

Chapter 16

Weaponizing Political Rhetoric to Galvanize Voters' Support on the Twitterscape

Case Study of Contentious Political Spheres in South Africa and Nigeria

Tshepang B. Molale, Olanrewaju J. Ogundeyi,
and Nureni Aremu Bakenne

An in-depth review of political narratives on social media demonstrates how social networking sites (SNSs) such as Twitter are strategically used by political parties and actors to galvanize the masses behind their political electioneering campaigns (see Faris, 2013). Hence, the rise of digital communication technologies in recent times has generated critical discourse bordering on issues of political participation that are central to democracy (Wilhelm, 2000; Wright, 2016).

The internet has transformed many methods of contemporary political communication, and their impact has been viewed as significant in altering the crucial relationship between political parties, actors, and ordinary citizens (Margetts, 2006). In Africa, prominent political parties such as the African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA), and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) in South Africa, as well as the All Progressives Congress (APC), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and Labour Party (LP) in Nigeria, also use digital platforms as part of their political rhetoric to galvanize support from voters for their electioneering campaigns.

This study employed “digital rhetorics” as the theoretical framework to analyze how political parties employ Twitter in electioneering campaigns.

The term “digital rhetoric” has been applied to technology, network rhetorics, social media use, the use of rhetorical appeals in online discussion forums, and the study of new media. If we see digital rhetoric as a productive art, then “nearly all digital texts can be seen both as objects of study for analysis and as products of digital rhetoric practices” (Eyman, 2016: 9).

There are several works on digital community and identity formation. These include Taylor and Ward’s (1998) *Literacy Theory in the Age of the Internet*, Howard Rheingold’s work on virtual communities (1993), and *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* by Rheingold (2002). A careful study of these works demonstrates how social media has been predominantly used for politically motivated reasons.

In the current political landscape, there is growing concern and debate over the effects of false news, manipulation, and distortion of facts. However, the digital space has equally become an arena where all interested parties can collaborate in countering falsehoods and fake news peddling. Various studies have been conducted in this regard. For example, Coleman’s (2005) study on new mediation and direct representation in the digital age has observed that the digital age has helped create collaboration and interaction between political elites and the public. Likewise, Morris (2001: 1033) noted that the internet offers potential for direct democracy and may transform our system of politics and form of government, bypassing national representatives and speaking directly to one another.

Furthermore, in Etumnu et al.’s (2019) study on “Social Media as a Modern Platform for Political Discourse in Imo State,” it was found that social media has greatly influenced public participation in the democratic process and political discourse. Although scholars have expressed concern about the changing tone of political discourse, technology experts, corporate practitioners, and government leaders predict that future public online discourse will continue to be shaped by bad actors, harassment, trolls, griping, and distrust (Rainie, Anderson, and Albright, 2017). This submission identifies a high level of incivility of social media actors in political discourse. Therefore, despite its growing use as a communication tool in challenging and engaging political actors in the issues of good governance, little study has been done on how Twitter has been deployed by political actors in galvanizing support for their candidates in this digital age. Therefore, the present study focused on this problem and used digital rhetoric as well as political discourse analysis to explore artifacts such as Tweets to study various weaponized communication methods used by political elites in galvanizing voters’ support.

This study employed qualitative content analysis, which is rooted in political discourse analysis, to review politically charged texts deployed by the political parties in the two countries to attract voters’ support on Twitter between the months of June and November 2022. This was a critical time

frame in Nigeria and South Africa: In the former country, it was a time when the three leading political parties were jostling for votes in the run-up to the country's general elections in March 2023, while in the latter, political figures in the ANC were jostling for voter support in the run-up to the party's election conference in December 2022.

Through our exploration, we found that the use of various political rhetoric on Twitter has created a new culture of political consciousness among major actors, which also serves as powerful social media tools employed by political influencers in the two African countries under study. In addition, we found that Twitter is a safe space for netizens to freely express contending views against political leaders. This is crucial since it contributes to the growing corpus of knowledge that looks at the dangers of propaganda as well as political agency and digital activism to counter political manipulation and coercion.

This research is structured into six sections starting with this introduction, followed by background on the four chosen political parties and their Twitter profiles. Then a section on the theoretical lens underpinning this chapter is presented. In the fourth section, we provide a brief review of the extant literature to justify the study's importance and expose existing knowledge gaps. Then a section on the study's methodological orientation, rooted in political discourse analysis (PDA), is presented. In the sixth section, we discuss key findings of the study through identified key themes that emerged inductively or deductively. Last, the study concludes by providing a summary of the study's intent, the key findings, and recommendations made.

