Discourse and Manipulation: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Nigeria's 2023 Post-Election Tweets

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Abstract: This paper is a critical discourse analysis of manipulation in reactionary tweets posted on the Twitter (X) social media platform on the results of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. This study identifies the functions that tweets play in political communication in Nigeria, analyses some of the reactionary tweets that were posted by netizens after the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria and examines the power relations of Twitter (X) users in political communication. The study employs a qualitative research methodology in which thirty-seventy tweets were purposively selected and downloaded from the INEC Twitter (X) handle. They were then subjected to a critical analysis using the theoretical framework of Teun van Dijk's (2006) Discourse and Manipulation perspective which is premised on Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. The study reveals that social manipulation was done through the vehicle of anonymity that Twitter as a social media platform provides for its users thereby making it possible for people to tweet at will. Cognitive manipulation is shown through the posting of tweets that provide false information that seeks to mislead the social media audience who lack sufficient information to resist such manipulation. The paper concludes that discursive manipulation is done through the emphasis of the negative aspects of the electoral process versus the positive emphasis of Twitter authors who stand in judgement against what they term corrupt and illegal practices of the electoral commission.

Keywords: Manipulation, Political Discourse, Power, Tweets, Twitter (X)

Introduction

The 2023 Nigerian presidential elections took place in various parts of the country on Saturday, the 25th of March 2023 and were fraught with the usual complaints and discontentment that is common with elections globally. Prior to the conduct of the elections, the electoral body in charge of its conduct, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) made several promises to Nigerians. One hundred days to the commencement of the elections, the Business Day Online newspaper (2023) reported that the INEC Chairman, Professor Mahmoud Yakubu, had in a letter signed by him, assured Nigerians that the elections would be 'free, fair, credible and verifiable … supported by technology, which guarantees transparent accreditation and upload of polling unit results for citizens to view in real-time on election day'. He further stated that, 'It is for this reason that the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) were introduced. There is no going back on the deployment of BVAS and IReV for the 2023 general election.' (*Business Day Online Newspaper*) Many Nigerians believed in the assurances given by the INEC Chairman and were therefore disappointed when not only were the results of the polling units not uploaded for citizens to view in real time on the day of the elections, but the results of the presidential elections were not announced until several days after its conduct. Some Nigerians therefore took to Twitter now known as X, after the announcement of the results of the presidential elections to express

their opinions on not just the results but the conduct of the elections. One of the ways in which the internet has influenced media discourse is through its interactive method of communication. There now exists, because of social media platforms on the internet, more forceful means of sharing thoughts, opinions, and feelings. This is perhaps because these platforms provide a level of anonymity which makes their users more comfortable and indeed bolder in expressing their feelings and opinions on just about any and every discursive topic. Twitter (X) is a microblogging social media application which provides a platform for netizens (citizens of the internet) to share short and quick information, opinions, and comments. Posts shared on twitter mostly contain texts but may also contain pictures, videos, and links. The posts on Twitter (X) have a maximum limit of 280 characters only per tweet. As of December 2022, according to Dixon (2022), 'twitter's (X) audience accounted for over 368 million monthly active users worldwide.'

Several studies have been carried out on tweets used in political discourse in Nigeria. Most of these studies have focused on the linguistic devices in these tweets and their implications for social media users (Ihebuzor and Nwachukwu: 2018, Ukwueze et al: 2018). This study is different because it looks at the power relations that are seen using the tool of manipulation in internet tweets and how this can sway netizens either positively or negatively to action. This area of discourse analysis as far as the manipulative reactions of citizens after political elections in Nigeria are concerned is an area that needs to be given greater academic attention and it is this gap that this study seeks to fill.

This study is significant because it details the importance of communicating serious issues using a tool which many people readily identify with, which is the internet via the Twitter (X) social media platform. Not only is the internet becoming more and more popular among the young and old alike, but internet tweets are also becoming a veritable tool through which people express their views on topical issues. This study also shows that it is not only institutions and political office holders that exercise power but that ordinary citizens also exercise and even abuse power when they find a suitable platform from which they can do so. It is this fact that makes a study of the use of internet tweets in political discourse an important area that needs to be given academic attention.

