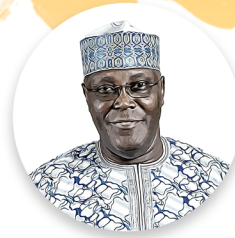# RUNNING DIGITAL

Online Political Advertising and Nigeria's 2023 General Elections

Introduction

Four to five election cycles ago, political advertising in Nigeria looked like this: expensive nationwide media tours and press conferences across traditional media outlets with the largest number of audience; millions of naira shelled out to printing companies for flyers, banners and other traditional publicity materials; and tons of TV, radio, and newspaper adverts in aureate language.

As with many other democracies, political campaigning in Nigeria is still very much traditional (broadcast, print, out of home [OOH] media, etc), with most political ads still concentrated[1] on the TV, radio, and newspapers. However, as the world faces the big internet revolution which has drastically transformed the way we live, communicate, do business, and make decisions— politics without exception, political campaigning globally has equally taken a new shape, with social media and digital technology platforms gaining more attention from politicians. There is now a shift to a "hybrid[2]" model of political campaigning in which politicians combine the old world of broadcast and print media with the new world of the digital. Although the scale of digital political ads is difficult to estimate per country (with the exception of a few countries like the US, where digital political ads[3] are a wildfire), political advertising across the world is becoming more digital, data-driven, and targeted.

In the US alone, the total contributions of digital ads[4] to political campaigning went from 2-3% in the 2016 presidential elections to 18% in the 2020 cycle. British politicians are not exempted, as they particularly turn to Facebook[5], while digital ads overall constituted about 43% of total ad spend[6] in the UK's 2017 general elections. In the Nigerian context, the 2015 elections ushered in an upsurge in digital political campaigning[7] — especially on Twitter and Facebook. There are already indications that digital political ads will increase[8]

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1   Ojekwe, G.I. (2016). Political advert campaigns and voting behaviour: Akinwunmi Ambode's 2015 election campaign in Lagos State. Journal of African Elections, 15 (2), pp.13-27.

2   Paatelainen, L., Kannasto, E., Isotalus, P. (2022, January). Functions of hybrid media: How parties and their leaders use traditional media in their social media campaign communication. Frontiers in Communication [Online Edition].

3   Statista (2022). 'Digital political advertising spending in the United States from 2008 to 2020 (in million U.S. dollars)' [Data Set].

4   Homonoff, H. (2020, December, 8). '2020 political ad spending exploded: Did it work?' Forbes.

5   Sabbagh, D. (2018, March 23). 'Rise of digital politics: why UK parties spend big on Facebook'. The Guardian.

6   The Electoral Commission UK (n.d). 'Report: Digital campaigning - increasing transparency for voters'. The Electoral Commission.

7   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): 6, pp. 1–32.

8   Akingbolu, R. (2022, January). 'Political marketing: Ad practitioners foresee increased budget in 2022.' This Day.

even further for the 2023 general elections.

Digital Political Advertising in Nigeria

Considering that Nigeria's political terrain is largely dominated by an older generation in their 50s and above, one wonders what could be driving the fast-moving adoption of the digital in Nigerian elections. The first reason is the perceived "political value"[9] of social media. Social media is the language of young people; with more than 60% of the Nigerian population[10] being youth, and with the majority of this youth group sourcing its political news from social media, the numerical benefits of digital advertising is very significant for politicians. Another reason is the quick, mobilising and social adaptation power of social media; information travels faster on digital media, and online ads can have a ripple effect beyond their primary audience. Similarly, monitoring engagement and consumer interaction with an advert is easier on digital platforms than on traditional media.

Perhaps the most important reason for the increasing adoption of digital political marketing is the low cost of deploying precision[11] techniques to target voters. Social media technologies now allow politicians to direct their adverts to specific groups of people, at specific times, using specific wordings which make it easier to particularly influence neutral voters — all this while spending a considerably lesser amount of money compared to traditional adverts. Also known as microtargeting, this technique has been deemed dangerous for democracy[12], in that it could sway voters' perspectives of public discourse in ways they do not consciously consent to.

Such increasing preference for online news consumption has made digital advertising grow in scope and techniques lately, causing social media platforms to institute more transparency in the way their platforms are used and placing stringent regulations on political ads. For instance, it was not until 2018 that Facebook introduced its Ad Library[13]

9   Oxford Analytica (2021). Political value of social media will rise in Africa [Expert Briefings]. Oxford Analytica.

10   Akinyemi, A.I., & Mobolaji, J.W. (2022, July 18). 'Nigeria's large, youthful population could be an asset or a burden'. The Conversation.

11   Tech For Campaigns (n.d.). '2020 Political digital advertising report: How covid, massive fundraising, and the culture war played out online, up and down the ballot'. Tech For Campaigns.

12   Bayer, J. (2020). Double harm to voters: Data-driven micro-targeting and democratic public discourse. Internet Policy Review, 9 (1), pp.1-17.

13   Constine, J. (2019, March 28). 'Facebook launches searchable transparency library of all active ads'. Tech Crunch.

— a feature that allows users to track a repository of adverts that have been placed on the platform, using location, topic, and timeline as filters.