RESEARCH CONTEXT: THE CHOSEN POLITICAL PARTIES' TWITTER PROFILES

The African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa (@MYANC)

The ANC opened its Twitter account in January 2009. The profile picture shows its top seven national leaders. These are the leaders who were elected following the ANC's national elective conference in December 2022. It should be noted that although this study is focused on the time leading up to this December conference, the chapter was retrospectively written after this period; hence it is not surprising to find that the party has a Twitter profile picture with its recently elected leaders. These leaders include the party's president, Cyril Ramaphosa; deputy president, Paul Mashatile; national chairperson, Gwede Mantashe; and the secretary general, treasurer, 1st deputy secretary, and 2nd deputy secretary. At the time of writing this chapter in

May 2023, @MYANC has about 1.1. million followers, while the profile follows about 8,001 accounts. Furthermore, the account shows that by May, @MYANC had about 67,700 tweets.

The Labour Party in Nigeria (@NgLabour)

The Twitter account of the Labour Party also has a profile of its seven national leaders. These include the party's presidential candidate, Peter Obi; vice presidential candidate, Yusuf Datti Bab-Ahmed; and its national chairman, Julius Abure. The party joined Twitter in May 2022 and has about 801,000 followers, while it follows twenty-eight accounts. At the time of writing this chapter in May 2023, the party had 1,263 tweets.

All Progressive Congress (APC) in Nigeria (@OfficialAPCNg)

The APC opened its Twitter account in April 2018. It has about 988,000 followers and follows 130 accounts. Its profile shows a recent picture of now-Nigerian president Bola Tinubu waving to a large crowd, flanked by three military guards in official Nigerian military gear, on the rooftop of a moving state vehicle during his inauguration on May 29, 2023. Since joining the social media platform, @OfficialAPC has cumulatively produced 4,075 tweets.

Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria (@OfficialPDPNg)

Last, the PDP Nigeria's Twitter account shows a background picture of the following words in the party's official colors: "NIGERIA'S TIME TO RECOVER (*sic*).” The “o” in “Recover” has the party's umbrella logo with the word “PDP” in it. The party joined Twitter in June 2016. It has 1.2 million followers and follows 934 accounts. The party has tweeted 45,300 times since joining Twitter.

THEORETICAL LENS: DIGITAL RHETORIC

Galvanizing support of voters for a candidate requires a strategic and persuasive communication method, as embedded in rhetorical communication strategy. One example of rhetoric is the use of creative slogans weaved with emotional arguments to inspire voters' support. According to Eyman (2016: 3), rhetoric is the art of persuasion through communication, designed to appeal to people's emotions and logic to motivate them to act. Aristotle

identified as types of rhetoric “logos” (logical arguments) and “pathos” (emotional arguments) to construct a more persuasive argument, and “ethos” (the credibility of the speaker). Additionally, theory is “a way of framing an experience or event to understand and account for something and the way it functions in the world” (Foss and Foss, 2003). This means that rhetorical theories guide speakers on how to make effective messages, which is why scholars have historically used rhetorical theories to produce and evaluate messages. Digital rhetoric helps highlight the importance of considering context as essential for understanding messages. If nearly all human acts of communication engage rhetorical practice, then rhetoric-as-method can be applied to all, including digital media platforms. Hocks (2003: 632) states that “digital rhetoric describes a system of ongoing dialogue and negotiations among writers, audiences, and institutional contexts, but it focuses on the multiple modalities available for making meaning using new communication and information technologies.”

Similarly, Verhulsdonck (2014) states that earlier theorists defined digital rhetoric as a novel relationship between literacy and the mechanics of text as computer-mediated communication and changed relationships between consuming, producing, and engaging with discourse as information on a screen. Meanwhile, Eyman (2016: 9) notes that the term “digital rhetoric” has been applied to technology, network rhetorics, social media use, the use of rhetorical appeals in online discussion forums, website design, multimodal composition, and the study of new media. If we see digital rhetoric as a productive art, then nearly all digital texts can be seen both as objects of study for analysis and as products of digital rhetoric practices.

The two critical assumptions of the rhetorical theory are that (1) public speakers must consider their audience for effective communication, and (2) speakers must also use a number proof during a presentation. Putting these assumptions of rhetoric with the application of “digital” will give speakers the momentum to innovate and reinvigorate rhetoric. Bogost (2007) suggests that digital media can be placed at the center of rhetorical practice in the case of digital rhetoric by focusing on the text and image content the digital platform might host and the communities of practice in which that content is created and used. Digital rhetoric has been criticized for the rhetorical complexity of digital interactions. For example, Arduser et al. (2011), note that the participants bemoan juggling between different modes of communication: visual, textual, and audio. It was further criticized on ethical communication grounds. This is evident in a study conducted by Arduser et al. (2011: 63) where multiple participants requested that the instructor provide guidelines for navigating the multimodal communicative options, including a “cue system and rules for ‘politeness.’” The findings of the study demonstrate confusion about decorum, a classical rhetorical concept that abounds

with social and ideological implications (Duerringer, 2016) of what constitutes appropriate communication in this multimodal environment. Despite these criticisms, Depew (2015: 440) suggests that “digital rhetoric is not just about the use of digital communicative technologies,” but its versatility in the persuasive and ideological nature of communication online—hence the adoption of digital rhetorical theory for this study to make sense of political multimodal arguments and campaigns digitally created through various media on Twitter.

