

THE OLD GUARD: SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSE ON ATIKU ABUBAKAR'S 2023 PRESIDENTIAL AMBITION

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Abstract

Social media platforms serve as alternative means of communication for many across the globe and as such have emerged as critical instruments for political discourse. Twitter, for instance, owing to its affordances enables the rapid spread of information and has thus become a strategic tool for political actors. Using social media, citizens challenge government actions and policies, while politicians use the platforms to make announcements, self-promote, and directly engage voters. Research has shown that by reason of the public sphere-like composition of these platforms, social media discourse can shape public opinion and may determine election outcomes. Against this backdrop, this study explored Twitter discourse about former Vice President Atiku Abubakar's presidential ambition. On 23 March 2022, Abubakar declared his intention to contest Nigeria's presidency in the 2023 general elections. This announcement marked the sixth time the former Vice President is vying for the position. The manual and computer-assisted qualitative analyses of about 3,000 tweets with the hashtags #AtikuDeclares2023 and #AtikuDeclaration, revealed three themes - Old Guard, Zoning, and Competence. These findings point to some of the key issues that shape Nigerian politics and may decisively influence whether Atiku emerges as Nigeria's next president.

Keywords: Twitter, Affordances, Old Guard, Atiku, Zoning

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 23 March 2022 Atiku Abubakar, a politician, businessman, philanthropist, and Nigeria's former Vice President between 1999 and 2007, put to rest speculations regarding his intention to vie for the Office of President of Nigeria by making a formal declaration at a well-attended ceremony (Kwen & Agomuo, 2022). Before venturing into politics, Atiku grew to the rank of a Deputy Director with the Nigerian Customs Service, the country's fastest revenue generation field as well as its citadel of corruption (Odivwri, 2021). Although Atiku's announcement was well publicised across Nigeria's legacy media, the candidate also deployed social media networks like Twitter to promote the event and organise conversations regarding his presidential ambition.

Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter serve as alternative channels of communication for many people around the world, including Nigerians. Unlike traditional media where access is limited and there are higher levels of control, social media is available to persons with access to the Internet, especially in regions where there are no prohibitions on Internet/platform access. Social media have, therefore, become critical for political conversations owing to their public sphere-like composition and design. In a setting like Nigeria where legacy platforms are highly regulated and controlled, Twitter, for instance, serves as the medium for unfettered political discourse and activism (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017). Politicians tweet to self-promote, test new ideas and policies, express thoughts on issues, challenge their opponents, rally voters, retweet content

from other platforms, share the news and make announcements (Golbeck et al., 2010; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Kruikemeier, 2014; Larsson, 2015). Using Twitter, citizens hold governments and other political actors accountable for their actions (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017; Suleiman, 2017; Uldam & Vestergaard, 2015). Thus, like many other Nigerian politicians who understand the relevance of social media, Atiku and his team, generated two hashtags - #AtikuDeclares2023 and #AtikuDeclaration to organise conversations about his big announcement. Identity markers like hashtags are social media affordances, which by design, allow tweeters to have conversations about content or topics in ways that will enhance their visibility and searchability.

In keeping with the logic of Twitter, where political news tends to spread faster and thus gain more visibility, Atiku's announcement went viral and many Twitter users (Tweeps, Tweeteters) had the opportunity of expressing their thoughts on, and have conversations about Atiku's plan to become Nigeria's next president. This paper is an analysis of those conversations, with a view to evaluating how they may shape Atiku's success in the 2023 polls and lend to the understanding of the significance of Twitter in Nigerian politics.

This research is premised on the understanding that Twitter interactions are shaped by users' "background, experiences, and environment" (Siegert et al., 2020, p. 3). To this end, this research presupposes that users who engaged in the conversations about Atiku's presidential ambition have knowledge of what Twitter affords them, understand the relevance of the platform for political conversations, and may have reasonable knowledge of the candidate, the Nigerian state, and its politics. For example, Nigeria is known to be bifurcated along ethnic and religious lines and these polarisations are more visible during election cycles (Campbell, 2010; Orji & Uzodi, 2012). Also, while Twitter offers many benefits, the platform also has many flaws. Research has shown, for instance, that Twitter is susceptible to misinformation, mal-information, and the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, which limit citizens' exposure to a diversity of opinions (Cinelli et al., 2021). The platform also enables ideological polarisation by enabling the creation of networks of individuals who share similar beliefs or political views. These outcomes are attributable to the platform's algorithm which links users to content that they are likely to prefer. In

addition, previous research has established that individuals deliberately choose to expose themselves to the content they like on social media (Bakshy et al., 2015, p. 1130). This study is conducted in response to the call for researchers to investigate talk on social media following the rising significance of networked platforms in shaping public opinion and election outcomes (Tumasjan et al., 2010; Ahmed, Jaidka & Cho, 2016). This research is also necessitated by the understanding that social media may facilitate electoral violence (Njuguna et al., 2020).

Nigeria Decides 2023

In line with the provisions of the Nigerian Constitution, President Muhammadu Buhari is due to exit his office in 2023. Although elections in Nigeria like in other parts of the world are deemed crucial, the 2023 presidential election for many in the country is critical owing to the weakened state of the country's economy. According to a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report, the Nigerian economy is in a state of decline following dwindling revenue and foreign exchange earnings, over-reliance on borrowing, rise in debt service payments, and infrastructure deficit (Anumihe & Ibe, 2022). Many citizens have become disenchanted with the current government because of heightened levels of insecurity, unemployment, and food inflation (Agbelusi, 2022; Ajulo, 2022). The 2023 elections present citizens with the opportunity of ousting persons and political parties they deem responsible for the abysmal state of the country.

