



**INSTRUMENT OF PERCEPTION CHANGE USED BY OPINION LEADERS TO
CHANGE VOTER PERCEPTION OF URBAN AND RURAL ELECTORATES IN THE
2019 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION IN SOUTHWEST, NIGERIA.**

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ABSTRACT

Electorates' perception of candidates contesting for political offices, no doubt, is a key factor in determining the voting decisions of the electorates. Having realized the importance of voter perception to electoral victory, candidates for political offices are always concerned about how to influence or alter voters' perception of who they are. Past studies revealed that one of the key agents of perception change is the opinion leader who, by virtue of his goodwill, credibility and closeness to the voters can influence their perception of candidates. The type of leadership style used to ensure perception change and the degree of the change in perception attributable to opinion leaders' influence have however not been thoroughly investigated by existing studies. This study employed survey research design. The population of the study included all 11,897,401 registered voters in the three South-west state that conducted gubernatorial election in 2019. The states are: Ogun, Oyo and Lagos. A sample size of 1,067 was generated. The multi-stage sampling technique was used for the study. The study showed that opinion leaders significantly influenced voters' perception of political candidates as information given by opinion leaders made them to view a particular candidate positively during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria. Urban ($x=3.69$) and rural ($x=3.80$). The study concluded that the main instrument of perception change employed by opinion leaders among urban and rural electorates was the quality of information offered by opinion leaders about a particular candidate. The study, therefore, recommended that opinion leaders

should concentrate on offering illuminating information about their preferred candidates rather than the use of gifts or coercion to change voter perception.

Keywords: Opinion leadership instrument, Opinion leadership style, Perception change, Urban and Rural electorate, South-west, Nigeria.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Although, traditional and social media are veritable tools of managing people's perception of political candidates, opinion leaders because of their closeness to the people are likely to exert greater influence on how electorates perceive political candidates. While it is true that the social media (Twitter, Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, Youtube etc.) have become powerful media, which may affect voter perception of candidates because of their potential to provide direct and cheap access to the production and consumption of current information, the lack of face to face interaction which characterizes the social media and the consequent low level of believability and trust has arguably enhanced the role of opinion leaders as agents of perception management because of their perceived credibility, reputation, trustworthiness and expertise occasioned by their closeness to the people.

Perceptions are important influences on the voters. It is believed that perception of candidates is influenced by honesty and trustworthiness of the candidates. Miller and Shanks (1996) opined that voters judge candidates by their personal characteristics which will include such things as: experience, honesty, morality, compassion, competence and leadership ability. Pandel, et al also corroborated this view when they argued that political trust greatly influences perception. It is also believed that since the electorate do not know most of the candidates very closely to enable them evaluate them critically, they depend on opinion leaders who are presumed to know so much about the candidates.

Electorates' perception of candidates contesting for political offices, no doubt, is a key factor in determining the voting decisions of the electorates. Having realized the importance of voter perception to electoral victory, candidates for political offices are always concerned about how to influence or alter voter's perception of who they are. Past studied revealed that one of the key agents of perception change is the opinion leader who, by virtue of his goodwill, credibility and closeness to the voters can influence their perception of candidates.

Certain characteristics and style of leadership of opinion leaders have been acknowledged globally as being instrumental to their ability to influence voter perception of candidates and consequently bringing about perception change. Marko (2011) noted that they exert influence on their followers based on their standing within ethnic-political divides. This means that their position as ethnic figures could determine their influence. Chen, Glass and McCartney (2016) also attributed a leader's influence to such characteristics as reputation, stubbornness, appeal and extremeness. They explained that leaders with higher reputation will be able to persuade their neighbours thereby, attracting more followers. Trepte and Scherer (2010) equally emphasized the importance of knowledge to the influence of opinion leaders as they claimed that those who display high knowledge are respected when they offer advice.

Apart from the strategies employed by opinion leaders to influence voting decisions of the electorate, another key instrument of influence is leadership style. We have the carrot and stick styles of leadership. The carrot style of leadership uses reward. Lindberg (2010) opined that the patron-client relationship existing between opinion leaders and their followers have been mutually beneficial as the leaders' influence is motivated by a carrot. Stokes (2005) argued that the stick style of leadership monitors voters, rewarding support and punishing defectors.

The nature of emergence of a leader is believed to be responsible for his style of leadership. Gottlieb (2014) argues that there are basically two types of opinion leaders: the competitively selected and the autonomous leaders. The competitively selected leaders are more likely to share preferences of their followers and less likely to rely on tactics that are distasteful to followers such as coercion. They are perceived as more legitimate and thus induce higher levels of cooperation. Gottlieb believes that autonomous leaders are less downwardly accountable and have a greater capacity for coercion. They are more likely to motivate followers through fear of sanction rather than preference alignment.