LITERATURE REVIEW: POLITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS (PDA) IS A VERITABLE TOOL FOR ANALYZING TWITTER’S USE BY POLITICAL ACTORS IN GALVANIZING VOTES.

The technological changes associated with the rise of the internet have transformed many structures and methods of contemporary political communication, and their impact has been viewed as significant in altering the crucial but historically distant relationship between political campaigns and ordinary citizens (Margetts, 2006). It has been asserted that the interactive potential of digital networked technologies has facilitated the involvement of citizens in political campaigns, by “reconnecting political parties with their civic roots by providing the basis for a more democratic mode of organization” (Gibson, 2015: 187).

This claim was frequently articulated in the use of Twitterspace as a political battleground in Nigeria’s general election among the three major political parties—All Progressives Congress (APC), Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), and Labour Party (LP)—as well as South Africa’s African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA), and Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF).

Political discourse analysis is quite germane to this research and has been adopted by various cross-discipline studies. Most scholars engaged in political discourse analysis are linguists and discourse analysts (see Chilton 1985, 1988; Geis 1987; Wilson 1990). However, the application of discourse approaches in political science proves to be one of the few social sciences that so far have barely been infected by the modern viruses of the study of text and talk. What we find in political science are studies on political communication and rhetoric, while studies of media also adopt PDA (Bitzer, 1981; Chaffee, 1975; Graber, 1981). Only some of these approaches have recently taken a more discourse-analytical orientation (Gamson 1992; Thompson 1987d).

Political discourse analysis (PDA) has become a global phenomenon that is used for asserting power and knowledge, and for resistance and critique in most countries where democracy is practiced. While analyzing the critical

discourse analysis (CDA) of Obama's political discourse, Horváth (2009) submits that the objective of this type of research method is to perceive language use as social practice; the users of language do not function in isolation but in a set of cultural, social, and psychological frameworks.

Considering the submission above, this means that CDA can theoretically bridge the gap between micro and macro approaches, which is a distinction that is a sociological construct (Van-Dijk, 2003: 354). Van-Dijk (2006: 733) notes that political situations do not simply cause political actors to speak in certain ways; instead, "there is a need for a cognitive collaboration between situations and talk or text, which is a context." This, according to Bayram (2010: 8) is the realization of power in Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's language use and its ideological component through a linguistic analysis based on CDA during a debate. Given the enormous domestic and global significance of said speech, it is crucial to decipher ideological traits typical of Erdogan as enshrined in his political discourse.

The same scenario has played out in the United States, especially in studies of presidential rhetoric, which are numerous in political speeches (see, e.g., Campbell and Jamieson, 1990; Hart, 1984; Snyder and Higgins, 1990; Stuckey, 1989; Thompson, 1987e; Windt, 1983, 1990). Kumwenda (2016: 35) states that during the 2007 French presidential elections, CDA demonstrated a strong influence toward the center-right Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) party's Nicolas Sarkozy's election results, when he scored a decisive victory over the opposing socialist candidate, Ségolène Royal, for the French presidency. Over 40 percent of internet users reported that their voting decision was due to conversations and other activities on the internet.

It is worth noting that the use of Twitter as a social media platform has now been integrated into both South African and Nigerian political discourse mechanisms, as well as other countries of the world. Opeibi (2019) opines that while Twitter is a critical tool for wooing voters and engaging the Nigerian electorate during the democratic process, it is also used to perform a range of politically related activities such as electioneering campaigns, image branding, special identity-laundering, and a lot more. Island (2016: 13) affirms that the same scenario played out in the South African 2014 elections when political parties, such as the EFF, Democratic Alliance (DA), and ANC, saw an increase in their votes, partly due to their use of social media platforms.

Political discourse analysis (PDA) demonstrates how social media tools play critical roles in reshaping public discourses and reinvigorating democratic processes in many countries of the world, and how the interdisciplinary research agenda of CDA attracts the "classic" theories and tools of linguistics to new empirical territories in political discourse (Cap 2020).