The platform, which was primarily introduced due to policymakers' concerns of transparency in political advertising, includes 3 features: the Meta Ad Library, the Ad Library Report Report and the Meta Ad Library API — a more sophisticated feature requiring a basic knowledge of coding to conduct customised searches of ads on Facebook.

Digital Ads and the 2023 Elections

Although, according to INEC's timelines[14], presidential campaign is set to officially begin only on September 28, 2022, adverts in support of presidential candidates have already begun surfacing on Facebook and Instagram (whether Facebook should have permitted adverts for presidential candidates before the official campaign period is another issue entirely). However, despite the growing popularity of digital ads, traditional media still holds the ace when it comes to political advertising in Nigeria.

Take for example, whereas the total ad spend for social issues, elections and politics on Facebook and Instagram totalled 25.5 million naira since march 2022 (this includes non-partisan adverts by civil society organisations), a 3-hour live broadcast of political campaigns on NTA alone costs[15] about 10 million naira, not to mention the numerous advertising costs on pages of newspapers, and radio jingles across other multiple media outlets. Put together, traditional ads gulp millions of naira in a single month alone.

Even if we are to assume, for a minute, that digital ads could rapidly multiply in value as the 2023 elections draw nearer, their scope would still not match the financial enormity of traditional advertising. Of course, we cannot control for the possibility that digital advertisers may have spent less than the total amount budgeted or issued by politicians — something more probable with social media ads which have no set costs, in contrast with traditional media whose costs are more standard or fixed.

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14   Adamu, F (2019, December 4). 'On the Cost of elections in Nigeria; Where does all the money go?' The Elections Network.
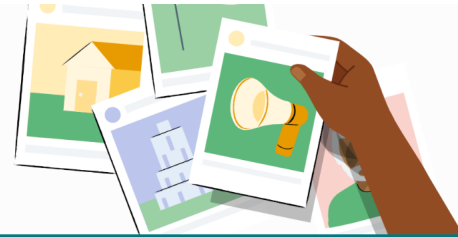
15   Independent National Electoral Commission (n.d.). 'Timetable and schedule of activities for 2023 General Election'.

Source: Meta Ad Library

This raises two important concerns: one around the nature of social media political advertising in Nigerian elections, and two, whether social media political advertising really works. This piece attempts to answer these questions in two ways: first, using meta data from Meta Ad Library, it examines the scope of Facebook and/or Instagram ads placed by supporters of the 3 most prominent contenders in the 2023 presidential elections (Atiku Abubakar, Bola Tinubu, and Peter Obi). Secondly, it uses AI-powered social listening tool, Sprinklr, to harvest aggregated big data showing the demographic, and sentimental breakdown of online media conversations about these 3 political figures.

Facebook and Instagram Ads

The table below shows the total number of monthly ads for each of the 3 most prominent candidates in the forthcoming 2023 general elections. To align with the financial timeline Facebook has automatically set for its Nigerian ad records (from March 2022), the results presented below have been filtered to show only ads from March, 2022 till date (6 months).

A few contextual notes are important. First, since Meta Ad Library shows all ads containing each candidate's name as key words, not all ads listed under a candidate's name in the Ad Library were exclusively placed in support of that candidate.

As such, in the table below, we have included only adverts in favour of each candidate, while excluding from our calculations adverts which contain antagonistic content. It is also worth noting that the majority of the ads were placed by proxy — individual

advertisers and supporter groups, rather than the official campaign pages/handlers of these candidates themselves, although a few ads were placed by the official campaign groups of the candidates. Lastly, some ads promoted events related to the candidates' presidential bid, rather than the persona, party, or political ideology of the candidates. We considered this promotional content and therefore included them in our calculations. Ads that went against Meta's Advertising policy — such as those containing hate speech or fake news — were already removed by Meta, but still remained on the list of adverts for each candidate. We excluded this from our calculations.

Monthly Advert (Facebook and IG) Per Candidate

| Candidate	Month	Total Number of Monthly Ads	Monthly Ads Spends (NGN)	Monthly Average Impressions
Atiku Abubakar (PDP)	March, 2022	6	7,998	14, 500
	April, 2022	9	20,598	10, 499
	May, 2022	9	384,199	145, 444
	June, 2022	15	104,698	30, 733
	July, 2022	14	50,995	24, 357
	August, 2022	8	11,499	17, 750
	TOTAL	61	579,087	243, 283
Bola Tinubu (APC)	March, 2022	8	15,896	8, 333
	April, 2022	10	13,597	11, 400
	May, 2022	3	258,500	318, 333
	June, 2022	29	169,492	27, 666
	July, 2022	13	11,093	12, 583
	August, 2022	25	309,492	58, 040
	TOTAL	88	778,070	436, 355
Peter Obi (LP)	March, 2022	0	0	0
	April, 2022	6	10,097	15, 166
	May, 2022	8	97,497	58, 750
	June, 2022	47	97,191	10, 234
	July, 2022	29	68,486	20, 069
	August, 2022	22	33,290	18, 273
	TOTAL	112	306,561	122, 492

