably, the exploitation of social media platforms was a key feature of spin doctoring in the 2023 presidential campaign. Various politicians and their supporters have used social media platforms to spread spin and manipulate information to their advantage. The use of spin doctoring in the 2023 presidential election campaign has significant implications for democracy in Nigeria. By manipulating information and shaping public perception, politicians undermine the ability of citizens to make informed decisions about their leaders and the voting decision.

Spin doctor is a person whose job involves trying to control the way something; such as an important event, is described to the public in order to influence what people think about it. Generally speaking, spin is a term that is used to describe a significantly heavy biased portrayal in one’s own favour of an event, issues or perception using deceptive and highly manipulative language tactics (Asemah, 2019).

Spin doctoring can, therefore, be described as the art or possibly, the science of skewing the description of something, product, company or political candidate widely perceived as bad a thing, such that, it appears instead, as probably quite good a thing or at least, not half bad as it is initially looked. It is the process of polishing an issue, situation or candidate in order to conceal the ugly aspect so as to attract positive comments or disposition (Kurtz, 1998; Maloney, 2007). You simply shade the bad side of something and expose people to its good side. The process entails the use of lies and facts for convincing people. Through spin doctoring, something bad is painted to look good. Spin doctors and spin doctoring are so important for the modern world because it enables the general populace to feel more positive about themselves and about their place in the world. Spin is a derivative work designed to allow people to see the other side of an agreement and then, to discount and in time, forget the one they originally held to be true.

Furthermore, the use of spin doctoring can also contribute to the erosion of trust in institutions and the media. When citizens are repeatedly exposed to false or misleading information, they can become cynical and disillusioned with the political process. The use of spin doctoring in the 2023 presidential campaign in Nigeria was a significant phenomenon that has important implications for democracy, the political process or electioneering in Nigeria. By understanding the tactics employed by spin doctors, citizens can better navigate the complex and often misleading information landscape of modern politics. Notable examples of spin doctoring in the 2023 presidential election campaign was the statement by Festus Keyamo on the candidacy of Atiku Abubakar on Channels Television *Politics Today*, the certificate and drug-related saga on Tinubu, the meetings between Bola Tinubu and Kayode Fayemi, Bola Tinubu and Nyesome Wike and the narratives or constructions that followed by spin doctors of the various candidates, attempting to shape or reshape the public opinion and perception about the candidates; *“Yinka Oyebode, the chief Press Secretary to then Governor Fayemi, disclosed that, the meeting was a routine one ,with nosignificant discussions taking place. However, various spin doctors attempted to spin the meeting as a strategic move by Tinubu to secure Fayemi’s support for his presidential ambition.”*

The use of spin doctoring in the 2023 presidential campaign has also been observed in the manipulation of news stories. For instance, a web-based article published in January 2022 on *Nairaland* reported that; Fayemi had debunked rumors of his presidential ambition and had pledged his support for Tinubu’s presidential bid. However, this report was later debunked as false, with Fayemi’s aides denying that he had made any such statement (Oyebode, 2022).

Many communication scholars like; Godam, Omego and Ochonogor 2019, aptly posited that, the significant revolution of modern times is not industrial, economic or political, but the revolution taking place in the art of creating consent among the governed . . . they contended that, within the life of the new generation now in control of affairs, persuasion has become a self-conscious art and a regular organ of popular government. None of us begins to understand the consequences, but it is no daring prophecy to say that the knowledge of how to create consent will alter every political premise. He posited that the importance of an informed, knowledgeable electorate dictates that democratic politics must be pursued in the public arena (as distinct from the secrecy characteristic of autocratic regimes). The knowledge and information on the basis of which citizens will make their political choices must circulate freely and be available to all. While democratic theory stresses the primacy of the individual, the political process nevertheless demands that individuals act collectively in making decisions about who will govern them. The private political opinions of the individual become the public opinion of the people as a whole, through debate and ideological engagement which may be reflected in voting patterns and treated as advice by existing political leaders. Public opinion, in this sense, is formed in what German sociologist Jürgen Habermas called ‘the public sphere.’