Following the successful completion of political party primaries, 18 candidates have emerged as potential occupants of Nigeria's highest office. However, there seem to be at least three main contenders - Bola Ahmed Tinubu, former Governor of Lagos State, and presidential flagbearer of the ruling party - All Progressives Congress (APC); Peter Gregory Obi, former Governor of Anambra State, and flagbearer of the Labour Party (LP); and Atiku Abubakar, the flagbearer of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) - Nigeria's main opposition party. Whereas this is the first time many of the candidates are contesting for the position of President of Nigeria, for Atiku Abubakar, this is the sixth.

Atiku's first attempt at being President happened in 1993 when he was a presidential aspirant under the Social Democratic Party (SDP). He lost the primaries to Late Moshood Abiola. In 2007, Atiku emerged as the presidential flagbearer of the Action Congress now the Action Congress of Nigeria. He lost during the general elections to the Late Umaru Musa Yar'adua of the PDP.

Atiku was again in the race for the presidency during the 2011 and 2015 elections. He lost both times during the party primaries of the PDP and APC, to former President Goodluck Jonathan and Muhammadu Buhari respectively. Atiku returned to the PDP in 2017, won the party primaries, and emerged as flagbearer only to lose to President Muhammadu Buhari of the APC during the presidential election. Atiku's March 2022 announcement is, therefore, the sixth time he is vying for the position of president.

In addition to traditional media, Atiku made his big announcement using social media platforms like Twitter. The choice of Twitter can be attributed to the role of the media in communication (mediation), the rising significance of the media and communication technologies in socio-economic and political institutions (mediatisation), as well as the affordances of the platform. Mediation and mediatisation are critical theories that capture the relevance of new media in political discourse, while affordances help us understand the complex relationship between technology, users, and the socio-political context of topics and events.

Mediation, Mediatisation, and Affordances

Communication technologies have played crucial roles in many historically significant events in many parts of the world including Africa. Examples include the Arab Spring - a series of pro-democracy uprisings around the Middle East and North Africa between 2010 and 2011; Occupy Nigeria - a 2012 protest against fuel subsidy removal in Nigeria; the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) campaign - a 2014 global movement that created awareness about the plight of 276 Nigerian girls who were kidnapped by the terrorist group, Boko Haram; and the ENDSARS protests - the 2020 decentralised social movement against police brutality in Nigeria. Scholars have shown for instance that social media was critical in shaping political discourse before and during the Arab Spring (Howard et al., 2011; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Uwalaka and Watkins (2018) in labelling social media as Nigeria's fifth estate, argued that during the Occupy Nigeria protest, social media facilitated "interaction, socialisation, collective engagement, and liberation" in ways that were absent in the country's traditional media platforms (p. 1). The global spread of the BBOG campaign and ENDSARS protests have both been attributed to social media (Ajisafe et al., 2021; Njoroge, 2017). These outcomes can be understood in terms of mediation and mediatisation, two theories that underpin the

relevance and impact of social media in society and culture.

Mediation is "the concrete act of communication by the means of a medium in a specific context" (Hjarvard, 2008, p. 114) while mediatisation refers to the process via which "social and cultural institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media's influence" (p. 114). From the perspective of mediation, the media is the dais for the exchange of information and ideas regarding politics for the furtherance of political ambitions and goals. Social media within this context is, therefore, a vehicle for the direct exchange of information between politicians and citizens with the benefit of reduced communication lag.

Mediatisation is visible in the ways the logic of the media shapes and influences the logic of political institutions. Scholars have, for example, highlighted the relevance of social media in the world of politics and political campaigns (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). While engagements via legacy platforms and face-to-face interactions still hold significant value, social media offers campaigners an inexpensive and alternative means of reaching constituents. These newer platforms have, therefore, become a critical tool in political campaigns, serving as vehicles for planning events such as fundraisers, and organising volunteers and support groups (Ekwueme & Folarin 2017). Hamilton and Daromola (2011) for instance, described President Barack Obama's 2008 campaign for the US presidency as the first to effectively utilise Facebook. Obama successfully engaged with his supporters and raised millions of dollars in campaign funding. Obama's template has since been deployed in many other parts of the world including Nigeria where former President, Goodluck Jonathan announced his intention to vie for the highest political office in the country on Facebook to over 200,000 fans. Following the trend, the key contenders in the 2019 general elections, Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar used YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter for reaching out to the electorates. Social media has, thus, continued to feature prominently in the campaign strategy of the country's major political parties and many politicians, at the local, state, and national levels.

Even though social media platforms are generally deemed relevant in political discourse, Twitter, the world's largest microblogging platform is important for political conversations. Unlike the world's largest social network, Facebook where content is designed for

in-network exposure, tweets can be seen by all tweeters owing to the platform's "open, horizontal, and broadly-networked architecture" (Kadijat et al., 2020, p. 134). Twitter lends to political discourse because it is a real-time information network for current news and information. In addition, while Facebook enables social connections, connectivity on Twitter is centered around topics, people, and conversations (O'Riordan, Feller & Nagle, 2012). These traits make Twitter a more convenient and vibrant space for political conversations which tend to be fast-paced, fervid, and dynamic. Furthermore, Twitter expedites interconnectivity, bridging spatial, temporal, cultural, and political divides (Zappavigna, 2013). Moreover, like other technologies, Twitter has its affordances, which offer additional explanations for its popularity among political actors.