Gottlieb's identification of leader types and their styles can be used to explain opinion leadership types and styles in Nigeria. Where leaders of market, trade associations and unions are competitively selected, they tend to have preferences that align with those of their followers as the relationship is mutually beneficial because the leader's continued leadership depends on the followers' faith in him or her. Therefore, the influence is usually motivated by a carrot.

However, in the case of an autonomous leader, who was perhaps selected by governor or local council chairman, or inherited leadership position, there is the possibility of such a leader being coercive as his allegiance will be to the one who appointed him. We have heard cases of powerful politicians appointing their daughters and associates as Iyaloja and Babaloja with a strong mandate to deliver electoral votes. Such a leader will naturally want to employ force to ensure the wish of his/her paymaster is done. Their influence can be enormous as Gottlieb (2014) explained that voters believe ballots are not secret even when they are, thereby voting in fear of being monitored by leaders and sanctions that would follow if their choice is discovered.

The South-west region of Nigeria consists of six states: Ekiti, Lagos, Osun, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo State. Lagos, as claimed by Akanle (2015), can be said to be the most prominent of the states with over 20m people residing in the state. The South-west is made up of Yoruba people, one of the three largest groups in Nigeria. Olutayo and Akanle (2007) described the Yoruba as a people with well-established political and economic system over which the Alafin of Oyo had pre-eminence in pre-colonial context. The Yoruba people have a culture of respect for constituted authority and elders. This culture of respect and obedience to elders may likely make them listen and follow the dictates of opinion leaders.

Akanle and Adejare (2015) opined that prior to the introduction of Christianity and Islam, African Traditional Religion was predominant among the Yoruba people. Ifa consultations, Obatala, Sango, Ogun and the worship of Osun were some of the popular forms of African Traditional Religion among the traditional Yoruba people. Politically, the Yoruba people are also believed to be ever conscious and willing to participate in political activities. They are also assumed to be willing tools in the hands of political leaders who dictate without discretion to their followers. The story of political opinion leaders such as Awolowo, Akintola, Adedibu and a host of others to whom their followers showed unalloyed loyalty and obedience, which almost set the region ablaze in the 1960s cannot be easily forgotten

Akanle and Adejare (2015) explained that even with apparent modernity, westernization and globalization, a lot of Yoruba traditional values still remain relevant today. In the light of the attributes of the Yoruba people of South-west Nigeria, this study sought to investigate how the attributes have been brought to bear on their relationship with opinion leaders. This study, therefore, looked at

the activities of opinion leaders as agents of perception change during 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Political candidates, having realized the importance of opinion leaders and how they are perceived by the electorate engaged them to help manage and influence their followers' perception of political candidates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in Southwest, Nigeria. There is no gain saying the fact that they engaged the opinion leaders as agents of perception management because of their perceived reputation, trustworthiness, and expertise occasioned by their closeness to the people. Rosas (2010) buttressed this view when he asserted that, globally trust plays an important role in the perception of political candidates. However, it is believed by some people that the opinion leaders have betrayed the trust reposed in them by the electorate as they no longer objectively and honestly present the credentials of political candidates to the electorate because the candidates now engage them to influence perception through gratifications. Political candidates, of course, will leave no stone unturned to influence voter perception because they are fully aware that voter perception of candidates will ultimately determine the voting behaviour of the electorate. It is also believed that the leadership style of opinion leaders will also determine their ability to influence voter perception as a leader's style is believed to be a strategic expect of his instrument.

This study, therefore, sought to understand the extent, the style and the means through which opinion leaders influenced urban and rural electorates' perception of candidates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in Southwest, Nigeria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the opinion leadership style used to influence voter perception of urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria?
2. How did opinion leaders influence voter perception of candidates among urban and rural electorates in the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

- H_{o1}: Opinion leadership style did not significantly influence voter perception of urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria.
- H_{o2}: Opinion leaders did not significantly influence voting perception of urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study examined the instruments engaged by opinion leaders to ensure perception change about candidates contesting in the 2019 gubernatorial election. Such concepts as characteristics of opinion leadership, opinion leadership style, perception and perception management were examined. The unit of analysis is the comparative influence of opinion leaders on perception change among urban and rural voters. The change brought about by the instruments employed was the subject of our analysis. The study focused on the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria. All the three South-west States that conducted gubernatorial election in 2019 were enumerated. The states are: Lagos, Ogun and Oyo. The South-west electorates are the registered voters in the urban and rural areas of all the three states that held gubernatorial election. The study was conducted between November, 2020 and January, 2021.

CONCEPTUAL STUDIES

PERCEPTION

Perception, from the Latin word *percepto*, means to gather and receive. It is the interpretation of sensory information in order to represent and understand the presented information or environment. Perception involves signals that go through the nervous system, which in turn, result from physical or chemical stimulation of the sensory system. It must be noted that perception is not only about passive receipt of these signals, but is also shaped by the recipient's learning, memory, expectations, and attention. Perception is believed to be subjective because the processing of information received happens outside conscious awareness and depends on the complex functions of the nervous system.