Habermas located the development of the public sphere in eighteenth century Britain, where the first newspapers had already begun to perform their modern function of supplying not only information but also opinions, comments and criticisms, facilitating

debates amongst the emerging bourgeois and educated classes. Habermas showed how these new social forces replaced an orthodox political system 'in which the [autocratic or undemocratic] ruler's power was merely represented before the people with a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse by the people'. In the coffee-house and salon cultures of Britain and France, debate and political critique became, for the first time, public property (meaning, of course, the bourgeois public, which excluded the mass of poor and illiterate underclasses). According to Habermas, the first use of the term 'public opinion' was documented in 1781, referring to 'the critical reflection of a [bourgeois] public competent to form its own judgments' (Brian, 2011: p.18).

The public sphere, in contemporary political communication, comprises in essence the communicative institutions of a society, through which facts and opinions circulate and by means of which a common stock of knowledge is built up as the basis for collective political action: in other words, the mass media; radio, television, newspapers, oral-media and digital or online communication which since the eighteenth century have evolved into the main source and focus of a society's shared experience have been negatively exploited. Typical adoption and usage of the media as instrumentality of spin and public opinion communication and framing in political communication in Nigeria was the *emilokon theory* as framed and propagated by the Tinubu media organisation during the 2023 presidential election. The modern concept of 'news' developed precisely as a means of furnishing citizens with the most important information, from the point of view of their political activities and of streamlining and guiding public discussion, functions which are taken for granted in contemporary journalism.

Statement of the Problem

There was heavy adoption and use of spin communication in the run up to the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. This phenomenon did not only mar the credibility of electoral process in the country, but has equally led to serious voter apathy and poor political participation or engagement-an occurrence that is anti-democratic. Spin was heavily used to shape public perception and manipulate information in the public domain to the advantage of some major contenders. This phenomenon has been observed in various forms, including the manipulation of news stories, the use of lies and the exploitation of social media platforms.

The following political parties and their candidates used spin doctoring tactic or strategy to manipulate the voters, thereby creating a spiral of silence among the citizenry; Accord Party- Christopher Imumolen, Action Alliance- Hamza Al-Mustapha, Action Democratic Party- Yabagi Sani, Action Peoples, Party- Osita Nnadi, African Action Congress- Omoleye Sowore, African Democratic Congress- Dumebi Kachikwu, All Progressive Congress- Bola Ahmed Tinubu, All Prograssive Grand Alliance- Peter Umeadi, Allied Peoples' Movement- Princess Ojei, Boot Party- Sunday Adenuga, Labour Party- Peter Obi, National Rescue Movement- Felix Osakwe, New Nigeria Peoples Party- Rabiu Musa Kwankwaso, Peoples Redemtion Party- Kola Abiola, Peoples Democratic Party- Atiku Abubakar, Social Democratic Party- Adewole Adebayo, Young Progressive Party- Malik Ado-Ibrahim and Zenith Labour Party-Dan Nwanyanwu (Independent National

Electoral Commission [INEC], 2023). However, the three major contenders; Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressive Congress (APC), Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) and Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) became very prominent by winning frontline headlines in the countdown to the general election.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the adoption and use of spin doctoring in political communication of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. To achieve this aim, the following specific and measurable objectives were set:

- (i) To determine the adoption and use of spin communication in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.
- (ii) To analyse the use of spin doctors by the various political candidates in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.
- (iii) To evaluate public opinion management and its consequences on the voting behaviours of the electorates due to spin communication during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

Research Questions

- (i) How was spin doctoring adopted and used in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?
- (ii) In what way, did the candidates of the various political parties use spin doctors in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.
- (iii) What were the consequences of public opinion management on the voting behaviours due to spin communication in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?

Research Hypotheses

The study adopted both null and alternate hypotheses.

H0. Spin doctoring was adopted by all the political candidates in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria

H1. Spin doctoring was not adopted by all the political candidates in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria

H0. Spin doctors were used by the various political candidates in the 2023 presidential election campaign in Nigeria.

H2. Spin doctors were not used by the various political candidates in the 2023 presidential election campaign in Nigeria.