James Gibson introduced the affordance concept in 1979 to explain the usefulness of objects (Treem & Leonardi, 2012, p. 4). Affordances enable us to understand "what might drive an individual to adopt and make use of an object" (Dyrby & Jensen, 2012, p. 3). The application of the affordance concept in humans and their interaction with technology facilitates knowledge of how people use technology differently, based on their "background, experiences and environment" (Siegert et al., 2020, p. 3).

Many studies have been undertaken to understand the nature of social media affordances. These affordances are broadly conceptualised under two categories -high-level and low-level affordances. High-level affordances are "the kinds of dynamics and conditions enabled by technical devices, platforms, and media" (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 12). Danah Boyd (2011) identified some high-level affordances such as persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. Another example of high-level affordances is seen in Treem and Leonardi's study on organisational communication and social media use. For these authors, social media affordances include visibility, editability, persistence, and networked association. Visibility refers to how easily information on platforms like Twitter can be easily located. The search feature on Twitter, for instance, makes "finding, confronting, viewing, and consuming content" a lot easier (Evans et al., 2017, p.40). Editability according to Walther (1993) points to the understanding that users can construct and reconstruct messages before posting them or making them available to other users. Persistence, which is also known as reviewability, recordability, archivability, or

permanence by other scholars (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Ellison et al., 2015; Hancock et al., 2007; Tokunaga, 2011; Whittaker, 2003), are situations where a piece of content "remains accessible in the same form as the original display after the actor has finished his or her presentation" (Treem & Leonardi, 2012, p. 18). Networked association refers to how technologies make possible two levels of interaction - Social and Content ties. A social tie entails establishing links between individuals as followers while a content tie describes how pieces of information on Twitter are linked to individuals or other content on the platform. This can be achieved by using Twitter features like replying or tagging. As boyd and Ellison (2007) argued, "what makes social network sites unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (p.211). Conversely, low-level affordances focus on the "materiality of the medium, in specific features, buttons, screens, and platforms" (Bucher & Helmond, 2017, p. 12). Affordances, in this case, refer to the technical features of the platform. For instance, Twitter features such as the link and like icons, afford the actions of sharing or liking. The knowledge of these affordances on the one hand shapes Twitter architecture/design and on the other hand determines how politicians and other tweeps engage with the platform and the media, more generally. The benefits these affordances offer, encourage usage and at the same time elevate the relevance and reach of the platforms. How users choose to make use of Twitter determines improvements or alterations of the platforms by its owners.

Twitter and Politics

The high-level and low-level affordances of Twitter allow users to "associate, network, express themselves, and mobilise others" (Opeibi, 2019, p. 5). This explains why the platform has become increasingly used for political activities in many parts of the world. In Nigeria, for instance, Twitter is an important political tool for attracting voters, campaigning, branding, identity laundry, and networking (pp. 7-8). Although Twitter offers many high-level and low-level affordances, hashtags, a technical feature of the platform and a type of low-level affordance are quite popular. A hashtag is a word prefixed by the # symbol used to distinguish a brand, an event, a location, or a feeling. They are identity or content markers that enable tweeters to link their tweets to a conversation in ways that will enhance the findability and visibility of the tweets (Hodson et al., 2018; Page, 2012; Stathopoulou et al., 2017). The literature indicates that hashtags are used to "monitor and transmit current

events, topics, issues, and trending messages globally” (Opeibi, 2019, p. 6); and promote products, initiate conversations, label events, call to arms, and indicate associations (Jeffares, 2014). Laucuka (2018) who investigated the communicative functions of hashtags noted that they carried out specific roles including “topic-marking, aggregation, socialising, excuse, irony, providing metadata, expressing attitudes, initiating movements, propaganda and brand marketing” (p. 56). Evidently, the hashtags utilised by the Atiku team - #AtikuDeclares2023 and #AtikuDeclaration - were employed to derive some of these benefits.

Although a lot has been documented about the positives of affordances with respect to politics (Ekowati, 2018), research in the field has shown how Twitter affordances could enable the spread of hate speech, disinformation, fake news, and polarising content. This means that Twitter can become a threat to democracy (Guesmi, 2021) as well as play a significant role in electoral violence as seen in the case of Kenya (Njuguna et al., 2020).

Nigeria's history with electoral violence has been documented by authors like Akintola (2006), Mitee (2003), Osaghae (2002), Post and Vickers (1973), and Sklar (1966). The country's elections are often characterised by high levels of electoral malpractices, money politics, and the weaponisation of ethnic and religious sentiments (Albert, 2007; Olakunle et al., 2019). According to Human Rights Watch (2011), more than 800 people were killed and 65,000 displaced after the 2011 general elections in northern Nigeria. Nigeria's electoral umpire, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) April 2022, reported that a total of 1,149 persons died in the 2011, 2015, and 2019 elections. In addition, INEC said its offices and staff had suffered more than 42 attacks, while over 9,836 smart card readers had been lost (Adepegba & Olorok, 2022).