Literature Review

Critical Discourse Analysis, according to Van Dijk (2001), 'is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. With such dissident research, he adds, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality.' (352)

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) define discourse as:

> a knowledge which is (1) a knowledge of practices, of how things are or must be done (at the level of discourse these two merge), together with specific evaluations and legitimations of and purposes for these practices, and (2) a knowledge which is linked to and activated in the context of specific communicative practices. This means that people may at different times draw on different discourses about the

same practice or practices, choosing the one they see as most adequate to their own interests in the given context. (114)

According to Wodak (2011), 'Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is fundamentally interested in analyzing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control when these are manifested in language. In other words, CDA aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, constituted, legitimized, and so on, by language use (or in discourse)' (53).

Van Dijk (1997), in affirming that political discourse does not only involve politicians, states that, 'From the interactional point of view of discourse analysis, we … should also include the various recipients in political communicative events, such as the public, the people, citizens, the 'masses' and other groups or categories.' (13)

Social media use and its effect on the users and society at large has garnered a lot of academic interest in recent times particularly with the advent of the smart phone and the accessibility of social media platforms to more and more users over time. Some studies have focused on social media and politics in Nigeria. Abubakar (2012), for instance, did a study on political participation and discourse in social media during the 2011 presidential electioneering in which he examined the role of social media in enhancing citizens' political participation in Nigeria's democracy during the 2011 presidential electioneering campaign. Using the Public Sphere Theory (PST), thematic analysis approach and multiple sample technique, he concluded that more citizens actively participated and contributed to the political discourse, particularly on themes related to politics, power, energy, security, education, and foreign relations in pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral manners but mostly on ethnic-regional lines during the elections.

Ihebuzor and Nwachukwu's (2018) study sought to investigate the dominant themes and motives of political conversations on Twitter in Nigeria. Their study concluded that tweets on political conversations in Nigeria exhibited hostile engagement, unwillingness to listen, contempt for the other, etc. which led him to conclude that the major motive for using the Twitter platform for political conversations was self-aggrandizement.

Ukwueze et al (2018) explored the extent of youth involvement with the social media for the electioneering process. Their investigation revealed that the political judgement and voting patterns of many young people during the 2011 elections were influenced by social media. Also, the fact that electoral stakeholders such as INEC, monitors/observers used social media during the 2011 elections probably gave more credibility to the medium and explained its ability to have some form of influence on the political decisions of youths.

The above studies focused on the importance of social media in enhancing the participation of Nigerian citizens in elections, the use of Twitter (X) as a platform for political aggrandizement as well as the involvement of young people in the electioneering process because of the influence of social media. None of the studies looked at the effect of Twitter in promoting the use and abuse of power in politics by social media users. This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing how Twitter users manipulate their audience through the messages they post on the platform.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used for this research is Van Dijk's (2006) perspective of discourse and manipulation which is premised on Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistic theory which states that language is used for a particular reason or reasons. Van Dijk's perspective of discourse and manipulation triangulates a social, cognitive, and discursive approach to manipulation. He views this triangulated approach to manipulation as a form of social power abuse, cognitive mind control and discursive interaction. Van Dijk states that,

> Socially, manipulation is defined as illegitimate domination confirming social inequality. Cognitively, manipulation as mind control involves the interference with processes of understanding, the formation of biased mental models and social representations such as knowledge and ideologies. Discursively, manipulation generally involves the usual forms and formats of ideological discourse, such as emphasizing Our good things, and emphasizing Their bad things. (359)

According to Van Dijk (2006), 'In order to be able to exercise such social control of others, however, social actors need to satisfy personal and social criteria that enable them to influence others in the first place.' (362) Van Dijk (2006) stresses the discourse structures that aid in manipulation as follows:

(a) Emphasize the position, power, authority or moral superiority of the speaker(s) or their sources – and, where relevant, the inferior position, lack of knowledge, etc. of the recipients.
(b) Focus on the (new) beliefs that the manipulator wants the recipients to accept as knowledge, as well as on the arguments, proofs, etc. that make such beliefs more acceptable.
(c) Discredit alternative (dissident, etc.) sources and beliefs.
(d) Appeal to the relevant ideologies, attitudes, and emotions of the recipients. (376)

Van Dijk's theory is useful as a theoretical framework for analysis because it provides a systematic approach to understanding how language can be wielded to shape perceptions and manipulate audiences. By examining discourse structures and linguistic strategies, it offers insights into the mechanisms of persuasion, propaganda, and social control thereby aiding in uncovering hidden agendas, biases, and power dynamics embedded in language use.

Methodology

The research methodology for this study is a qualitative methodology that depended on a purposive sampling method in obtaining the data that was used. Thirty-seven internet tweets were downloaded via the Twitter (X) social media platform and were then compressed into 10 screenshots for use in this study. A purposive sampling method was used for the data collection since the study employed a content-based qualitative analysis method as its research methodology. The tweets were downloaded via the twitter (X) handle of the Independent

National Electoral Commission (INEC) @inecnigeria. The downloaded tweets were responses to the news item by the commission on the declaration of the winner of the 2023 presidential elections. The selected tweets were then subjected to a political discourse analysis.

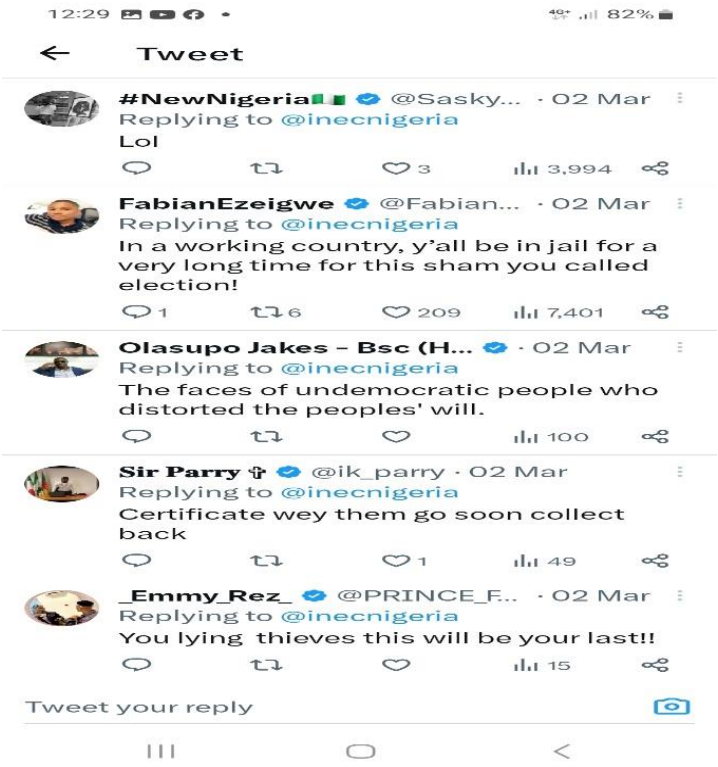
Findings and Discussions

Van Dijk (2006) states that, '… in order to be able to manipulate many others through text and talk, one needs to have access to some form of public discourse, such as parliamentary debates, news, opinion articles, textbooks, scientific articles, novels, TV shows, advertising, the internet, and so on. And since such access and control in turn depend on, as well as constitute, the power of a group (institution, profession, etc.), public discourse is at the same time a means of the social reproduction of such power.' (362) The internet, and by extension, social media is therefore a veritable platform for users to exercise manipulative powers over other users.

Self-Presentation

Fairclough (2013) notes that, '… it is the prerogative of powerful participants to determine which discourse type(s) may be legitimately drawn upon. Thus, in addition to directly constraining contributions, powerful participants can indirectly constrain them by selecting the discourse type' (39).