H0. Public opinion was not properly managed and had negative consequences on the voting behaviour in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

H3. Public opinion was properly managed and had no negative consequences on the voting behaviour in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

Review of Literature and Related Empirical studies

Major discourse on the concept of spin communication cannot be complete without attempting a closer look at propaganda and public opinion, which are centered on the work of Harold Lasswell's Propaganda Theory and Walter Lippmann's Theory of Public Opinion Formation. From a political, mass media and sociological point of view, American Political Scientist and Propagandist, Harold Lasswell propounded the propaganda theory in 1927. Lasswell borrowed the theory from the behaviourism and Freudianism of the mass media and the roles in fitting into the social orders. Naveed (2016) underpinned the assertion hence; Lasswell's theory of propaganda blended ideas borrowed from behaviorism and Freudianism into a particular pessimistic vision of media and their role in forging modern social orders. Lasswell was one of the first political scientists to recognise the usefulness of various psychological theories and to demonstrate how they could be applied to understanding politics. The power of propaganda was not so much the result of the substance or appeal of specific messages but, rather, the result of the vulnerable state of mind of average people.

The main assumption of Lasswell's Propaganda Theory is that propaganda is the management of collective attitudes through the manipulation of meaningful symbols.... Propaganda is the planned use of any mass communication designed to influence the minds and emotions of a particular group for military, economic or political purpose (Rodriguez, 2018).

Akinwalere & Oyeniran (2021) examined the relationship between public relations practice and politics in Nigeria. The study employed a qualitative design, using in-depth interviews to collect data from 20 public relations practitioners. The results showed that public relations played a significant role in shaping political communication in Nigeria, but noted that the effectiveness of public relations strategies was limited by corruption and inadequate infrastructure. There were theoretical and methodological gaps between the current and the former studies; qualitative method and in-depth interview were adopted while this study adopted quantitative and questionnaire method. Another major gap is that public relation cannot be equated to spin doctoring. However, the similarity is that both studies centered on political communication.

Ezegwu, Ezeji, Chukwuemeka & Chime-Nganya (2024), conducted a survey research on; "Abuja Residents' Perception of Mass Media Coverage of the 2023 Presidential Election Campaign." The study found that the majority of Abuja residents were highly exposed to mass media coverage of the campaign, with radio being the primary medium used. However, this survey was limited to only residents of Abuja while the present study is about all the eligible voters in Nigeria.

Nnabuko, (2022), examined the Impact of Public Relations Strategies on the Performance of National Population Commission Census Exercises in Nigeria. The study employed a survey design, using a questionnaire to collect data from 400 respondents. The results showed that public relations strategies significantly improved the

performance of the census exercises. However, the study noted that the effectiveness of these strategies was limited by inadequate funding and lack of infrastructure. One shape difference between these studies is that while the former was based on population, the latter is on spin doctoring and political communication.

Nnabuko & Onyiaji, (2021) conducted a study on the Application of Public Relations in Enhancing Healthcare Delivery to Women of Reproductive Age in South-East Nigeria. The study used a descriptive survey design, collecting data from 300 respondents through a questionnaire. The results showed that public relations strategies were effective in enhancing healthcare delivery, but noted that cultural and socio-economic factors limited the effectiveness of these strategies. The study is on health communication on the reproductive age in South-Eastern Nigeria, but the current study is on spin and political communication in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. There is equally a noticeable gap in the population and sample, even when the studies adopted survey as a method.

Inya, (2017) conducted a study on the Influence of Social Media on Public Relations Practice in Universities in South-East Nigeria. The study used a descriptive survey design, collecting data from 200 respondents through a questionnaire. The results showed that social media had a significant impact on public relations practice, but noted that inadequate infrastructure and lack of expertise limited the effectiveness of social media strategies. There are gaps on the variable and construct of the studies; influence of social media in university students in South-East and adoption of spin in political communication.

Godam, (2019), conducted a study on the Application of Excellence Theory in Public Relations Practices of Electricity Distribution Companies in Nigeria. The study used a descriptive survey design, collected data from 150 respondents through questionnaire. The results showed that excellence theory was effective in guiding public relations practices, but noted that inadequate funding and lack of infrastructure limited the effectiveness of these practices. There was theoretical gap in the studies; Excellence Theory was adopted in earlier study while Spiral Of silence and Framing Theory were adopted in our study.