While many of Nigeria's expressions of electoral violence can be traced to its prebendal politics, social media owing to its affordances has been said to fuel violence during elections (Ezeibe, 2021). Whereas the earliest understandings of electoral violence were limited to its physical manifestations such as physical assault of individuals, electoral officials, or candidates; the assassination of political opponents; shootings, killings, and kidnappings; and snatching of ballot boxes, studies have shown that electoral violence is more than physical. Galtung (1991), for instance,

argued that violence could also be psychological and structural (pp. 10-12). Nwolise (2007) for instance, detailed these forms of violence in his examination of electoral violence in Nigeria's 2007 elections. While forceful disruption of campaigns and other types of political events by hired thugs qualify as a physical expression of electoral violence, threats and harassment are psychological, while the absence of voting materials was classified as structural expressions of electoral violence (pp. 160-161). This study adopts Albert's understanding of electoral violence as “all forms of organised acts or threats - physical, psychological, and structural - aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during, and after an election with a view to determining, delaying, or otherwise influencing an electoral process” (Albert, 2007, p. 133). By this definition, certain tweets which are aimed are intimidating, abusing, and attacking any political stakeholder before, during, and after elections can be labelled as an expression of electoral violence. Although the platform's owners claim to have measures in place to regulate content (Twitter Help Center, 2022), these moderation attempts in many instances fail due to the platform's architecture. For example, research indicates that the following factors can enhance the virality of social media content: proximity, conflict, human interest, controversial and emotional content, and content that trigger positive and negative sentiments (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Kim, 2015; Trilling et al., 2017). Thus, in understanding social media discourse on Atiku Abubakar's 2023 presidential ambition, this study will reveal how conversations using the hashtags #AtikuDeclares2023 and #AtikuDeclaration may prime the country for electoral violence. This is given that politics on Twitter is shaped by many environmental factors including a country's prevalent party and media system, the composition of voters, and other socio-economic elements (Van Aelst et al., 2017).

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted qualitative content analysis (thematic analysis) for understanding the textual features and discourse patterns around the hashtags - #AtikuDeclares2023 and #AtikuDeclaration. As earlier stated, the Atiku Abubakar campaign used these hashtags to facilitate conversations about his 2023 presidential ambition. Using Mozdeh Big Data Text Analysis Software, we extracted a total of 3,000 tweets including retweets. Retweets were included in the analysis following Jang and Hart (2015) who argued

that retweets contribute to the perceived relevance of a piece of content. The unit of analysis was each tweet. Mozdeh is particularly useful because it allows for the live retrieval of tweets. The software was set up to run on 23 March 2022, for 24 hours. The entire population of retrieved tweets was analysed manually, and subsequently with the aid of Leximancer – a quantitative and qualitative data analysis software that aids in the understanding of textual content by quantifying and displaying their conceptual structure (Leximancer, 2011). Leximancer according to Smith and Humphreys (2006) is a Method for transforming lexical co-occurrence information from natural language into semantic patterns in an unsupervised manner. It employs two stages of co-occurrence information extraction—semantic and relational—using a different algorithm for each stage. The algorithms used are statistical, but they employ nonlinear dynamics and machine learning (p. 26).

As earlier detailed, this study is aimed at understanding Twitter conversations around two predefined hashtags. To this end and given the nature of the subject, it was important to closely examine each line of a tweet, and this could best be done manually. Manual coding was effective given the subtleties of language as well as the context of the subject under investigation. Two layers of coding were carried out: initial and line-by-line coding. At the initial coding stage, the researcher read through the entire dataset, while applying an inductive coding strategy. The codes identified were labeled descriptively. This was followed by the line-by-line coding stage, which involved an in-depth examination of already identified code as well as the inclusion of other codes. Extracted codes were subsequently categorised, while themes were generated from the categories and analysed using the thematic analysis method – a type of content analysis. A thematic analysis “is a way of identifying what is common to the way a topic is talked or written about, and of making sense of those commonalities” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 2). This analysis method is suited for this study because the thematic approach does not just focus on random patterns but on trends that are relevant to the case examined as well as the context of the study.

To test the veracity of the manually extracted themes, the researcher employed Leximancer. Leximancer employs a machine learning technique to locate the key concepts within a body of texts and shows via a concept map, how each concept is linked to others in the dataset. Using this software, the researcher was able to

see both the larger and the not-so-prominent concepts. This meant that the researcher did not become fixated on any set of concepts while neglecting others. The expandable maps on Leximancer make it easy to link each emergent theme to be traceable to parts of the dataset in which the concept appears (Ward et al., 2014).

The researcher acknowledges the ethical implications of using data extracted from Twitter regarding the need for informed consent, anonymisation, the minimisation of harm, and debates on whether social media data is private or public (Webb et al. 2017; Townsend & Wallace, n.d.). This is in keeping with Mason and Singh's (2022) argument that it is important that research ethics be acknowledged as a critical research procedure, while specific ethical measures taken during a research journey be outlined (p. 110). Moreover, Pagoto and Nebeker (2019) have noted that researchers, not social media platforms are responsible for propagating the need for ethics in research. For this study, consent was taken for granted based because tweeps accepted Twitter's terms and conditions. However, care was taken to exclude usernames and timestamps alongside quoted tweets. While this does not resolve the anonymisation problem, it does reduce the relative ease with which tweeps can be located, therefore, minimising the potential harm tweeps may face.

3. FINDINGS

This study set out to critically examine Twitter conversations about Atiku Abubakar's 2023 presidential ambition. The 3,000 tweets analysed in this study included two hashtags - #AtikuDeclares2023 and #AtikuDeclaration. On a general level, conversations using the hashtags focused on Atiku Abubakar; Nigeria's electoral umpire, INEC; the Nigerian political structure and elections; and the nature of the Nigerian state. However, the thematic analyses carried out using manual and computer-assisted approaches revealed three themes - Old Guard, Zoning, and Competence. Whereas the largest cluster of tweets emphasised Atiku's affiliation with Nigeria's old political and leadership class, the smallest cluster comprised tweets where Atiku's competence to manage the affairs of the country was either extolled or questioned.