METHOD

The present study employed a qualitative methodological approach. It is “netnographic” in nature and has employed a political discourse analysis (PDA) of Twitter accounts belonging to @MYANC in South Africa as well as @NgLabour, @OfficialAPCNg, and @OfficialPDPNg in Nigeria. Sometimes referred to as digital ethnography, netnography is an online version of what is traditionally known as ethnography (Molale and Mpofu, 2023), where the researchers immerse themselves in the data found online to identify patterns and deconstruct online material through processes such as data scrapping, online observations, and data visualization. This helps to study the identified phenomenon and explore how different actors interact in online settings and what the underlying meanings they ascribe to certain issues or points of engagement are (see Mpofu, Asak, and Salawu, 2022).

Tweets were analyzed looking at the online interactions between selected political parties in South Africa and in Nigeria, looking at how they interacted with their audiences ahead of defining elections in both countries.

Purposive sampling was used to select forty (40) artifacts (i.e., images, memes, and tweets/texts): ten (10) from @MYANC, ten (10) from @NgLabour, ten (10) from @OfficialAPCNg, and ten (10) from @OfficialPDPNg. We employed purposive sampling because it enabled us to purposively identify our unit of analysis based on our study’s fundamental purpose (see Tracy, 2020). This was prudent because datasets on Twitter are notoriously voluminous since thousands of tweets can be shared by different people per minute, and we needed a specified method, such as purposive sampling, to be able to extract a sample that would enable us to analyze and achieve the study’s objectives.

The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Ultimately, the following two themes were identified: (a) user agency and independence of thought, and (b) the persuasive nature of messages. The data is presented and interpreted in the following section, where we make sense of the nature of political interaction between the political parties and how rhetorical devices are used to persuade netizens.

PRESENTATION, INTERPRETATION, AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

User Agency and Independence of Thought

Looking at replies to ANC’s tweets, just about anyone can share their opposing views, especially when they feel that what is put forward by political

leaders reflects double standards. This kind of participation in deliberative democratic discourse is one of the most potent advantages of social media, particularly Twitter. Instances where the chosen political parties advanced arguments with the hope of persuading their audiences but were met with critical perspectives from netizens were observed. However, in some tweets, the political parties were not necessarily speaking about their upcoming elections. For example, on August 2, 2022, @MYANC tweeted a picture conveying a message to rally all South Africans to join a protest march against illegal miners as well as crime after about eight modelers were allegedly raped by illegal miners in Gauteng Province while shooting a music video at an abandoned mine. This picture was accompanied by the following tweet:

Join the protest against #illegalimmigrants #zamazama & #rapists on Wednesday 3 August 2022 outside Krugersdorp Magistrate Court from 8 am. Calling for law enforcement to shut down illegal mines. #leronarebatho. (ANC, 2022a)

The tweet attracted 1,911 comments, 972 likes, and 1,619 retweets. Different people gave their views either in support or against this stance by the ANC.

In another example, @MYANC tweeted a media statement on June 7, 2022, about the arrest of brothers Rajesh and Atul Gupta in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). They were accused of having dishonestly benefited from contracts in government through their alleged corrupt relationship with the then-president, Jacob Zuma. The media statement is accompanied by the following tweet:

MYANC notes and welcomes the arrests of Messrs Rajesh and Atul Gupta by law enforcement authorities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). (ANC, 2022b)

This tweet attracted 342 comments, 182 retweets, and 342 likes, with some people supporting and sharing the sentiments expressed by the ANC and others totally critical of the ANC and seemingly accusing it of double standards.

Likewise, in the Nigerian context, interactions between the three leading political parties and netizens also revealed instances where users could openly challenge views shared by the APC, the Labour Party, and PDP in their tweets. One example is a tweet shared by APC on November 4, 2022, accompanied by two pictures of a bridge that was being commissioned. The tweet read:

The new 1.5km border bridge linking Nigeria and Cameroon at Mfum/Ekok, Cross River State is officially commissioned. The construction began 2017. #PMBAtWork. (@officialAPCNg, 2022)

This tweet generated 224 retweets, 37 quotes, and 826 likes. Most of the tweets read were mainly critical of the APC. Some interlocutors mocked the fact that it took five years for the APC to commission a 1.5-kilometer stretch bridge linking Nigeria and Cameroon, while others lamented that the ruling party loves other African countries more than Nigeria. These views are captured in the following extracts:

B1: “So it took 5 years for this short distance bridge to be completed?”

B2: “The way our @MBuhari love other African countries, is matchless. Money they would have use to fix Lagos to Akwa ibom road. That is helping the commerce of south south and south east he took it to link Cameron (*sic*). The aba, ikot ekpene road, don turn propaganda (*sic*).”