SCREENSHOT 1



SCREENSHOT 2

Heaney (2013) believes that emotions are 'the means by which the power game is played.' (358) This display of emotions is seen in most of the tweets posted in this study. The emotions, most of which are angry, are reactions to the announcement of the winner of the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria. There is an obvious case of positive self-representation and negative other representation in the first tweet in Screenshot 1: 'We the citizens must fight for our right and future, old man of that age can never be our president, God forbid.' The citizens in this tweet are portrayed in a good light unlike the winner of the presidential elections who is portrayed as an old man that is incapable of leading the country. There is also a case of macro speech act where the good act of the citizens is implied as people who want to fight for their rights and future as against the bad act of INEC and the winner of the presidential elections.

Assertion

The second tweet, in Screenshot 1 reads: 'They are all going to jail. The evidence is overwhelming…' This tweet is linguistically similar to the fourth and fifth tweets in Screenshot 2 which respectively read: 'Certificate wey them go soon collect back.' and 'You lying thieves this will be your last!! One criterion of recipients of manipulation, according to Van Dijk (2006) is a lack of crucial resources to resist, detect or avoid manipulation. This, he adds, 'may involve incomplete or lack of relevant knowledge – so that no counterarguments can be formulated against false, incomplete or biased assertions.' (375)

A number of users of Twitter (X) as can be seen from this study, take advantage of this criterion, banking on the lack of relevant knowledge of their audience in order to spread their own biases and false assertions thereby cognitively manipulating them. In the aforementioned tweets, the authors make authoritative declarations about going to jail, the action of INEC being their last, and the collection of the certificate of return of the winner of the 2023 presidential elections, etc. like people who have some knowledge that their audience lacks.

SCREENSHOT **3**

SCREENSHOT **4**

The tweets in Screenshots 3 and 4 continue with discursive strategies which display emotional outbursts that reflect the negative reactions of their authors to the announcement of the presidential results. There are comments about the INEC chairman going to jail, being arrested soon, a quotation from the Quran alluding to the amputation of the hands of a thief, reference to the declaration of the winner of the presidential elections in 'the middle of the night', etc.

The tweets in Screenshots 3 and 4 emphasize the position and authority of their authors in comments like, 'Y'all going to jail' and 'He will be arrested soon.' There is also seen in those tweets, a focus on the belief that the authors want their audience to accept as knowledge. They make their comments with a level of authority that imply that they have some hidden knowledge about the fate of the INEC Chairman that their audience lacks. Goffman (2008) notes that 'by breaching and violating quality or expressing irrelevance, speakers tend to prove their points, support their claims, and preserve their self-images' (17). This act is seen in the above assertions in the aforementioned tweets.