Perception, especially in philosophy, include the extent to which sensory qualities such as sound, smell or colour exist in objective reality rather than in

the mind of the perceivers. A lot of sensory information are interconnected, thereby influencing each other. For example, taste is believed to be strongly influenced by smell. Perception is seen as a belief or opinion, often held by many people based on how things seem or appear to them. It is the quality of being aware of things through the physical senses, especially sight. Perception can also be described as someone's ability to notice or understand things that are not obvious to others. It is the way that someone views, sees, thinks and feels about a person, a company, a product or services.

Perception is also defined as the process by which individuals select, organize, and interpret sensory information to give meaning and order to the world around them. In the process of selecting and interpreting, we tend to see things either negatively or positively. Linda Hunphrey (2016) opined that there are two people in the world. Those who view the glass as half-full (positive) and those who see the glass as half-empty (negative). The category to which we belong will definitely impact how we see life. It will shape, mould and influence our experiences of reality. Our past experiences will greatly influence how we decode things. Certain people, things and situations can trigger one to interpret things through a positive or negative lens. Our perceptions may appear real, but that does not mean they are necessarily factual. Humphreys (2016) argued that if you constantly perceive people as always being against you, you will most likely react in a defensive, combative and a victim-like way.

THE PERCEPTION PROCESS

Fiske & Taylor (1991) explained that in view of the fact that we take information through our five senses, and given the fact that our perceptual field (the world around us) includes so many stimuli that are impossible for our brains to process and make sense of it all, we must therefore engage in sensory selection.

The first part of the perception process is selection. Sensory selection is the process of determining which stimulus gets our attention and which stimulus to ignore.

In selecting, we tend to pay attention to information that is salient. Salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context. The determination of what is salient is influenced by:

1. Needs and interest
2. Expectation

3. Physiological limitations. This is best explained in terms of those who wear glasses. To them the world is blurred.

The second part of the selection process is organizing. Organization is based on proximity, similarities/differences and experiences.

The third part is interpreting information. This is the stage where we assign meanings to our experiences, using material structures. Our interpretation will directly affect our behaviour, which is a direct result of our accumulated experiences, needs, wants, values, expectations and beliefs.

The fourth stage is memory. It is the stage at which we decide what information to store and what to discard. The fifth stage is recall. You will want to constantly recall what you have stored.

PERCEPTION MANAGEMENT

Perception management is the practice of ensuring that the message that you wish to send to specific individuals, organizations or groups is well understood. It is about influencing how people interpret what others say about you.

Tatum (2022) described perception management as a type of strategy that is aimed at guiding the motives, emotions and conclusions of another party by working on perception of past events and the projection of future events. Khan (2015) opined that perception management may be required for such events as scandals, accidents, failures, etc. Tatum (2022) argued that some see perception management as the act of manipulating public opinion to suit one's own agenda through propaganda, spin doctoring and misinformation in order to achieve a set goal.

Garfinkle (2016) gave a four-step outline of the perception management cycle:

- 1) How do you think you are perceived? Individuals strategically employ self-serving bias to maintain and protect positive self-views
- 2) How are you perceived? He explained that political surveys commonly load semantics to both achieve target results and influence opinions. The survey questions are already biased and seek biased results.
- 3) How do you want to be perceived?

Garfinkle argued that this is the difference between your self-perception and the actual public perception. If they match, you reinforce that perception, but if not, you would need to work hard to make them align. You would need to define how you want public perception to change. If they feel you are socially

irresponsible and you seek a reputation for social responsibility, acknowledging past failures may be part of the story. This is called framing and it is important as they will begin to see you as being truthful and repentant.

4) How do you change perceptions?

Garfinkle explained that this could be achieved by keeping a friendly and responsive presence in the social media. Full-fledged reputation management may be required to distract audiences from negativity. It goes beyond manipulating information. This is where the role of the opinion leader comes in. Opinion leaders, in an attempt to manage voters' perception of candidates must not be engaged in manipulating information that can guide the electorate in making the right choices.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OPINION LEADERS

Arguably, opinion leaders are characterized by what Welmann and Joubert (2009) listed as the general characteristics of opinion leaders: Opinion leaders are found at every social level, and in most areas of decision making they influence people from the same social level. Opinion leaders are found in both sexes, all professions, all social classes, and all age groups. Opinion leaders tend to be more involved in various social activities and social organizations and occupy central positions in their personal networks. Opinion leaders are considered experts in their field, but this is an informal recognition by close friends, relatives, co-workers, colleagues, and acquaintances.

Opinion leaders are more exposed to the mass media than non-leaders, opinion leaders are more interested, involved, and updated in the field in which they are influential, and opinion leaders tend to be homomorphous. They are usually experts in one area but rarely in various areas (i.e., polymorphous). Opinion leaders manifest specific communication behaviour. They are more involved in formal and informal personal communication than non-leaders. Opinion leaders are usually well aware that they are sources of information and influence for others.