With respect to the Labour Party, despite enjoying much support and positive reactions among netizens, there are instances where people share contrary views and demonstrate their independence of thought, free from persuasion. An example is a tweet shared by Peter Obi and retweeted by the political party on November 23, 2022, which reads:

Perusing “Nigeria’s Poverty Trap and How to End It,” I found the conclusions troubling, but also a compelling clarion call to action. I’ve always accorded priority to poverty alleviations; more so within the context of moving Nigeria from consumption to production. (@LabourPartyNG, 2022)

This tweet attracted 4,500 retweets, 49 quotes, and 13,400 likes. Although it generated a lot of positive responses, with netizens showing admiration for the political party’s presidential candidate, it also attracted critical views from some netizens who were courageous to express their misgivings against Obi. These views are demonstrated below:

C1: “Why haven’t you ended the POVERTY TRAP of ANAMBRA STATE when you were a GOVERNOR? (*sic*).”

C2: “Moving Nigeria from consumption to production yet you’re not producing bread.”

Finally, in the case of the PDP, the same trend continued where tweets by the political party attracted critical comments from netizens. There seemed to be significant negative comments when netizens interacted with tweets around the PDP’s Atiku Abubakar. For instance, the PDP published a tweet on November 6, 2022, about the party’s vice presidential candidate, Dr. Ifeanyi Okowa, being scheduled to attend a town hall debate against leaders of

rival political parties in the run-up to the elections. This tweet generated 190 retweets, 19 quotes, and 716 likes. Most comments in this tweet were negative, primarily from netizens angry that the political party seeks to send a vice presidential candidate to represent the party at a meeting, instead of the party's presidential hopeful, Atiku Abubakar. The following extracts can be used as examples:

D1: "Same @atiku wey dey tweet about Arsenal match can't come for Debate????? (*sic*)."

D2: "Imagine the rubbish, so Atiku is too big to attend the meeting but wants to rule Nigeria? We have already rejected Atiku and his disrespectful attitude."

The tweet of September 13, 2022, where the political leader criticized the skyrocketing of lifestyle in Nigeria and positioned himself as a savior if voted into power generated 189 retweets, 37 quotes, and 488 likes. However, it still attracted scathing attacks on the party's leader from netizens, who seemingly were not convinced despite the masterful prose and skillful use of three classical rhetoric features. The following extracts can be cited as examples:

D3: "You boss for 8 years said you're a crook and not to be trusted (*sic*)."

D4: "Why did you steal economic documents without permission from the owner?"

The above extracts demonstrate how Twitter has become a platform where even the most critical views by ordinary citizens can be vented against their leaders without any fear of repercussions. People can use their own agency to challenge what they think are cheap electioneering tactics by political parties, and they have the freedom to express their own views through social media.

The Persuasive Nature of Messages

When studying the selected tweets of all four political parties, it is arguable that they spend time creating content that seeks to influence people and lure them in their favor. The creative use of words and images are some of the techniques used by political parties to attract attention and appeal to society. An in-depth review of the ANC's @MYANC Twitter posts between June and December 2022 reveals that the party largely posts:

- Pictures of campaigns and events that its leaders embark on
- Pictures of current leaders hosting commemoration events for late ANC leaders

- Events and commemorations about deceased ANC leaders
- Periodic countdown posts to the fifty-fifth National Elective Conference scheduled for December 16–20, 2022.

With respect to tweets where the party pays tribute to their late struggle heroes, for example, they published a series of pictures on September 27, 2022, with a tweet based on a tribute to the late Winnie Madikizela Mandela. In this tweet, the ANC captioned its commemorative message in the following way:

Mama Winnie played multiple roles in society and when she was banished for eight years in Brandfort, she continued to be actively involved in uplifting the community. Therefore, Brandfort is befitting place for @MYANC led by TG Cde Paul Mashatile @PMashatile to celebrate in. (@MYANC, 2022)

The tweet is accompanied by a picture of the late ANC veteran during her younger years, with the words: “ANC Celebrating Cde Mama Winfred ‘Winnie’ Nomzamo Madikizela- Mandela” and a caption of what seems to have been words from one of her writings/books: “I am a product of the masses of our country and the product of my enemy.”

It is arguable that, like in the earlier example of the APC, the ANC tried employing three basic features of rhetoric (i.e., logos, pathos, and ethos) as a way of appealing to its audience about the significance of its rich history and the importance of cherishing the role that Winnie played in the liberation struggle against the apartheid government in South Africa. However, instead of eliciting positive remarks, this tweet attracted many negative reactions from netizens. The following extracts are examples:

E1: “Its funny cause u guys abandoned her (*sic*).”

E2: “you failed to honour her while she was alive (*sic*).”