Source: Meta AD Library

Table Methodology

- *August 2022: Ads calculated as of 30th August, 2022.*

- *Facebook Ad policy requires that the currency of payment for an ad and the country of targeting must match. Total number of Ads and Total Ad spends in the table above exclude ads that were paid for in foreign currency, which were removed by Facebook after a few days of running. Ads in support of Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Peter Obi violated this rule the most, as a large number of the adverts were placed by advert agencies and individuals using mostly the US Dollar, Pounds, and Argentine Peso (ARS), and the US Dollar, Euros, and Canadian Dollar respectively.*

- *Facebook records Ad spends using a range (higher & lower boundaries). Where this applies, the higher range has been used to calculate the cost of ads.*

- *Some ads used the same images, videos or creatives for multiple ads. Data for these were aggregated by Meta as one, rather than multiple ads.*

- *According to Meta, ad impression is counted as the number of times an instance of an ad is on screen for the first time. Repeated scrolling past the same ad within the same time still counts as a single impression; but an ad shown twice to a person at different times in a day counts as 2 impressions.*

- *Average impressions were derived by dividing the total sum of all monthly impressions by the number of ads per month. The average impressions gives an idea of the overall monthly performance of ads associated with each candidate, rather than the performance of each ad — since each ad's impressions would typically vary based on targeting.*

- *Meta Ad Library recorded monthly impressions using a range; the average calculation above was based on the higher range of each monthly impression.*

From the table above, supporters of Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP) have, in the last 6 months, placed the highest number of ads, although the group has spent the least amount of money on the ads by placing numerous ads with lesser cost. On the other hand, supporters of APC's Bola Tinubu have spent the most money, followed by those of Atiku Abubakar. Unsurprisingly, the highest spends and highest number of ads for both Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi occurred in May — when both were gearing up for the primary elections in their respective parties. This is not the case for Bola Tinubu, whose major ad spends happened in August; perhaps because a very large number of the ads placed in May were done using foreign currency, which have been excluded from our calculations.

Candidates' Facebook and IG Ad-Spend (in thousands), March-August 2022
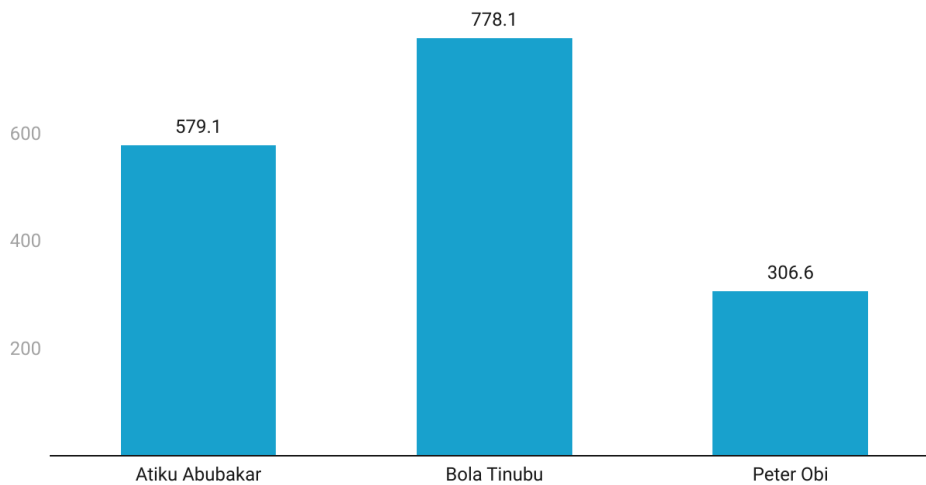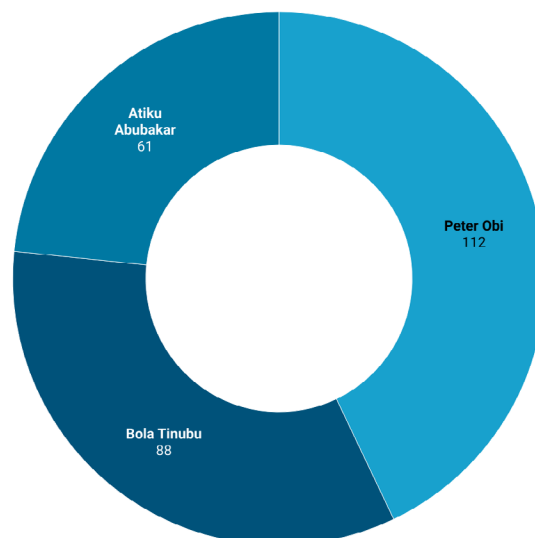

Source: Meta AD Library

As briefly mentioned above, one striking fact about most of the Facebook and/or Instagram ads is that they were placed by proxy groups and individual supporters, rather than the official campaign groups of the candidate. A very probable explanation for this is that candidates might be waiting for the official kick-off of the campaign period before commencing a full digital campaign. This is possibly applicable to traditional advertising as well. Relatedly, a huge chunk of the ads were foreign political ads — i.e ads placed outside of Nigeria, using a foriegn currency. This could suggest a growing interest in political participation back home by Nigerians in the diaspora.