Theoretical Framework

Framing Theory

Anthropologist Gregory Bateson propounded Framing Theory in 1972. The theory is largely referred to as the second-level Agenda Setting Theory because of its close relationship to the Agenda Setting Theory. The Media are accorded the responsibility to design frames through which the world views, events in the society. Framing Theory observes that the media have a window frame through which the audience in the society watches both the good and the bad occurrences around the world. It is through this frame that news and media contents come to them (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Media Dependency Theory

Media dependency was developed by Sandra Ball-Rockeach and Melvin Defleur in 1976. The theory is grounded in classical sociological literature positing that media and their audiences should be studied in the context of larger social system (Asemah, 2017). The key idea or assumption of this theory is that audience depends on the media to satisfy their information needs and goals. This theory has been explored as an extension of or an addition to the uses and gratification theory; though, there is a subtle difference between the two theories. Media dependency looks at audience goals as the origin of the dependency, while the uses and gratification approach emphasizes audience needs.

Methods

The study adopted survey method of research. Survey method of research is used to describe or explain a situation, hence Descriptive and Analytical methods. This study adopted analytical method, because it is aimed to analyse “the adoption and use of spin doctoring in political communication in the 2023 presidential election campaign.

Research Design

The researcher adopted quantitative design for the study. Allen, Ekwenchi, Odogwu & Umeh (2016), Falaye & Okwilagwe (2016), Anyaegbu, Umejiaku & Masigwe (2016), adopted the quantitative design and generated the desired data.

Population of the Study

The population of this study consisted of all the eligible voters which included the presidential candidates and their spin doctors. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) update on eligible voters for the 2023 general elections is ninety-three million, four hundred and sixty-nine thousand and eight (93,469,008).

Samples Size

The population of the study included the eighteen presidential candidates in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Using the Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination formula; $n = \frac{x^2 NP(1-P)}{e^2(N-1)+x^2P(1-P)}$ it is given that the population above, will study a sample of three hundred and eighty-four (384) respondents. Therefore, the sample size for this study is three hundred and eighty-four people drawn from the scope of the study (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

Sampling Techniques

Simple random sampling technique was adopted to ensure randomization, while the purposive sampling technique, as a non-probability sample, was adopted purposively, to ensure that only the eligible voters were qualified as respondents. The study will be conducted in the six geo-political zones of Nigeria based on the spread of the respondents.

Research Instruments

This study adopted questionnaire as the instrument to generate data. The questions were structured to generate quantitative data using close-ended questions only.

Validity of the Instrument

The instruments were validated based on content, by senior academics (content validity). A language expert also validated the instruments to ascertain face (construct validity) in ensuring the 'fit-for-use', so that, what is meant is what is communicated, what is communicated is what is understood and what is understood generates the desired response or data.

Pilot Testing

In order to ascertain the validity of the instruments, a pilot study was carried out on three (3) members of the major political parties; APC, PDP and LP.

Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure the reliability of the instrument, four copies of the instrument (which constitute 10% of the sample) was produced and distributed and analysed using Cronbach alpha and a reliability index of 0.86 was obtained. The instrument will therefore be adjudged reliable for use since the reliability index stands between 0.5 to positive one (1). This is in line with Abbas (2009) statement that a reliability index that is close to one (1) is reliable.

Location of the Study

The study was carried out in the six geopolitical zones of the country (Nigeria) with one state randomly selected to represent each zone (Kano state for the North-West, Lagos state for the South-West, Enugu state for the South-East, Rivers state for the South-South, Bauchi state for the North-East and Abuja for the North-Central). This is because the states selected are good locations or heavy spotlights for the 2023 presidential election campaign. They are also relatively peaceful in terms of security and logistics. It is expected that such regional representation will give room for the generalisation of the findings of the study across the entire nation.

Administration of Research Instrument/Data Gathering

After the instrument was validated and pilot tested, it was administered by the researcher through online google form with the aid of a programme developer who designed a link using survey monkey. The link was sent to several platforms until the desired sample was studied.