E3: “Dead people dont have birthdays (*sic*).”

While some tweets contained offensive and derogatory slur words, others were aimed at questioning Winnie’s alleged involvement in the torture and subsequent murder of fourteen-year-old Stompie Seipei in the 1990s.

Nigeria’s ruling party, @OfficialAPC, seems to be in the same position as South Africa’s ANC. This is because no matter how it tries to use Twitter to generate good publicity, netizens use a host of creative images, emojis, and memes to mock the party’s efforts and discredit it along with its leaders ahead of the 2023 general elections. For instance, on November 11, 2022, APC tweeted an online newspaper article, in which its then-presidential candidate,

Bola Tinubu, promised to “make solid minerals the new ‘oil’ for Nigeria.” The tweet generated 48 retweets, 164 likes, and 65 comments. Most of the comments were critical of APC and its presidential candidate. The following extracts are demonstrative of these critical views of Nigeria’s ruling APC and its leaders:

“F1: “Beware of their empty promises, Vote Wisely (*sic*).”

This tweet was accompanied by a picture with the following words: “Don’t fall for APC lies again. 2015: change—X. 2019: Next level—XX. 2023: Renewed Hope—XXX. I’m warning you now!!! Vote Peter Obi and Datti Ahmed of LP for a better Nigeria.”

Other netizens even went as far as being hostile to APC’s presidential candidate:

F2: “Bola Tinubu was 58 years old in 1993 according to the US court document from his drug trafficking trial. Tha means Bola Tinubu should be 87 year old in 2022, but he’s parading himself as a 70 year old man. Everything about this man is a lie. A conman contesting for President (*sic*)”

In the same vein, the party tweeted on December 2, 2022, with a simple hashtag: “#TinubuBayelsa” (@OfficialAPCNg, 2022). This tweet was accompanied by four pictures of people cheering the party’s leaders at a rally in Bayelsa. The tweet garnered 16 comments, 39 retweets, and 186 likes. The same negative reaction among netizens continued. This is shown in the following selected extract:

F3: “Nigerians, Stand up for yourselves. Stand up for your truth. Stand up for your country. Stand up for your values. Stand up for your future. Vote for competency. Vote for capacity. Vote for character. Vote for honesty. Vote for productivity. Vote for @PeterObi”

However, unlike the ANC, there are still some people who publicly support the APC and its leader, Bola Tinubu. For example, on December 15, 2022, the APC tweeted about the opening of the Niger bridge and the tweet was simply: “ONWA DECEMBER [partying face emoji]. The 2nd Niger Bridge is open for use by motorists #PMBAtWork” (@OfficialAPCNg, 2022).

This tweet attracted 99 retweets, 411 likes, and 38 comments. Although there were some negative comments to this tweet, there were positive ones as well. This shows that some netizens are persuaded by the messages posted by the party. The following extract can be cited as an example:

F4: “Thank you @OfficialAPCNG. God bless @MBuhari. God bless Nigeria. @OfficialABAT will continue the great works in 2023 by God’s grace”

When it comes to the Labour Party (@NgLabour), the party enjoys considerable support based on the positive reactions it generates when it tweets messages and interacts with netizens. From a rhetorical perspective, the party appears to succeed in persuading its audience. For example, on December 3, 2022, the party tweeted a speech where its presidential candidate, Peter Obi, simply read, “I have not come out for myself! I have come out for the millions of youths that are losing in our beloved country! The millions of wone and what it holds for them and their children, the poor who are asking whether it’s a sin to be a Nigerian! For them, I have come! – PO (*sic*).” The tweet generated 164 comments, 2,562 retweets, and 8,132 likes. Most comments to this tweet were positive. Some of them are in the extracts below:

G1: “Father of Nigeria we are solidly behind u Mr president (*sic*).”

G2: “‘The labour of our heroes past’ and the Labour of our heroes present shall never be in vain (*sic*).”

In the case of the PDP (@OfficialPDPNg), despite the party’s attempts to actively reach its audience and persuade them to rally behind its leaders, we found that most of the reactions to the tweets by the party were negative. Some tweets, however, were positively received by the party’s supporters. For instance, on December 21, 2022, the party tweeted a video that showed a crowd of its supporters gathering at a mega rally in Delta state. The tweet was captioned as follows:

Umbrellas everywhere at Delta State @OfficialPDP Mega Rally in Patani LGA of Delta State. #DeltaPDPRally #MOREForDelta #SOFTDELTA #SHerriffOnyeme2023 (*sic*).

The tweet generated 13 comments, 27 retweets, and 75 likes. The following extracts are examples of positive reactions from PDP’s supporters:

H1: “PDP power atiku okuwa will win the incoming elections insha Allah (*sic*).”