OLD GUARD

The largest set of tweets (51%) focused on Atiku Abubakar's ties with Nigeria's old political and leadership class. In this category of tweets, some tweeps labelled him a political criminal (T9), failure (T12), a political thief (T6, T10), and an old klepto (T18). These characterisations mirror popular perceptions of the leadership class in Nigeria. For example: one tweep tweeted as follows:

The reason why NIGERIA is not headed anywhere 23" is round the corner same old political thieves, rebranded and packaged like goods are being recycled into the system and here you have educated fools cheering e'm on... Why won't your life be a mess? (T6)

The emphasis on Atiku's similarity to those in current leadership is further evidenced in his links with the dominant political parties in the country, his age, and his repeated attempts at being president. For example, in T3, Atiku is associated with the *twin evil*, that is, the APC and the PDP. As is detailed in the literature section, Atiku Abubakar had at different times, been a member of each party and is now the flagbearer of PDP – Nigeria's main opposition party. He has also for the second time, emerged as the Presidential flagbearer of the PDP. The tweets in T21-T27 emphasised his age. While T21 and T25 stated Atiku should retire, T26 said he should remain an elder statesman, and T27 suggested he rested.

Taken together, the above representations indicate that Atiku Abubakar is a member of Nigeria's Old Guard. The Old Guard in this study comprise a group of aged politicians who have secured their place in the corridors of power owing to their access to state resources.

Table 1: Tweet excerpts for the Old Guard Theme

Code	Tweets
T1	I'm still standing on the fence concerning Atiku being the president of this country! We Hope not to see someone like buhari who contested 2003,2007,2011,and 2015 without any blueprints on how to governor this country #AtikuDeclaration #AtikuDeclares2023 #Atikukawai
T2	We already agreed that we don't want recycled politicians no more. We don't want old cargo anymore in our government houses. We want smart brains who are ready to serve the country for the betterment of her citizens. #AtikuDeclaration
T3	Instead of voting for the twin evil of APC and PDP, I would rather vote for Sowore. #AtikuDeclaration is among the twin evil.
T4	Nigeria don't need atiku right now we need some one with modern ideas of government, some one who will think outside the box not same old people Nigeria deserve better. #AtikuDeclaration
T5	Enough is enough with this old people abeg 9#AtikuDeclaration
T6	: #AtikuDeclaration The reason why NIGERIA is not headed anywhere 23" is round the corner same old political thieves, rebranded and packaged like goods are being recycled into the system and here you have educated fools cheering e'm on... Why won't your life be a mess?
T7	We don't need old people to rule dis nation and some youth are still seeing Tinubu and @atiku as young boy or man still running after them to support them. Now I understand why Jesus said it is finish. BBC to BBC Wizkid Chioma #AtikuDeclaration

T8	Who did this to Nigerians Atiku should go and rest now #AtikuDeclaration
T9	Atiku, Tinubu and these other political criminals should not be in our lexicon when we discussing 2023... Discussion should center around Peter Obi ,Femi Adesina or Ngozi okonjo -iveala... #AtikuDeclaration
T10	We already agreed that we don't want recycled politicians no more. We don't want thieves in our government houses. We want smart brains who are ready to serve the country for the betterment of her citizens. #AtikuDeclaration
T11	#AtikuDeclaration Just a reason why Atiku shouldn't contest the 2023 election. Atiku Abubakar was the presidential flag bearer for the PDP in 2019 and lost the elections, He has been calm and mute without condemning the Government policies .
T12	And I wasted my time and data watching #AtikuDeclaration I see persons rooting for Tinubu as Nigeria president as mentally retarded, worst still are those rooting for Atiku Abubakar We can't b jumping from one failure to another... We want a real deal
T13	Electing Atiku as president is like a man digging his own grave and calling his kinsmen to perform his burial rite. With all due respect, Atiku shouldn't even be an option, based on his political traits and pedigree. When you give such men power, it's finished. #AtikuDeclaration
T14	What should we do to retire these old politicians? I really need Answers. because, what is #AtikuDeclaration?
T15	Voting for PDP & APC is like putting old wine in new bottle The end of it is Nigerian citizens would keep groaning in pain for another 8yrs Their ideologies are selfish. They loot.. Travel abroad for medical treatment & their kids schooling abroad
T16	If Atiku wins PDP primary and Tinubu APC primary, i will not vote because whoever wins between them, Nigeria loses. #AtikuDeclaration
T17	At the end of the day we'll be settling for either Tinubu or Atiku too sad we can do better than this let's try something new not this recycling of people with personal interest not the nations interest #AtikuDeclaration
T18	As expected the old klepto has declared. #AtikuDeclaration
T19	But wait.... Are we still having Atiku back? Same Atiku who once believed in Buhari and provided PJ for him to run his campaign in 2015? We can't build a new Nigeria with the same old leaders. #AtikuDeclaration
T20	How can you rescue Nigeria from the very problems you plunged it into by bringing Buhari to power in 2015? Will you probe the monies looted under Buhari? Atiku, make it make sense. #AtikuDeclaration #AtikuDeclares2023
T21	Say no to the aged generation again. We will not allow grandfathers to rule us again, 75% of the Nigerian populace are between ages 18 to 60. Why these retire fellows? Say no to them all #AtikuDeclares2023 #Tinubu2023
T22	It's 2022 and I can't believe Atiku is still contesting.. don't you think we need young people with fresh ideas ie Crypto, tech ideas #AtikuDeclaration
T23	Dear sir, I've so much respect for you since the very time you became the vice president till this present moment. But, HE @atiku can you please change your mind on contesting as the President of Nigeria? The system needs fresh bloods cos the system is porous . #AtikuDeclaration
T24	People don't wan Tinubu becoss he's old but support Atiku that is 75 years young 9 . Una too mumu. Hypocrites!!! TSTV OAU VC #AtikuDeclaration
T25	The is a good reason why the retirement age is pegged at 60years. Above this bar should please go and join the league of #Elder -state -men #AtikuDeclaration
T26	Atiku is trying to recoup all the money he has spent since 1992 (in SDP vs MKO Abiola) when he started contesting Buhari had the same desperation Atiku should remain an elder statesman and support younger candidates like Seyi Makinde or Peter Obi #Atiku Declaration #Atikukawai
T27	@atiku Oga you have really tried... I think it's time to rest. #OneNigeria #AtikuDeclaration