Marko (2011) defined an opinion leader as "the agent who is an active media user, and who interprets the meaning of media messages or content for ordinary media users". They also described him/her as somebody with good reputation among his followers or those who believe in him. Katz also outlines three aspects of opinion leadership; first is the way his person is valued (who one is), the

second is his/her abilities (what one knows), and the third is his/her reputation in a network (who one knows). What Katz is simply saying is that the way the opinion leader is perceived, his competence or skills and his/her ability to form network of relationships will determine his sphere of influence.

Liu (2007) shared a similar thought on the characteristics of the opinion leader. He believes opinion leaders: are more exposed to all forms of external communication and thus are somewhat cosmopolitan, have somewhat higher socioeconomic status, are more innovative (although their degree of innovativeness depends, in part, on the system's norms) and are at the centre of interpersonal communication networks. Liu has also corroborated what others have said. The striking point in his characterization is the fact that the level of forthrightness of any opinion leader is dependent on the social system or societal norms. This view had earlier been submitted by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) when they opined that the opinion leader uses social acceptance and social pressure as the basis of influence in a network.

Loeper and Steiner (2013) described opinion leaders as very influential, with their influence dependent on their expertise and visibility. What matters is not their degree of expertise, but their expertise relative to their followership. The simple truth that Loeper is putting across is that the influence that a leader exerts is a direct function of followers' characteristics. The better informed the followers are, the more equipped the leader must be. Loeper and Steiner also noted that leaders can be influential even if their preferences differ from those of the followers. However, they expressed the danger associated with a leader becoming too biased as his influence dwindles because his choices are no longer attractive to the followers.

Closely related to the degree of expertise is personality strength. The personality strength of an opinion leader is defined in terms of his ability to move through a structured social network and his ability to move is a function his expertise and credibility. Schenk and Rossler (1997) confirmed this in their study when they explained that people with high personality strength are connected to larger social networks and interact with others more often. The ability to connect to larger social networks is also dependent on the qualities of the opinion leader. A number of scholars have argued that opinion leaders are monomorphic because they refer to one area of interest only (Goldsmith & Hofacker, 1991, Rogers & Cartano, 1962). However, some of them that are polymorphic in terms of their ability to connect with two or more areas of interest have been found to have

higher personality strength as they are connected to larger social networks because of their strength that cuts across different fields of interest.

Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) explained that they are important political actors who relay messages to a wider public that do not choose to access messages directly from the politicians. They are followed because they are seen as experts, with great skills and in a position within their local community to exert social pressure and solicit social support. The ability of opinion leaders to exert influence and ensure support within their local community was emphasized by Hammed (2012) who argued that an extension worker as an outsider may not have intricate understanding of different aspects of the village community nor appreciate the perceptions and feelings surrounding village problems as local people will. This provides the basis for engaging people who belong to the community. Hammed (2012) opined that opinion leaders have the ability to use their influence and skills to gather people and charge them to take action for societal development because of their positioning in the society where people are still engrossed in superstitious beliefs, degrading cultural ideas which impact the society negatively.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are many theoretical options upon which the theoretical framework of this study can be rested. However, the review was limited to the following three theories: Two-Step flow Theory and Perception Theory.

Two Step Flow Theory

The concept of a two-step flow of communication started with Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1994) in their study on the American election campaigns in the 1940s reported in the People's Choice. They conducted the study hoping to discover that media campaigns dictated the voting choice of Americans. Surprisingly, the group discovered that the media exerted very little influence on voter's choice. Lazarsfeld and his research colleague also found that most people already made up their minds even before the voting took place. Majority of those who changed their voting decisions during the campaigns attributed such changes to other people, not the media. The revelations, therefore, ensured the emergence of a new idea of media influence unlike the days of the magic bullet that assumed media consumers as passive. The research by Lazarsfeld et al

brought about a new concept of media effect, the two step flow of communication unlike the single step flow.

Liu (2007) stated that the idea the theory conveys is clear because opinion leaders are interested in public issues and better enlightened than non-leaders. They are regarded as the primary source of influence on the public. Before the study, scholars had thought that opinions were formed by the elite of the community and then relayed from one social stratum to the other (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955:3). Now, scholars have found that opinion leaders cut across all occupational groups and are found at every socio-economic level (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955:32). By implication, Katz & Lazarsfeld believed that opinion leaders were experts in a particular field, not all. It, therefore, means that an opinion leader on educational issues might not be the same person as opinion leader on religion or fashion. Liu opined that the theory also did not take cognizance of some major news stories disseminated directly by the news media. It is also wrong to think that only opinion leaders get information directly from the media. The theory did not pay much attention to the reputation and credibility of opinion leaders as information coming from a trusted medium may be difficult to dispel by an incredible opinion leader. The theory also fails to take cognizance of the role of individual differences when it comes to information processing and media use.