Total Number of Facebook and IG Ads, March-August, 2022

Peter Obi   Bola Tinubu   Atiku Abubakar

Source: Meta AD Library

It is crucial to note that these figures do not necessarily represent the strength of each candidate's digital footprint, since several other popular mediums in Nigeria such as YouTube, Whatsapp, and TikTok, were not examined — chiefly because these platforms do not have an open portal that allows public access to ad records. Others, such as Twitter, have banned political ads[16] altogether. This, however, does not mean that other subtle forms of political campaigning do not occur on the platform; for example, posts by influencers endorsing a particular candidate would get high numbers of organic interactions without having to place an ad. These are difficult to quantify.

To give an insight into each candidate's digital footprint, we turn to Sprinklr for some analysis.

Snapshots from Sprinklr

To capture insights into the digital footprint of the 3 candidates being examined, we use the Overview and Author features on Sprinklr's Insights module. The timeline shows digital conversations around each candidate for the past 90 days (May 30- August 30, 2022) . Below is a quick breakdown.

Overview

The overview section presents the number of social media posts made around the candidates, including the number of people actively discussing the posts, and estimated number of people the posts have potentially reached — all within the last 3 months. The data below excludes conversations from Facebook and Instagram, and is instead focused on Twitter and online news media.

Between May 30 and August 2022, there were about 455, 610 mentions of Atiku Abubakar on Twitter and online news media, compared to his 150, 330 mentions in the 3months before that (28 February to 30 May, 20222). These mentions are being driven by over 109,000 active users on Twitter and online news media platforms.

In contrast, Bola Tinubu has had over 1.4 million mentions within the last 3 months, driven by about 232, 700 active internet users. Peter Obi has, by far, the strongest digital footprint among the trio — with over 13.2 million mentions on Twitter and online news

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16   Feiner, L. (2019, October 30). 'Twitter bans political ads after Facebook refused to do so'. CNBC.

media, driven by more than 540, 900 users. This is plausible, seeing that the vast majority of Peter Obi's supporters are [young people](#)[17] — the largest category of internet users in Nigeria.
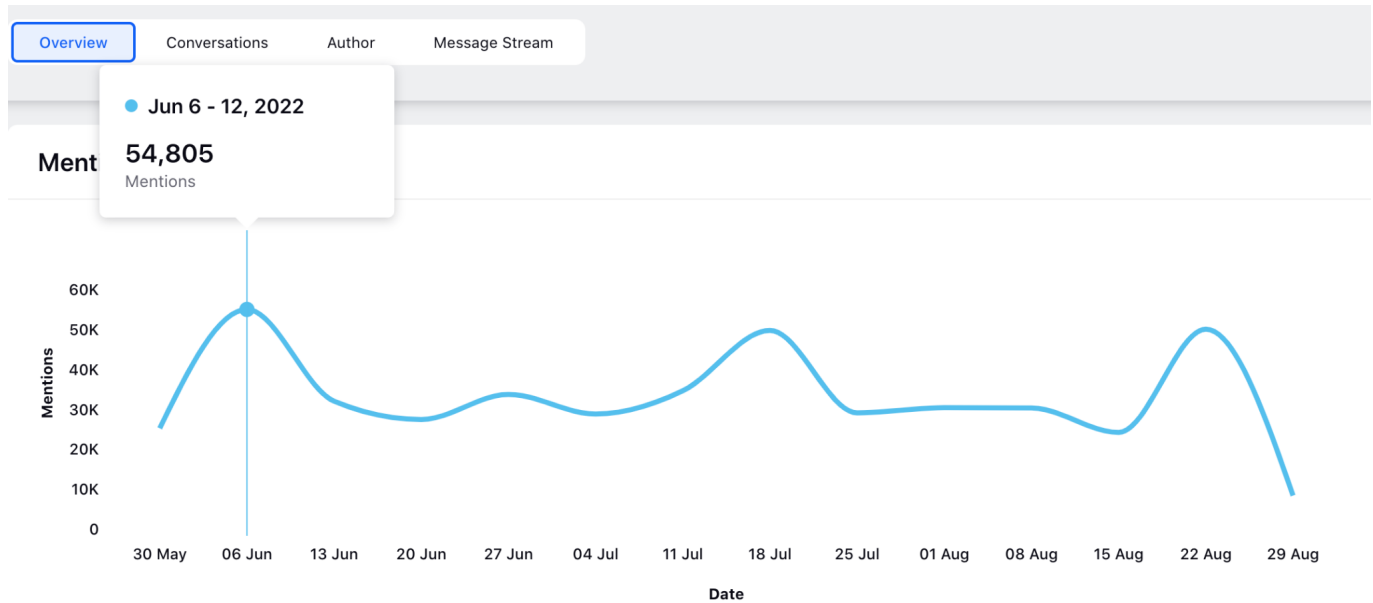
Atiku's Overall Mentions

Mentions ⓘ	Unique users ⓘ	Reach ⓘ
455.61K +203.07%	**109.14K** +117.41%	**3.55B** +140.23%
Mentions	Distinct Users	Reach
150.33K	50,199	1.48B
Previous Period	Previous Period	Previous Period

Tinubu's Overall Mentions

Mentions ⓘ	Unique users ⓘ	Reach ⓘ
1.44M +514.16%	**232.72K** +308.8%	**10.22B** +368.19%
Mentions	Distinct Users	Reach
233.74K	56,928	2.18B
Previous Period	Previous Period	Previous Period

Peter Obi's Overall Mentions

Mentions ⓘ	Unique users ⓘ	Reach ⓘ
13.24M +218.49%	**540.96K** +119.59%	**56.18B** +237.14%
Mentions	Distinct Users	Reach
4.16M	246.35K	16.66B
Previous Period	Previous Period	Previous Period

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17   Ndubuisi, O., & Orijinmo, N. (2022, July 5). 'Peter Obi: The Labour Party candidate electrifying young Nigerians'. BBC News.