SCREENSHOT **5**

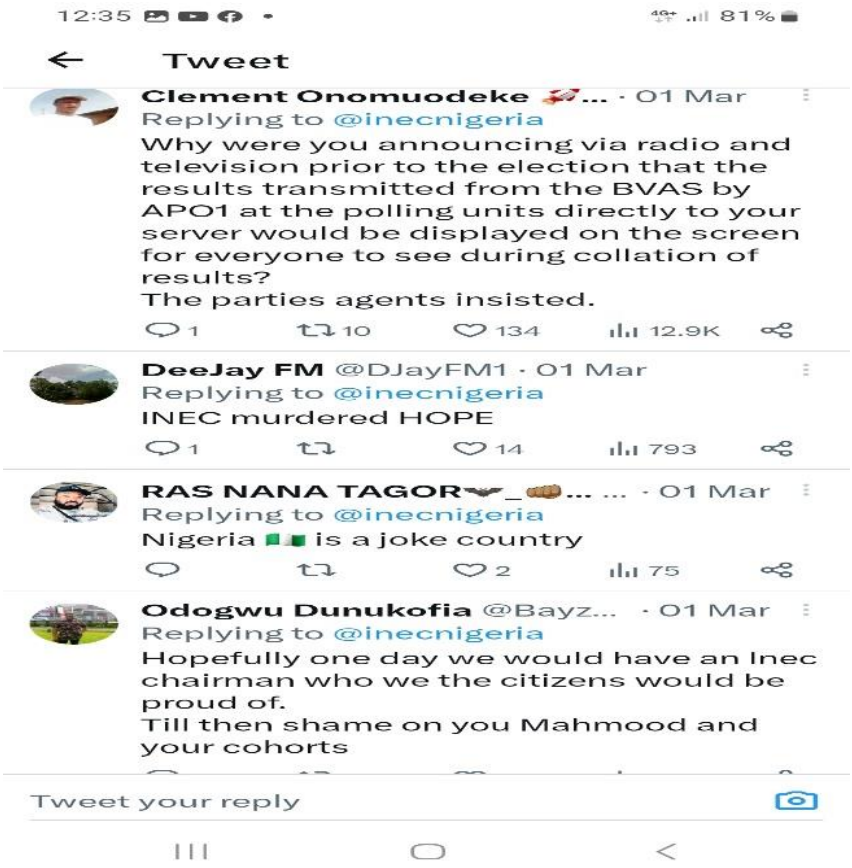
SCREENSHOT 6

Metaphors

In Screenshot 5, the first tweet is, 'You collected money and did coronation that you called election. Oleeeeee. Meanwhile, go and pay corp members & your agents ooo. With your moi moi rubber say na ballot box. Mtcheeew. Tinubu dependent body.' The use of metaphors in these tweets are done to purposefully deride the election process by referring to it as a 'coronation' and not an election. The author also implies that the electoral body did not pay her agents as well as the Youth Corps members that worked for her during the elections. There was also a reference to the ballot boxes which the tweet derisively called 'moi moi' rubber meaning it was ineffective. Finally, the tweet nicknamed the electoral body, 'Tinubu dependent body' implying that the electoral body was not independent as their name connotes but was working for one of the presidential candidates, Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu, hence the name, 'Tinubu dependent body.' The tweet immediately following that asks, 'What's honourable about Mahmood Yakubu?' This is a rhetorical question posed to mock the title, 'Honourable' which is customarily affixed to the name of the INEC president. The indirect assertion here is that the

Chairman of INEC lacks integrity and so should not be referred to as 'Honourable.' The last tweet in Screenshot five reads, 'Please, kindly unfollow INEC. An organization of no integrity. I'm doing that right now.' This tweet is a call to netizens to boycott the Twitter handle of INEC. The discursive manipulative strategy used in this tweet serves to emphasize the bad character of INEC in not having integrity and weighs it against the author of this tweet and his audience whose good character is emphasized by their decision to unfollow INEC in order to show their unwillingness to associate with anything or anyone who lacks integrity. So, there is a sense of superior moral authority that is shown through this tweet by its author and his compliant audience who the author seeks to manipulate through the tweet by asking them to 'unfollow' INEC.