The theory has also failed to critically examine the methods of persuasion being used by those regarded as opinion leaders. Some of the opinion leaders have become agents of political parties in Nigeria and are being used to financially induce voters (Adamu, Ocheni, and Ibrahim, (2016).The weaknesses of the theory notwithstanding, the theory is very relevant to this study, especially in Nigeria where the population is predominantly illiterate and rural. Therefore, people do not have access to the vehicles of the mass media. Secondly, because of the sociological bond of the African people where people act based on the influence of the social group to which they belong, the influence of opinion leaders is still largely pronounced.

Perception Theory

Perception theory falls under the “Minimally powerful Media Theories” or Individual Differences Perspective (Folarin 59). Perception can be defined as the process of making sense of our experiences or how the individual makes sense of his/her world (Folarin 1998:63). Perception has also been defined by Berelson

and Steiner (Onabajo 2005:32) as the complex process by which people select, organize and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of the world.

Perception theory explains that the process of interpreting message is quite complex; since mass communication want audiences to pay attention to their message and make appropriate change in the attitudes and beliefs and make desired behavioural responses, the process of arriving at this is quite complex; for perception is influenced by a number of psychological factors including assumptions based on past experiences, cultural expectations, motivation, needs, moods and attitudes Onabajo (2005:32). This is to say that perception does not work in isolation but depends on a complex of variables such as psychological disposition, past experience, cultural expectations, and social relationships. Perception theory thus nailed the coffin on the “Magic Bullet Theory” Folarin (1998:63). Researchers discovered that there was a nullity in the Magic Bullet Theory because communication effect is not as automatic as people were made to believe. This gave rise to the theory of selective influence, which is based on the view point that people want their beliefs and judgements to be consistent with one another and in order to remove the dissonance, people expose themselves only to those information that are consistent with their ideas and actions.

The study of perception led to the discovery of the selective processes; that individuals tends to perceive and decode communication messages in the light of their previous experiences and current dispositions and that the language we speak and words we use also tend to circumscribe our perception. The selective processes are employed by message recipients to counter the so called almighty power of the mass media. The theory states that the selective process in perception will include: selective perception, selective exposure, selective attention and selective retention.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed triangulation as the research design. Triangulation was adopted because of its suitability in combining both quantitative and qualitative designs to study opinions and perception of a large group of people, from which data from a sample of the population is collected. In this study, survey research design was used to document current opinions of participants regarding opinion leaders’ influence on voter perception of urban and rural electorates. Survey

enabled the researcher to generate quantitative data from the respondents, who are the electorate in South-west, Nigeria. Survey was found appropriate because of its relevance in providing accurate responses to sensitive issues. The survey approach was triangulated using questionnaire and interview guide as instruments of data collection to answer key questions raised in the study.

Interview guide was employed as a data collection instrument for the qualitative aspect of this study. Interview was used to complement the questionnaire that was adopted as the main instrument within the survey method approach. Interview in this study was used to elicit responses from identified opinion leaders both in the urban and rural areas where the study was conducted. This approach enabled the researcher to get first-hand information from leaders and politicians who also engage opinion leaders to help influence the voting decisions of voters.

The South West Nigeria geo-political zone is made up of Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ekiti and Ondo. This part of Nigeria is inhabited by the Yoruba, one of the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. A total enumeration of the three states that conducted gubernatorial election in 2019 was done. The states are: Lagos, Ogun and Oyo. The number of registered voters for the 2019 general elections in the three states was 11,879,401 as supplied by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

The sample size for this study is one thousand and sixty seven (1067) participants.

The sampling process for this study involved the use of multistage sampling technique. It was used because for the sampling process, more than one sampling techniques were deemed appropriate and were used at different phases of the sampling process. This study adopted multistage sampling because of the heterogeneous nature of the population. The process firstly involved purposive sampling because gubernatorial election was done only in three states. These states are: Lagos, Ogun and Oyo. The second phase adopted stratified sampling technique to select equal number of urban and rural areas in each state; focusing on developmental characteristics such as: educational institutions at all levels, availability of banks, health centres, hotels, modern markets, government agencies and major electrification infrastructure (sub-stations) as criteria for urban areas and lack of these for the selection of rural areas. Consequently, six local government areas were picked from each state with two coming from each of the three senatorial districts in each state. Therefore, a total of 18 local

government areas were selected in the three states using stratified sampling technique. The third stage involved selecting wards in each local government. Stratified sampling was considered appropriate at this stage of the study because it enabled the researcher to identify every segment of the sample of the population and effectively covered all elements of the sample for the population of the study. The criteria used considered the urban and rural nature of the wards. Such factors as availability of schools at all levels, hospitals, banks, modern markets, factories, hotels and government agencies determined the urban wards while non-availability of such determined the rural.

DATA ANALYSIS

This section is devoted to the analysis of the data collected in order to evaluate and compare the perception management instruments used by opinion leaders to change the perception of voters about a political candidate during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria. One thousand and sixty seven (1067) copies of the questionnaire were administered, while nine hundred and eighty four copies (984) were retrieved and found valid for analysis; resulting in 92.2 percent response rate.