The charts below also present a quick breakdown of the 3 candidates' weekly Twitter and online media mentions. The graph shows that both Atiku and Tinubu had their highest number of mentions in the week of 6th to 13th of June, when preparations for primary elections were either in top gear or just being concluded. This reality is somewhat different for Peter Obi, whose highest mentions seem to have a run-on effect, peaking weeks after he had clinged the Labour Party tickets.

Atiku Abubakar

| Overview | Conversations | Author | Message Stream |

● Jun 6 - 12, 2022
54,805
Mentions

Bola Tinubu

| Overview | Conversations | Author | Message Stream |

Previous Period   Previous Period   Previous Period

● Jun 6 - 12, 2022
266,024
Mentions

Peter Obi

| Overview | Conversations | Author | Message Stream |

Mentions tren

● Jun 13 - 19, 2022

1,832,876
Mentions
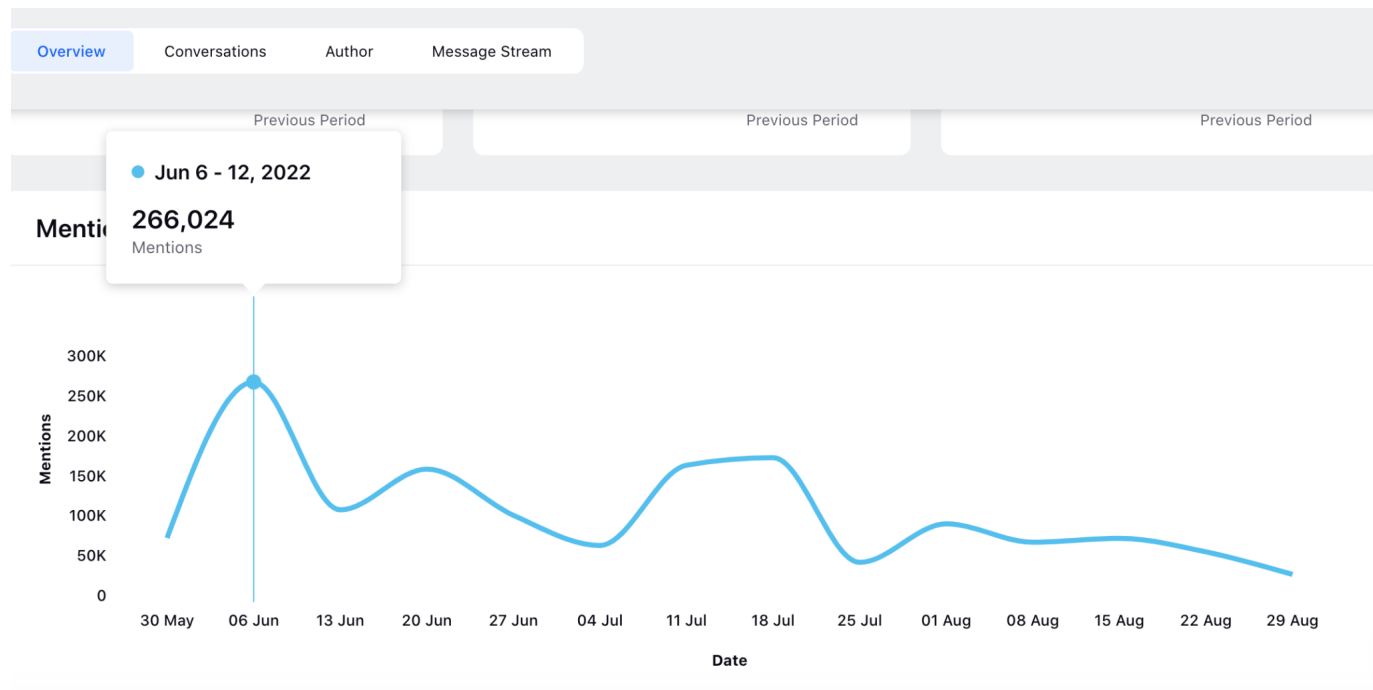
Source: Sprinklr