H2: “Umbrella every where simply means victory every where (*sic*).”

In comparison with political parties in Nigeria, @MYANC seems to be struggling to attract positive comments from netizens, despite enjoying somewhat enough support from South Africans, who keep voting them into power during elections. Despite the ANC keeping an active Twitter profile and regularly

posting updates on what it is doing, it seems there is a disconnect between the ANC's claims of what it is doing and the unscrupulous leaders who are only focused on lining their pockets instead of addressing social challenges.

In contrast, the Labour Party seems to be enjoying considerable support on Twitter, and its messages appeal to most netizens. This could be attributed to the fact that most of the party's supporters are primarily youth, who have a significant presence on Twitter. Notwithstanding, although it seems that netizens generally have the power to criticize their elected leaders, political parties can succeed in persuading netizens based on the messages they post on Twitter.

CONCLUSION

This chapter attempted to explore the contested political space on Twitter based on how political parties try to weaponize the social networking site to lure support from ordinary netizens. Among our key findings, we observed that although political parties use the fundamental features of rhetoric (i.e., logos, pathos, and ethos), netizens enjoy the power that comes with freedom of expression, and they can raise their critical views of the political parties without fear.

Another key observation was that, based on the kind of interactions and reactions that the political parties generate on Twitter, some political parties may not enjoy much positive support from netizens, but nevertheless are more popular and can garner much support from the electorate when they go to the polls. For instance, what seemed like a promising victory for the Labour Party and a humiliating defeat for the APC and PDP in Nigeria online did not materialize in practice. The APC's Bola Tinubu was elected as Nigeria's president, thereby extending the APC's governance over Nigeria for another term in office. Therefore, it is not a foregone conclusion that having considerable support on Twitter directly translates to a massive following in real life, notwithstanding the success that a party may have in persuading its online audience.

Based on the scope of this study, looking at its netnographic approach that necessitated the use of content analysis only, we call for further studies to be conducted where other methods of data collection are employed, to further interrogate the reasons behind, for instance, the supposed support of the critical stances that netizens share on social media. Furthermore, the kind of political tolerance that seems to exist on Twitter and the kind of power or freedom that netizens have to critique their public representatives, is peculiar and should be compared with the kind of behavior among ordinary citizens in other public spheres (e.g., a town hall meeting or localized meetings between

political leaders and residents). Such studies will help in further testing the assertion that Twitter could arguably be a suitable digital public sphere that enables political tolerance and advances the continuance of deliberative democratic discourse, irrespective of geographic setting or political dynamics.

REFERENCES

- Arduser, Lora, Davis, Julie M., Evans, Robert, Hubbell, Christine, Mascle, Deanna, Mullins, Cheri, and Ryan, Christopher J. 2011. "The need for rules: Determining the usability of adding audio to the MOO." *Computers and Composition* 28: 57–72.
- Bayram, F. 2010. "Ideology and political discourse: A critical discourse analysis of Erdogan's political speech." *Arecls* 7 (1): 18.
- Bitzer, L. 1981. "Political Rhetoric." In *Handbook of Political Communication*, edited by D. D. Nimmo and K. R. Sanders, 225–48. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Bogost, Ian. 2007. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Campbell, K. K., and Jamieson, K. H. 1990. *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cap, P. 2020. "Critical discourse analysis—theories, methodologies, domains." *Discourses on Culture* 13: 215–54.
- Chaffee, S. H. 1975. *Political Communication*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Chilton, P. 1985. "Words, Discourse and Metaphors: The Meanings of Deter, Deterrent and Deterrence." In *Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate: Nukespeak Today*, edited by P. Chilton, 103–27. London: Pinter.
- Chilton, P. 1988. *Orwellian Language and the Media*. London: Pluto Press.
- Coleman, S. 2005. "New mediation and direct representation: reconceptualizing representation in the digital age." *New media & society* 7 (2): 177–98. DOI: 10.1177/1461448050745.
- Depew, Kevin E. 2015. "Preparing for the Rhetoricity of OWI." In *Foundational Practices of Online Writing Instruction*, edited by B. L. Hewett and K. E. Depew, 439–67. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press.
- Duerringer, Christopher M. 2016. "Dis-honouring the dead: Negotiating decorum in the shadow of Sandy Hook." *Western Journal of Communication* 80 (1): 79–99.
- Faris, D. M. 2013. *Dissent and Revolution in a Digital Age: Social Media, Blogging and Activism in Egypt*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd.
- Foss, S. K., and Foss, K. A. 2003. *Inviting Transformation: Presentational Speaking for a Changing World*, 2nd ed. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.
- Eyman, Douglas. 2016. "Looking back and looking forward: Digital rhetoric as evolving field." *Enculturation: A Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture* 23. <https://www.enculturation.net/looking-back-and-looking-forward>.
- Etumnu, E. W., Okoro, L. N., and Okoro, U. C. 2019. "Social media as a modern platform for political discourse in IMO state." *IMSU Journal of Communication Studies* 3 (1): 24–36.