ZONING

The second cluster of tweets (30%) emphasised Zoning - a political arrangement that allows political parties to alternate the home region of public and elected officers between the north and south (Iroanusi, 2022). Here, tweeps interpreted Atiku's interest in the presidency as an attempt at Northern/Fulani domination of Nigeria's south (see T29-30, and T41); socio-political slavery (see T39); and as an indication that the PDP would lose the 2023 elections (see T31 and T35).

Table 2: Tweet excerpts for the Zoning Theme

Code	Tweets
T28	#AtikuDeclaration How I wish the Southerners will have sense... But I am seeing another Northerners The President... #PDP should zone straight to South... #PeterObi or no one else
T29	Did we offend the NORTH? Must @atiku contest? At what Age again Can't he support any young aspirant or @PeterObi Can't we get another president from the South East This Northerners has nothing to offer us BIG TIME. Egbeda Ghana Maduka Okoye Spartacus #AtikuDeclaration Chemistry
T30	The game plan henceforth from the north is go to APC hijack it after 8yrs is done we hijack PDP install another northerner then continue repeating the trick 9 #Nigeria #AtikuDeclaration #OAUTwitter
T31	@OfficialPDPNig let it be known that if Atiku wins the primaries, PDP will lose, every southern sympathy Atiku got in 2019 is now directed towards Peter Obi, thus, strive to execute massive campaign for Obi in the core North, APC will lose the south #Atik
T32	Let me repeat myself, PDP will NOT win 2023 General Election if they insist on allowing Northern aspirants vie for the Presidency. This time around, Igbo will NOT support #AtikuDeclaration. Sad as it may sound, it's APC till 2031.
T33	@AlademoJ Let's wait and see. Peter Obi won't save #AtikuDeclaration this time around. Many Igbo believe that it is their turn. I believe so too. The South East Zone has the least of registered voters. Same cant be said of Igbo residing in other parts
T34	#AtikuDeclaration Atiku again? Is there nobody else in this country? After 8 years of North... We don't need another Northerner now
T35	Atiku can't win the presidency for PDP. PDP using another northern in 2023 after Buhari 8 years will be the end of PDP IN NIGERIA. @OfficialPDPNig please use your head. #AtikuDeclaration
T36	If truly Atiku Abubakar is a democrat, he should throw his weight behind a credible South Easterner to cling the ticket on the basis of equity and fair play. He enjoyed robust support and relationship from them and he should not forget such gestures #AtikuDeclaration
T37	I supported Atiku in 2019, I won't do that again in 2023. Nigeria does not belong to the North alone. #AtikuDeclaration
T38	So Atiku declared his intention to run for President come 2023 & beats Buhari's Record attempt at Presidency, makes it 6th Declaration. 9 And by this PDP are not giving the south any chance despite SS/SE unalloyed support over the years. Funny lots #AtikuDeclaration
T39	That mindset that you don't zone what you don't have is a big political lie. If you are a southerner & believe in that FALSE NARRATIVE be prepared to live in perpetual socio-political slavery. APC will do same 2031 and the circle continues #AtikuDeclaration
T40	Tambuwal, Saraki & Atiku contesting for PDP presidential ticket for me is greed and lack of conscience, they want power to remain in the north for another 8 years, this Will definitely be the end of PDP. The party hasn't learned anything from their mis takes 9 #AtikuDeclaration
T41	I foresee Presidential Election boycott by majority of Igbo if Atiku finally becomes PDP candidate in 2023 I mean, how can another Fulani man be marketed for president when for 7yrs, the story was that Fulanis were Ki!!!NG Ndi Igbo #AtikuDeclaration https://t.co/TX1ftFpSR0

COMPETENCE

The last cluster (19% of the tweets) emphasized Atiku Abubakar's competence in managing the affairs of Nigeria. Two broad categories emerged. Whereas some tweeters hailed his experience and readiness as shown in T50 - T56, others questioned his capacity and preparedness for the office of President (T43-T49). For example, one tweeter said: "Today we stand with our leader and, hopefully, the next President of Nigeria, His Excellency Atiku Abubakar. May your declaration mark the start of the gentle breeze that will bring calm to our storm and development to our land" (T52), while another tweeted:

Electing Atiku as president is like a man digging his own grave and calling his kinsmen to perform his burial rite. With all due respect, Atiku shouldn't even be an

option, based on his political traits and pedigree. When you give such men power, it's finished (T49).

Also, T51 said: "Is all about having the competency, plans and ability to gain support. Which am sure @atiku has it all now". Atiku remains the last man standing while T47 asked:

Can Waziri Adamawa bring about the needed reforms and economic transformation we've been yearning for the nation? Cus as it is, I won't mince words Nigeria doesn't need a career politician as president, rather a technocrat to save us from this disaster.