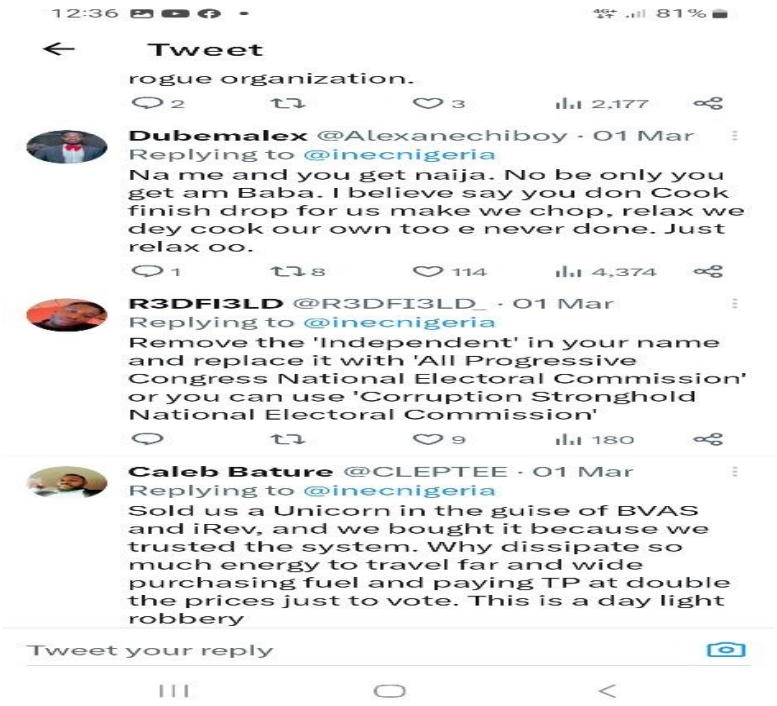
SCREENSHOT **7**



SCREENSHOT 8

Polarization

In wishing for INEC and other unnamed individuals to 'reap the fruits' of their 'labour', the author of the first tweet in Screenshot 7 is expressing his desire which is borne out of his frustration with the results of the elections. The second and third tweets in Screenshot 7 as well as the first tweet in Screenshot 8 are rhetorical questions which their authors pose in a manner that disparages the electoral commission and implies that they were fraudulent in their conduct of the presidential elections. There is a discursive strategy of polarization used between the good and the evil, between us and them, in these tweets. The metaphorical expressions used in the third and fourth tweets in Screenshot 8 are reflective of the emotional assertions made by their authors. These metaphorical expressions are used to make direct claims about the actions of INEC, that of dashing the hope of the people of Nigeria: 'INEC murdered hope' and that of Nigeria not being a serious country: 'Nigeria is a joke country.'



SCREENSHOT 9

SCREENSHOT 10

In Screenshots 9 and 10, all the tweets were accusatory as well as defamatory. The authors of the tweets apart from labelling INEC a rogue organization, accusing the commission and its chairman of conducting the worst election in the country's history, lying to Nigerians, also used threats like, '…relax we dey cook our own too e never done. Just relax oo' implying that something sinister was being planned against the electoral body. This flouts Grice's (1975) cooperative principle which requires the speaker to be 'as informative as required by the communicative situation without being redundant or ambiguous' (45). The fourth tweet in Screenshot 9 is an indirect appeal to the emotions of the recipients, appealing to their displeasure about some of the hardships that they experienced before and during the elections, hardships like fuel scarcity and shortage of cash. This appeal to the emotions of the recipients is no doubt done to gain their sympathy and thereby influence them negatively about the electoral body.

Conclusion

This study has succeeded in showing the implicit messages conveyed through the Twitter social media platform. A number of the tweets that were posted after the 2023 presidential elections were not only inflammatory but were also accusatory, defamatory and threatening. The authors of many of the tweets under study displayed a sense of moral authority by pronouncing judgement on the electoral commission, its chairman as well as the winner of the 2023 presidential elections. The tweets were used to manipulate their audience into action by calling them to unfollow INEC, giving them biased and untrue information. The use of social manipulation was done through the vehicle of anonymity that Twitter as a social media platform provides for its users thereby making it possible for people to tweet whatever they wish and get away with it. Cognitive manipulation was shown through the posting of tweets that provided false information that sought to mislead the social media audience who lacked sufficient information to resist such manipulation. Discursive manipulation was done through the emphasis of the negative aspects of the electoral process and the positive emphasis of the moral high ground of the Twitter authors who stand in judgement against what they termed corrupt and illegal practices of the electoral commission.

This study has not only identified but also examined the tweets that were posted on the INEC Twitter handle as a reaction to their announcement of the results and subsequent winner of the 2023 presidential elections. This study has revealed that the anonymity that social media platforms provide makes it easy for their users to not only exercise but also abuse power. It has revealed how discursive linguistic features such as self-presentation, assertion, metaphors, and polarization are used to persuade, manipulate, and convey social ideologies in twitter discourse on political issues. The use of the tweets studied in this paper show a reproduction and inculcation of the ideologies of their authors which are based on their interests and biases. This study has revealed that internet tweets have a great influence in manipulating their recipients. The lexical choices deployed in tweets are strategically used to emphasize the abuse of power by users of the internet who have the advantage of anonymity to post tweets that can be both damaging and hurtful to other users of the platform. This study has also helped to fill the gap in available knowledge by showcasing power abuse as well as its enactment, representation, reproduction, and legitimization in text and talk through the medium of internet tweets.

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