Online news media coverage for the candidates follows the same pattern as their Twitter mentions, although the trend of online news media mentions seems to be more stable but weaker than Twitter engagements. See below a quick breakdown for the 3 candidates.
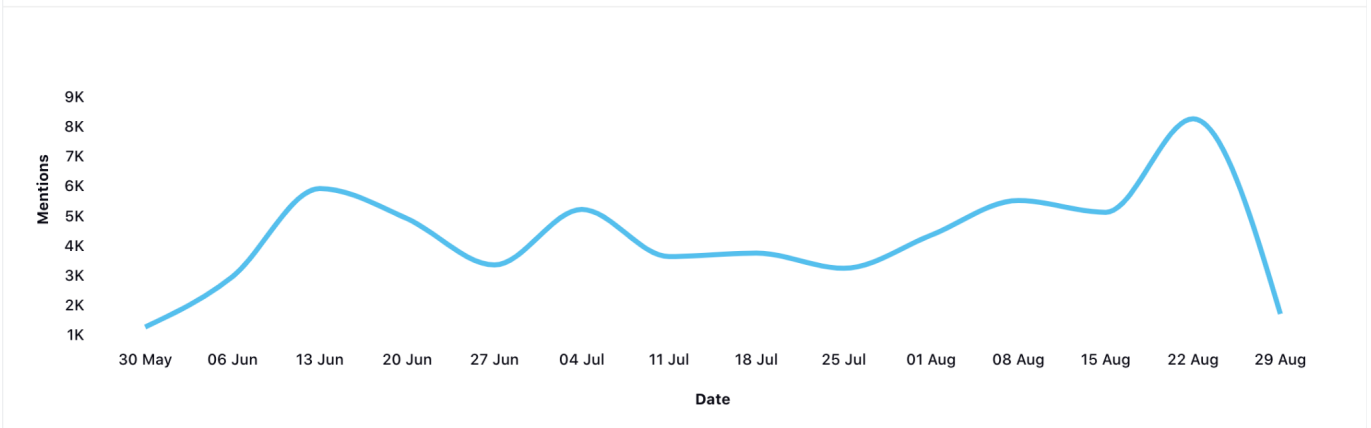
Atiku Abubakar

Media coverage trend ⓘ
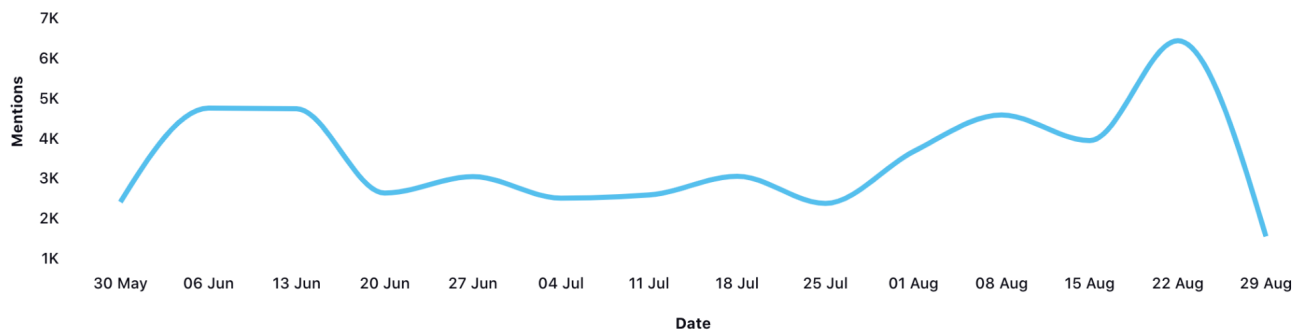
Bola Tinubu

Media coverage trend ⓘ
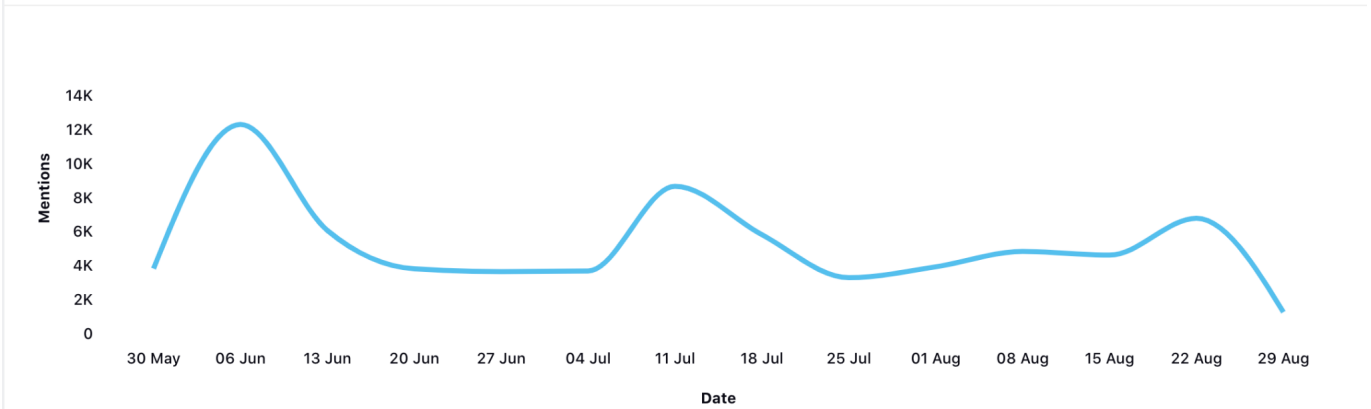
Peter Obi

Media coverage trend ⓘ

Source: Sprinklr

However, the sentiment behind online engagements are just as important as the mentions themselves. For instance, research[18] has shown that responses to a post might alter the intended meaning of a particular message from the initial author's perspective — causing a positive message to appear negative and vice versa. In the case of all the 3 figures being examined, a very large number of their online mentions carried neutral sentiments, and negative sentiments consistently outweighed positive tones in the online posts. However, the degree of negatives and positives vary for each candidate.