Again, whereas Atiku is considered the most qualified in T53, a visionary in T56, a brand in T55, and experienced in T54; one tweeter recalled that Atiku did not win elections in his home state during the last election cycle (T45) and another tweeter alluded that Atiku may not be able to "deliver on his ambiguous agenda" (T48).

Table 3: Tweet excerpts for the Competence Theme

T43	I am from Adamawa state and don't have issues with @atiku and #AtikuDeclaration but, we need to know what makes you different from others. Why should we choose you?
T44	Atiku is all those that are aspiring for no.1 seat of the nation should come out and tell us what they have for us. Are they physically & mentally fits to leads this country out of dungeon? #AtikuDeclaration
T45	Atiku that could not win his state last election. #AtikuDeclaration
T46	These politicians are yet to let you know there stand on issues and policies they have to introduce. But you have started campaigning for them. Nigerians have a long way to go #AtikuDeclaration
T47	#AtikuDeclaration Can Waziri Adamawa bring about the needed reforms and economic transformation we've been yearning for the nation? Cus as it is, I won't mince words Nigeria doesn't need a career politician as president, rather a technocrat to save us from this disaster.
T48	Is Atiku the man to take Nigeria to the next level? Can we trust that he would deliver on his ambiguous agenda? Do we need leaders who have ruled before to rule us again? May affliction not arise again!!!! #OneNigeria #AtikuDeclaration
T49	Electing Atiku as president is like a man digging his own grave and calling his kinsmen to perform his burial rite. With all due respect, Atiku shouldn't even be an option, based on his political traits and pedigree. When you give such men power, it's finished. #AtikuDeclaration
T50	Today, The Lion Declares. #AtikuDeclares2023 #AtikuKawai
T51	Zero tension I am so optimistic @atiku will clinch the ticket. Is all about having the competency, plans and ability to gain support. Which am sure @atiku has it all now. Atiku remains the last man standing. @safeeyan. #Atikukawai #AtikuDeclares2023
T52	#AtikuDeclaration Today we stand with our leader and, hopefully, the next President of Nigeria, His Excellency Atiku Abubakar. May your declaration mark the start of the gentle breeze that will bring calm to our storm and development to our land. @atiku
T53	We are supporting Atiku, NOT because he's from Adamawa, BUT because he's the most qualified candidate for President in 2023. ~ Gov. Umaru Fintiri #AtikuDeclares2023
T54	Experienced Leadership is what Nigeria needs at this critical time. @Atiku is the only solution. We lost the opportunity to sentiments and propaganda in 2019. We won't allow this opportunity to slip again #AtikuDeclaration
T55	@Rashe the Atiku is a brand! We are solidly behind him! #AtikuDeclares2023 #Atikukawai
T56	7 years of tyranny will be brought to an end if you vote in #AtikuDeclaration you no go need to dey follow olopa dey shout under bridge. Atiku is ready to take to the street if need be Man is a visionary.

1. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The paper sought to analyse Twitter discourse on Atiku Abubakar's presidential ambition following his March 2022 declaration. The analyses of 3,000 tweets, which included the hashtags #AtikuDeclares2023 and #AtikuDeclaration revealed findings that are critical to Nigeria's 2023 elections and the role of Twitter in Nigerian politics.

First, the emphasis on the Old Guard (51% of the tweets) is an indication that many tweeters are frustrated with Nigeria's old political class. Like many African states, the Nigerian leadership has been dominated by a particular group of visionless individuals who have failed to effectively partner with citizens to bring about the dividends of democracy. Although many in this category started governing the country as young men and during the country's military era, they have somehow remained in the corridors of power. The country's transition to democratic governance has done little to change the situation as political parties, without clear ideological stances, are composed of this same crop of leaders. According to Monday et al. (2020):

For Nigeria getting leadership right has been a recurring debate since its independence in 1960. The country has had more of sectional leaders, self-seeking and dictatorship than nationalists as leaders. Nigeria political landscape is dominated by the governing elite who share similar orientation on the need to preserve the political system for continuous perpetuation of control over the polity (p. 201).

In Nigeria, access to political power means unfettered access to state resources, and these state assets are mostly pilfered. For instance, the Economist Magazine reported in 2019 that about \$582 billion had been stolen from Nigeria since the country gained independence in 1960 (Asadu, 2019). Also, Nigeria's Information Minister, Lai Mohammed 2016 claimed that about 55 people including government ministers, state governors, bankers, and businessmen, stole a total of \$6.8 billion from the nation's purse within a seven-year period (Reuters Staff, 2016). These stolen state resources become weapons used to manipulate the political process and deeply entrench the positions of political officeholders. This explains the quest to acquire and retain power at all costs and accounts for the high incidence of electoral violence across the country.

Atiku Abubakar like many Nigerian politicians has been accused of amassing questionable wealth during his time as Vice President. In what can be described as the country's most notorious politico-personal conflict, Atiku Abubakar engaged in a show of scandals with the former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo. While Atiku who was serving as Vice President at the time, accused Obasanjo of seeking a life presidency (Akinkuotu, 2016); Obasanjo had this to say about the former Vice President:

What I did not know, which came out glaringly later, was his parental background which was somewhat shadowy, his propensity to corruption, his tendency to dis-loyalty, his inability to say and stick to the truth all the time, a propensity for poor judgment, his belief and reliance on marabouts, his lack of transparency, his trust in money to buy his way out on all issues and his readiness to sacrifice morality, integrity, propriety truth and national interest for self and selfish interest (Obasanjo 2015, p. 32)

The United States government has also indicted Atiku on corruption charges, money laundering, public funds diversion, and abuse of office (Coburn & Carl, 2010). Although he has not been charged to court for any of these offenses, many Nigerian citizens have a strong perception of mistrust regarding his person (Samuel, 2018).