Procedures for Data Presentation and Analysis

The data collected through the semi-structured questionnaire and in-depth interview was analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. All the null and alternate hypotheses will be tested using Kruskal Wallis' non-parametric statistics at; 0.05 level

of significance because the data gathered was a categorical data that can take on a discrete number of values or categories with no inherent order to the categories.

Results

Response to Research Questions

The questionnaire was structured based on the 4-points modified likert rating scale, of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The mean of the scale is 2.5. The decision is that, means scores equal to or above 2.5 were considered “Agreed” whereas those below 2.5 were regarded as “Disagreed”. The descriptive and inferential analysis done on each of the three research questions were presented as follows:

Table 1: Adoption and use of spin communication in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria

S/N	Item statement	mean	SD	Decision
1	The major political parties adopted spin communication in 2023 presidential election campaign	3.19	0.70	Accepted
2	The major candidates in the 2023 presidential election, adopted spin communication in their campaigns	3.13	0.70	Accepted
3	Spin communication was part of the campaign strategies	3.50	0.55	Accepted
4	Spin communication was disseminated on both mainstream and new media	3.32	0.78	Accepted
5	Spin communication dominated the campaign messages rather than issues –based campaign	3.50	0.55	Accepted

The table above showed the cumulative mean of 3.2233 and Std. Dev. of 1.4113. The standard deviation of 1.4113 is smaller and close to cumulative mean, which signifies that larger number of respondents agreed with the statements. The mean of 3.2233 is greater than the decision mean of 2.5. By implication, this result means that spin communication was largely adopted in the 2023 presidential campaign.

Table 2: Use of spin doctors by the various political candidates in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria

S/N	Item statement	mean	SD	Decision
1	Spin communication was used to smear the reputation of opponents in 2023 presidential election in Nigeria	3.50	0.55	Accepted
2	Political parties’ supporters used spin to de-market other candidates each time they appear on TV.	3.17	0.51	Accepted
3	Spin communication was used to shift public opinion from evaluating party agenda to personality and lifestyle	2.71	1.41	Accepted
4	Use of spin communication in verbal and non-verbal forms led to deception of the electorate in the 2023 presidential election	3.13	0.70	Accepted
5	Use of spin doctors/communication was prevalent on both the mainstream and the new media	3.05	0.53	Accepted

Table 2 showed that average mean of 2.964 and std. dev. of 1.5340. The standard deviation of 1.5340 is smaller and close to average mean, which signifies that larger number of respondents agreed with the statement. By implication, the use of spin doctors and communication led to image battering, deception and political apathy among the electorates.

Table 3: Management of public opinion and its consequences on the voting behaviours due to spin communication in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria

S/N	Item statement	mean	SD	Decision
1	Spin communication led to citizens' participation in the election.	2.07	0.70	Rejected
2	Spin communication increased voters interest in the election	1.98	0.85	Rejected
3	Spin communication was able to successfully market the political parties and their candidates	2.41	0.74	Rejected
4	Spin communication led to the acceptance of candidates in the election	2.18	2.10	Rejected
5	Spin communication led to high percentage of political apathy in Nigeria and low voter turn-out in the 2023 presidential election	3.50	0.55	Accepted

The table revealed that the cumulative mean score of 2.463 and std. dev. score of 1.2699. The standard deviation obtained, was lower than the decision mean of 2.5. This signifies that larger number of respondents disagreed with the statement. The mean 2.0192 is less than the decision mean of 2.5. This therefore means that spin communication, propaganda and deception led to poor political participation Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study found that spin communication was largely adopted in the 2023 presidential election and doctors utilized both the mainstream and new media to perpetrate this practice. This practice led to wrong choices in the voting behaviour and the ultimate outcome of the presidential election.

Recommendation

Political communicators and media practitioners adopt the push and pull model to promote political messages and candidates bowing to the audience reliance on the media for information. This involves multi-stage or stakeholder engagements through meaningful or purposeful communication. The use of spin doctors, who have no training in communication, made the political communication and campaign in the 2023 general election all-comers' affairs, with its negative effect on the level of political participation and stakeholder engagements. All regulators should increase their surveillance in the years ahead and ensure strict compliance to truth, accuracy, fairness and objectivity in reporting.

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