For Atiku Abubakar, 75.5 % of his online mentions were neutral, while 16.9% were

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18   Matalon, Y., Magdaci, O., Almozlino, A., & Yamin, D. (2021). Using sentiment analysis to predict opinion inversion in Tweets of political communication. Sci Rep, 11(1):7250.

negative and 7.5%, positive. Bola Tinubu has a somewhat similar profile, with about 72.5% neutral impressions. However, standing at 21.5% and 5.6%, respectively, he has a higher negative and lower positive sentiment than Atiku. Obi likewise has a 75.1% neutral sentiment, 16.7% negative sentiment, and a positive sentiment of 8.1% — higher than the other two contenders.
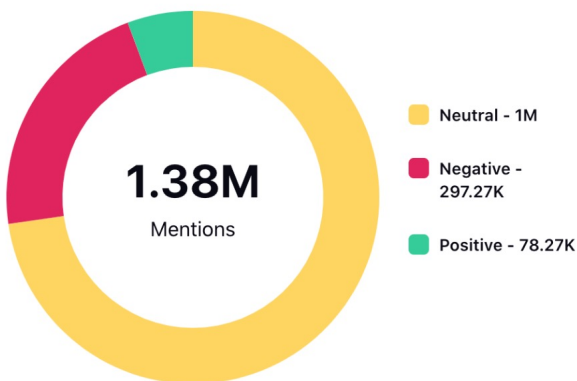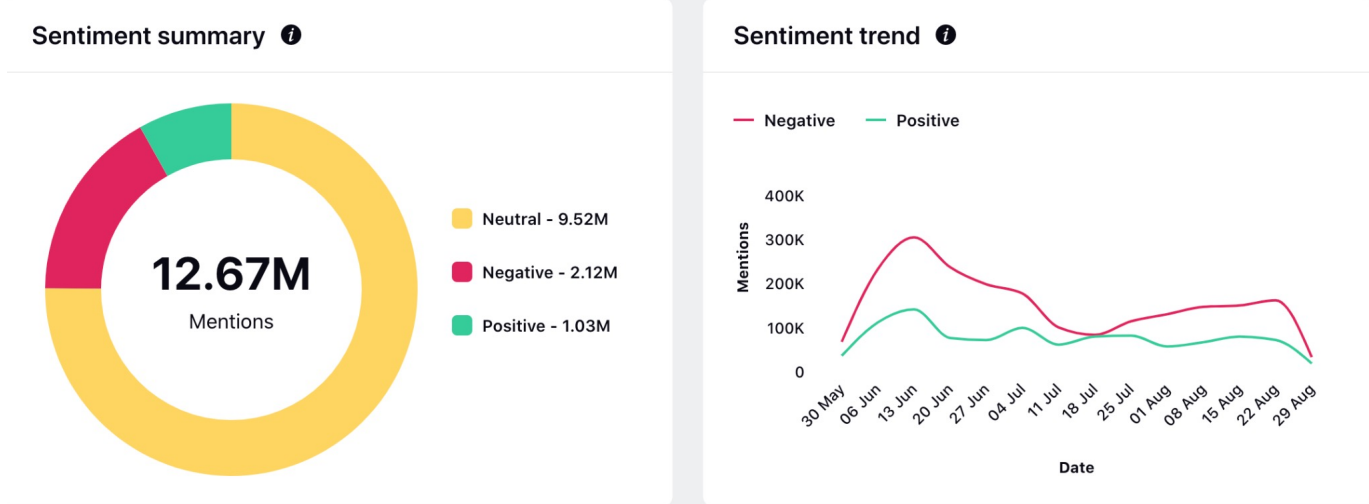
Atiku Abubakar

Sentiment summary

Neutral - 330.53K
Negative - 73.98K
Positive - 33.02K

437.53K
Mentions
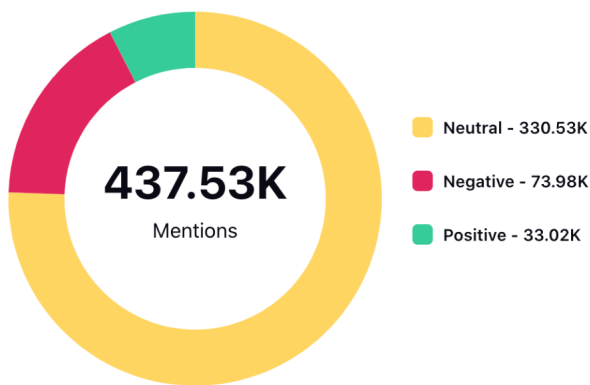
Sentiment trend

Bola Tinubu

Sentiment summary

Neutral - 1M
Negative - 297.27K
Positive - 78.27K

1.38M
Mentions

Sentiment trend

Peter Obi

Sentiment summary 🛈

12.67M
Mentions

- Neutral - 9.52M
- Negative - 2.12M
- Positive - 1.03M

Sentiment trend 🛈

Source: Sprinklr

Audience

Elsewhere, Dataphyte has written[19] about the demographic breakdown of voters' registration in Nigeria. The article offers some referential insights into how digital engagement compares with offline political participation. A very important aspect of digital engagement is the demographic composition of the audience engaging a topic. This is even more crucial when tracking political ads, as certain groups often hold more (numeric) political value to candidates than the others. For instance, the largest proportion of registered voters in Nigeria are 18-34 years old. An effective online strategy would therefore have to capture this group of voters.