Presentation of Descriptive Analysis/Analysis of Research Questions (Quantitative)

Research Question 1: What is the opinion leadership style used to influence voter perception of urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria?

Perceived Opinion Leadership Style among Urban and Rural Electorates

	Urban		Rural	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Opinion leaders in my area use force to influence people's decisions	3.21	1.47	2.99	1.74
Opinion leaders in my area are authoritative when giving direction to their followers.	3.24	1.31	2.85	1.40
Opinion leaders in my area use persuasion to influence people's decisions.	3.43	1.31	3.24	1.37
Opinion leaders in my area offer reward to influence people's decision	3.42	1.31	3.09	1.41

Opinion leaders in my area are liberal as they do not punish those who do not take political advice offered by the opinion leaders.	3.27	1.25	3.37	1.42
Opinion leaders in my area only offer advice but do not monitor whether we follow the advice or not	3.41	1.29	3.56	1.35
Source: Field survey 2020				
Average Overall Mean	3.33	1.33	3.18	1.45

KEY: VHE=Very High Extent, HE=High Extent, LE=Low Extent, VLE=Very Low Extent, NA= Not at all*Decision Rule if mean is ≤ 1.49 =Not at all; 1.5 to 2.49 = Very Low Extent; 2.5 to 3.49 =Low Extent; 3.5 to 4.49= High Extent; 4.5 to 5= Very High Extent**

It indicates that generally, the influence of opinion leadership style was low among urban (\bar{x} =3.33) and rural (\bar{x} =3.18) electorates. Specifically, participants noted that opinion leaders in their area used force to influence people's decisions to a low extent (Urban= \bar{x} =3.21; Rural= \bar{x} =2.99), opinion leaders were authoritative to a low extent when giving direction to their followers (Urban= \bar{x} =3.24; Rural= \bar{x} =2.85), opinion leaders used persuasion to influence people's decisions to a low extent (Urban= \bar{x} =3.43; Rural= \bar{x} =3.24). However, opinion leaders only offered advice but did not monitor whether they followed the advice or not to a high extent among rural participants (\bar{x} =3.56) but to a low extent among urban respondents (\bar{x} =3.41). This suggests that opinion leadership style was perceived to be low among urban and rural participants. Opinion leadership style was perceived to be low in the following ways: use of force to influence people's decisions among urban and rural electorates; authoritativeness of opinion leaders when giving direction to their followers in urban and rural areas; use of persuasion to influence people's decisions among urban and rural participants. However, opinion leaders to a high extent only offered advice but did not monitor whether they followed the advice or not among rural participants but they did same to a low extent among urban respondents.

Research Questions 2: How did opinion leaders influence voter perception of candidates among urban and rural electorates in the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria?

Connection between Opinion Leaders and Voter Perception among Urban and Rural Electorates

Items	Urban		Rural	
	\bar{x}	SD	\bar{x}	SD
Information given by opinion leaders in my area made me to view a particular candidate positively	3.69	1.21	3.80	1.25
The attitude of opinion leaders in my area towards a particular candidate influenced my view of the candidate	3.48	1.21	3.43	1.33
Gifts from opinion leaders in my area made me to view a particular candidate positively.	3.27	1.34	2.98	1.49
Average Overall Mean	3.48	1.25	3.41	1.36

Source: Field Survey 2020

KEY: VHE=Very High Extent, HE=High Extent, LE=Low Extent, VLE=Very Low Extent, NA= Not at all***Decision Rule if mean is ≤ 1.49 =Not at all; 1.5 to 2.49 = Very Low Extent; 2.5 to 3.49 =Low Extent; 3.5 to 4.49= High Extent; 4.5 to 5= Very High Extent

It shows that generally, the connection between opinion leaders and voter perception was low for both urban and rural voters (Urban= \bar{x} =3.48; Rural= \bar{x} =3.41). However, this connection was specifically high because: information given by opinion leaders made them to view a particular candidate positively (Urban= \bar{x} =3.69; Rural= \bar{x} =3.80); while it was low because the attitude of opinion leaders towards a particular candidate influenced their view of the candidate (Urban= \bar{x} =3.48; Rural= \bar{x} =3.43) and gifts from opinion leaders made them to view a particular candidate positively (Urban= \bar{x} =3.27; Rural= \bar{x} =2.98).

This implies that the main instrument of perception change employed by opinion leaders in both urban and rural areas was information offered by opinion leaders about a particular candidate.

TEST OF HYPOTHESIS

H₀₁: Opinion leadership style did not significantly influence voter perception of urban and rural voters during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria.