Although Nigeria has the largest population of youths in the world, a large percentage of these youths are unemployed, unskilled, and poor. They, therefore, lack the resources to challenge the Old Guard during elections (The Conversation, 2022). However, many of these youths have begun using Twitter to rally and organise around a younger candidate, Mr. Peter Obi - the flagbearer of the Labour Party. Obidients as they have dubbed themselves, have gone on to plan and execute many on-ground walks around the country, demonstrating their support for their preferred candidate, creating awareness for Peter Obi and the Labour party, and defying those who claim they only exist on social media (Adelagun, 2022; Chikindi, 2022). However, whether the reinvigorated social media activism, which was first experienced during the Endsars protests will translate to actual voting is yet to be determined. This is given Nigeria's history with money politics as well as the prevalence of physical, psychological, and structural electoral violence during

election cycles. For instance, 24 Nigerians have sued INEC, Nigeria's electoral umpire for refusing to afford about seven million Nigerians adequate time and opportunity to complete their voter registration (Silas, 2022, para. 1). Reports have also emerged of falsification of voter register in parts of the country (Jimoh & Olatunji, 2022). These issues if mismanaged may set the stage for voter apathy and high-scale electoral violence in the 2023 elections.

While the dominance of the Old Guard theme suggests that politicians like Atiku Abubakar stand lesser chances of winning the 2023 polls or other elections in the future, the likelihood of this occurring is small given Nigeria's history. Unless concerted efforts are made towards transparently improving the electoral process and addressing other socio-economic, political, and cultural issues, the Old Guard may continue to dominate the political space.

Second, one unexpected finding was the extent to which conversations centered on zoning than on competence. A possible explanation for this might be that many tweeters within the context of the upcoming elections, were more interested in equity, fairness, and justice. Zoning in principle is designed to address Nigeria's ethnically and religiously diverse composition, offer different regions a chance at balanced representation, and facilitate the peace and stability of the country. This regional power-sharing formula also quells the perceived dominance of parts of the country concerning access to and the distribution of state resources. The relevance of zoning in the country's politics is evident in its inclusion in the constitution of the PDP as follows: "Adhering to the policy of the rotation and zoning of the party and public elective offices in pursuance of the principle of equity, justice, and fairness" (Constitution of the Peoples Democratic Party, 2012 as amended, Section 3c, p. 8).

Under the zoning arrangement, therefore, since the current president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari is of northern extraction, the PDP ought to have zoned the presidency to the south and more specifically, the southeast, which is yet to produce a democratically elected president. Zoning could have, therefore, forestalled Atiku's expression of interest since like the current President, he too is from the north and of Fulani extraction. This is why many tweeps as exemplified in T28, T30, and T39 interpreted Atiku's interest in the presidency as a ploy by the north to remain in power to continually manage and control Nigeria's resources.

Amid claims that zoning is not in the Nigerian constitution, some have compared zoning to the country's Federal Character Principle (FCP), which was designed to eliminate ethnic domination via nepotism, tribalism, and gerontocracy (Okere, 2022; Akpan, 2022). For Idike et al. (2019), the FCP was introduced to "encourage behavioural transition from the primordial ethnic loyalty to a regime of national integration and consciousness... create an atmosphere for mutual ethnic cooperation and national loyalty" (p. 2). The FCP was launched during the Murtala administration in 1975 and enshrined in the country's constitution in 1979. Section 14 (3) of the constitution states that:

the composition of the Government of the Federation or any of its agencies and the conduct of its affairs shall be carried out in such a manner as to reflect the federal character of Nigeria and the need to promote national unity, and also to command national loyalty, thereby ensuring that there shall be no predominance of persons from a few states or from a few ethnic or other sectional groups in that Government or any of its agencies.

Atiku's emergence as the flagbearer of the PDP means that, like the FCP, zoning is now subject to selective enforcement. Whereas failures in implementing the FCP have resulted in calls for secession, distrust among the regions and the exclusion of minority groups, PDP's deliberate jettisoning of zoning may cost them the 2023 elections as expressed in T25 and T33.

Lastly, the findings of this study support arguments regarding the relevance of Twitter for political discourse and engagement as well as a tool for electoral violence. Whereas legacy platforms are highly regulated and controlled, newer media platforms like Twitter offer citizens a space for less restricted political engagement, with the likelihood of reaching a much larger audience as well as receiving immediate feedback. The affordances of Twitter (visibility, editability, persistence, and networked association) in this case, facilitated conversations by a wider range of individuals rather than a selected few. These individuals also shared strong opinions using language that are not typically allowed on Nigerian radio and television stations. In addition, Twitter enabled these messages to be easily located, reinterpreted in diverse ways, and stored for future reference. The networked association ability of Twitter encouraged homophilic tendencies, that is the possibility of people who share

similar views to look for and identify themselves. However, these affordances as earlier stated could enable electoral violence with dire consequences for citizens and the electoral process. This is consistent with research where scholars have argued that social media can serve as an instrument for positive social change as well as a tool for inciting violence (Akerele-Popoola, Azeez & Adeniyi, 2022).

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