- Gamson, W. A. 1992. *Talking Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geis, M. L. 1987. *The Language of Politics*. New York: Springer.
- Gibson, R. 2015. "Party change, social media and the rise of "citizen initiated campaigning." *Party Politics* 21 (2), 183–97.
- Graber, D. A. 1981. "Political Languages." In *Handbook of Political Communication*, edited by D. D. Nimmo and K. R. Sanders, 195–223. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Hart, R. P. 1984. *Verbal Style and the Presidency: A Computer-Based Analysis*. New York: Academic Press.
- Hocks, M. E. 2003. "Understanding Visual Rhetoric in Digital Writing Environments." *College Composition and Communication* 54 (4): 629–56.
- Horváth, J. 2009. "Critical Discourse Analysis of Obama's Political Discourse." In *Language, Literature and Culture in a Changing Transatlantic World, International Conference Proceedings*, 45–56. Presov: University of Presov.
- Island, R. 2016. South African History (Online). Available at <http://www.sahistory.org.za/people/jacobgedleyihlekisa-zuma>. Retrieved July 5, 2023.
- Kumwenda, S. 2016. "A Critical Discourse Analysis of How South African Publics Engaged in the Social Media Platform, Facebook, over Nkandlagate in 2015," doctoral diss., University of the Witwatersrand, Faculty of Humanities.
- Margetts, H. 2006. "Cyber Parties." In *Handbook of Party Politics*, edited by R. Katz and W. Crotty, 528–36. London: SAGE Publications.
- Molale, T., and Mpofu, P. 2023. "(Dis)continuities of African Language Radio on Social Media: The Case of South Africa's Motswedding FM and Radio Zimbabwe." In *African Language Media*, edited by P. Mpofu, I. A. Fadipe, and T. Tshabangu, 65–78. New York: Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781003350194-8.
- Morris, D. 2001. Direct democracy and the internet, *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review* 34 (3): 1033–53.
- Mpofu, P., Asak, M. O., and Salawu, A. 2022. "Facebook groups as a transnational counter public sphere for diasporic communities." *Cogent Arts & Humanities* 9: 1–13. DOI: 10.1080/23311983.2022.2027598.
- Opeibi, T. 2019. "The Twittersphere as political engagement space: A study of social media usage in election campaigns in Nigeria." *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique* 9 (1).
- Rainie, L., Anderson, J., and Albright, J. 2017. "The future of free speech, trolls, anonymity and fake news online." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/03/29/the-future-of-free-speech-trolls-anonymity-and-fake-news-online/>.
- Snyder, C. R., and Higgins, R. L. 1990. "Reality Negotiation and Excuse-Making: President Reagan's 4 March 1987 Iran Arms Scandal Speech and Other Literature." In *The Psychology of Tactical Communication. Monographs in Social Psychology of Language*, 2nd ed., edited by Michael J. Cody and Margaret L. McLaughlin, 207–28. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Stuckey, M. E. 1989. *Getting into the Game: The Pre-Presidential Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan*. New York: Praeger.
- Thompson, K. W. 1987d. *The History and Philosophy of Rhetoric and Political Discourse*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.

- Thompson, K. W., ed. 1987e. *To Form or Preserve a Government: The Presidency, the Congress, and Political Discourse*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.
- Tracy, S. J. 2020. *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact, 2nd ed.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Van-Dijk, T. A. 2003. "Critical Discourse Analysis." In *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, edited by D. Schiffrin, D. Tannen, and H. E. Hamilton, 352–71. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Van-Dijk, T. A. 2006. "Politics, Ideology, and Discourse." In *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, Vol. 9, edited by K. Brown, 728–40. Oxford; New York: Pergamon Press.
- Verhulsdonck, G. 2014. "Digital Rhetoric and Globalization: A Convergence-Continuum Model." In *Digital Arts and Entertainment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*, 1–39. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Wilhelm, A. G. 2000. *Democracy in the Digital Age: Challenges to Political Life in Cyberspace*. New York: Routledge.
- Wilson, J. 1990. *Politically Speaking*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Windt, T. 1983. *Presidential Rhetoric, 1961 to the Present*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Wright, S. 2016. "'Success' and online political participation: The case of Downing Street E-petitions." *Information, Communication & Society* 19 (6): 843–57. DOI: 10.1080/1369118X2015.1080285.