**The hypothesis is conducted separately for urban and rural participants
Influence of Opinion Leadership Style on Voter Perception of Urban Voters
during the 2019 Gubernatorial Election**

Variables	Coeff	Std. Error	β	t-stat.	Prob.
(Constant)	8.052	0.767		10.494	0.000
Opinion Leadership Style	.641	0.037	0.609	17.313	0.000
R ²	0.371				
Dependent Variable: Voting Decisions					

Source: Field Survey 2020

It shows that opinion leadership style positively significantly influenced voter perception of urban electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria ($\beta = 0.641$, $t = 17.313$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that increased utilization of opinion leadership style led to improved voter perception among urban electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria. The model shows that opinion leadership style could explain 37.1 percent variation ($R^2 = 0.371$) in urban voter perception during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West. Hence, the null hypothesis which states that opinion leadership style did not significantly influence voter perception of urban electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria was rejected.

**Influence of Opinion Leadership Style on Voter Perception of Rural Voters
during the 2019 Gubernatorial Election**

Variables	Coeff	Std. Error	β	t-stat.	Prob.
(Constant)	7.839	.572		13.699	0.000
Opinion Leadership Style	.698	.029	0.748	24.455	0.000
R ²	0.559				
Dependent Variable: Voting Decisions					

Source: Field Survey 2020

It shows that opinion leadership style positively, significantly influenced voter perception of rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria ($\beta = 0.698$, $t = 24.455$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that increased utilization of opinion leadership style led to improved voter perception among rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria.

The model shows that opinion leadership style could explain 55.9 percent variation ($R^2 = 0.559$) in rural voter perception during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West. Hence, the null hypothesis which states that opinion leadership style did not significantly influence voter perception of rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria was rejected.

H₀2: Opinion leaders did not significantly influence voters' perception of urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West, Nigeria.

The hypothesis was conducted separately for urban and rural participants
Influence of Opinion Leaders on Urban Voter Perception during the 2019 Gubernatorial Election

Variables	Coeff	Std. Error	β	t-stat.	Prob.
(Constant)	2.879	.595		4.842	0.000
Perceived Reputation	.113	.057	.097	1.963	0.050
Social Status	.003	.063	.002	.041	0.967
Perceived Credibility	.119	.056	.109	2.101	0.036
Educational Attainment	.028	.056	.025	.491	0.624
Political Status	.035	.064	.032	.549	0.583
Economic Status	.091	.055	.089	1.673	0.095
Religious Status	.330	.056	.314	5.910	0.000
R ²	0.292				
Adj. R ²	0.282				
F-Statistic (Joint)	29.54				
Prob.(F-Stat)	0.000				
Dependent Variable: Voters' Perception					

Source: Field Survey 2020

It shows that opinion leaders significantly influenced urban voters' perception during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West, Nigeria ($Adj. R^2 = 0.282$, $F(7, 502) = 29.54$, $p < 0.05$). Perceived credibility ($\beta = 0.119$, $t = 2.101$, $p < 0.05$) and religious status ($\beta = 0.330$, $t = 5.910$, $p < 0.05$) positively, significantly influenced urban voters' perception; while perceived reputation, social status, educational attainment, political status and economic status did not significantly influence urban voters' perception during the 2019 gubernatorial election ($p > 0.05$). This

suggests that improvement in opinion leaders perceived credibility and religious status led to better voters' perception.

The model shows that opinion leaders could explain 28.2 percent variation ($Adj. R^2 = 0.282$) in urban voters' perception during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West. Hence, the null hypothesis which states that opinion leaders did not significantly influence voters' perception of urban electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West, Nigeria was rejected.

Influence of Opinion Leaders on Rural Voters' Perception during the 2019 Gubernatorial Election

Variables	Coeff	Std. Error	β	t-stat.	Prob.
(Constant)	2.637	.550		4.793	0.000
Perceived Reputation	-.051	.042	-.048	-1.207	0.228
Social Status	-.015	.051	-.014	-.296	0.768
Perceived Credibility	.012	.039	.012	.318	0.751
Educational Attainment	-.134	.042	-.115	-3.197	0.001
Political Status	.293	.051	.259	5.749	0.000
Economic Status	.380	.043	.390	8.769	0.000
Religious Status	.296	.043	.305	6.874	0.000
R ²	0.545				
Adj. R ²	0.538				
F-Statistic (Joint)	79.80				
Prob.(F-Stat)	0.000				
Dependent Variable: Voters' Perception					

Source: Field Survey 2020

It shows that opinion leaders significantly influenced rural voters' perception during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West, Nigeria ($Adj. R^2 = 0.538$, $F(7, 466) = 79.80$, $p < 0.05$). Political status ($\beta = 0.293$, $t = 5.749$, $p < 0.05$), economic status ($\beta = 0.380$, $t = 8.769$, $p < 0.05$) and religious status ($B = 0.296$, $t = 6.874$, $p < 0.05$) positively, significantly influenced rural voters' perception; while educational attainment ($\beta = -0.134$, $t = -3.197$, $p < 0.05$) negatively influenced rural voters' perception. This suggests that improvement in opinion leaders' political status, economic status and religious status led to better rural voters' perception during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West, Nigeria; while improvement in opinion leaders' educational attainment led to worse rural

voters' perception during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West, Nigeria. The model shows that opinion leaders could explain 53.8 percent variation (*Adj. R*² = 0.538) in rural voters' perception during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West. Hence, the null hypothesis which states that opinion leaders did not significantly influence voters' perception of rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-West, Nigeria was rejected.

Presentation of Results (Qualitative)

Instrument

Instrument for data collection during the interview was the semi-structured interview guide.

Leadership style

All of the opinion leaders interviewed identified persuasion as their major leadership instrument. One of the elected opinion leaders who is an association chairman explained that, "the moment you introduce force or intimidation, you have lost your position because if your tenure expires, they won't vote for you the second time".

However, one of the opinion leaders who is not an elected leader appeared authoritative as he gave the impression that there could be consequences for non-compliance with directives as those identified as working against anointed candidates of such leaders could be marked for punishment, which could take the form of levies, harassment by local government rates collectors, and other repressive actions.

Voter perception of candidates

All opinion leaders interviewed said that they were able to effectively change electorates' perception of candidates by highlighting the striking qualities of their anointed candidates during the 2019 gubernatorial election. One of the opinion leaders explained that perception management is a function of research, claiming that, "we also research into the candidate's personality (his strengths and weaknesses) before attempting to change electorates' perception. Another leader said, "we look at the antecedents of the candidates before attempting to change perception because some candidates are not just sellable". Sometimes, opinion leaders advise candidates on what projects to embark, on for electorates' perception about them to be changed.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study sought to specifically find out the opinion leadership style and instruments that enabled them to change voter perception of political candidates during 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west, Nigeria.

Opinion leadership style used to influence voter perception of urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election in Southwest Nigeria

The study, as indicated by the descriptive analysis, reveals that opinion leadership style was not a key influence factor used by opinion leaders to influence the voter perception of both urban and rural electorates as respondent indicated that the use of force, persuasion and offer of reward for compliance were used to a low extent to influence their voter perception. However, the inferential method of analysis used for the research hypotheses indicated that opinion leadership style significantly influenced voter perception of urban and rural electorates during the 2019 gubernatorial election. While this may appear as a contradiction to the descriptive analysis, it is pertinent to explain at this point that the contradiction seems to stem from the inferential analysis which did not specifically differentiate between the leadership style that was significant and the ones that were not. The descriptive analysis clearly indicated that the significant leadership style was the advisory type of leadership, which neither employed force nor excessive persuasion to influence the voter perception of urban and rural electorates.

The findings that opinion leaders in the rural areas to a high extent only offered advice but did not monitor whether the rural electorate followed the advice or not is an indication that even in the rural areas, the electorate are getting wiser and cannot be monitored.

How opinion leaders influenced voter perception of candidates among urban and rural electorates in the 2019 gubernatorial election in Southwest Nigeria

The study established the importance of opinion leaders as agents of perception change. This finding, as shown in the descriptive analysis was also confirmed by the inferential analysis used to interpret the hypotheses as it also indicated that opinion leaders significantly influenced urban and rural electorates' perception

during the 2019 gubernatorial election. The study also found that both urban and rural electorates highly attributed a change in perception about a particular candidate only to the information and advice given by opinion leaders and not as a result of the attitude of opinion leaders towards a particular candidate nor the use of gifts from opinion leaders. This finding agrees with those of Schafer and Taddicken (2015) that opinion leaders are influential because they give information and advice to the followers about issues more than the media do. It also aligns with those of Karlsen (2015) that opinion leaders are influential because they pass first-hand information from politicians to people in the networks of the opinion leader.

This implies that the most potent instrument of perception change employed by opinion leaders during the 2019 gubernatorial election in South-west Nigeria in both urban and rural areas was provision of information about a particular candidate to the electorate. This finding was corroborated by the qualitative approach where opinion leaders that were interviewed said they were able to change electorates' perception of a candidate by providing information about the striking qualities of the anointed candidate of the opinion leaders and what the electorate stand to gain if the candidate gets into office.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Opinion leadership style was a significant influence factor for both urban and rural electorates. The study discovered that opinion leaders in the rural areas to a high extent only offered advice without monitoring compliance.

The most potent instrument of perception change employed by opinion leaders in both urban and rural areas was provision of information about a particular candidate to the electorate. The study also concluded that party manifesto to a high extent determined voter perception and consequently, the voting decisions of rural electorates.

There is need for voter education and increased media coverage in the rural areas so that rural electorates can probe the feasibility of the manifestoes presented to the electorate by political parties as most of them may be well packaged but with little or no prospect for implementation.

Opinion leaders should continue to focus on giving illuminating and credible information that can help the electorate make informed decisions. Opinion leaders also have a role in explaining party manifesto to the electorate, especially the rural electorate as unrealistic manifesto could help sway votes to

undeserving candidates. Political actors should engage credible personalities as opinion leaders and must match promises with action.

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