The charts below highlight the demographic composition of Atiku, Tinubu and Peter Obi's online audience. Online conversations around the 3 candidates are disproportionately male-driven. This is somewhat a paradox, since the number of females who have newly completed their voters' registration exceeds the males. On the other hand, it comes as no surprise that more than 78% of users discussing the 3 candidates are aged 18-35, since this age group essentially 'owns' the digital space.
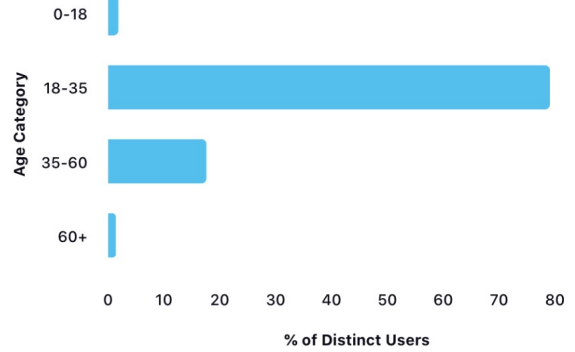
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19   Amata, D. (2022, August 3). '2023 Election: Completed PVC registration across Nigeria in 5 charts'. Dataphyte
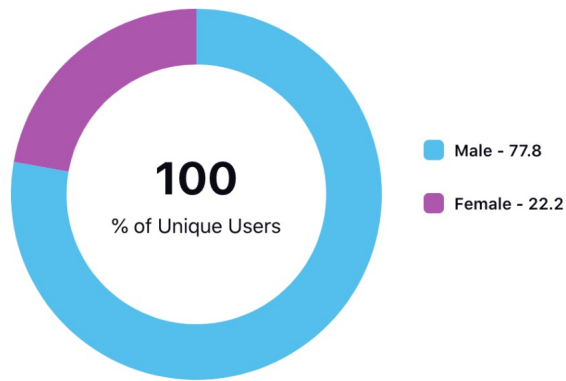
Atiku Abubakar

Audience distribution by gender ⓘ

100
% of Unique Users

■ Male - 79.3
■ Female - 20.7
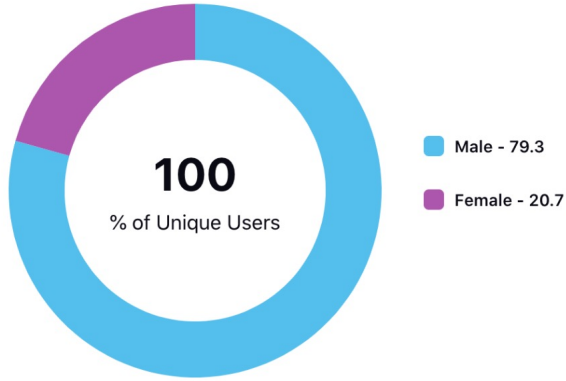
Audience distribution by age category ⓘ

Bola Tinubu

Audience distribution by gender ⓘ

100
% of Unique Users

■ Male - 77.8
■ Female - 22.2

Audience distribution by age category ⓘ

Peter Obi

Audience distribution by gender ⓘ

100
% of Unique Users

■ Male - 76.53
■ Female - 23.47
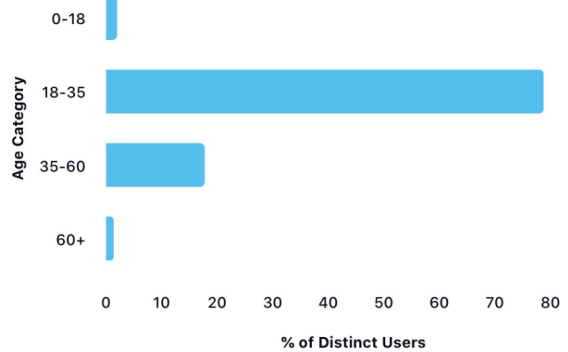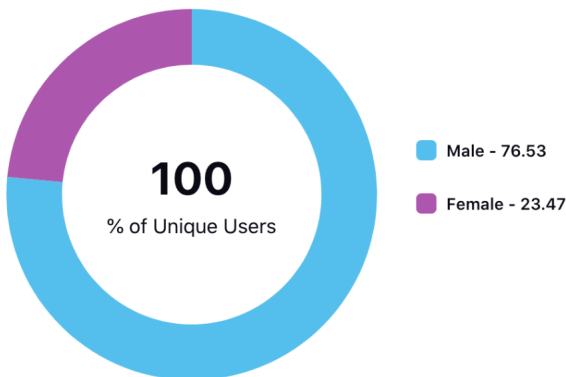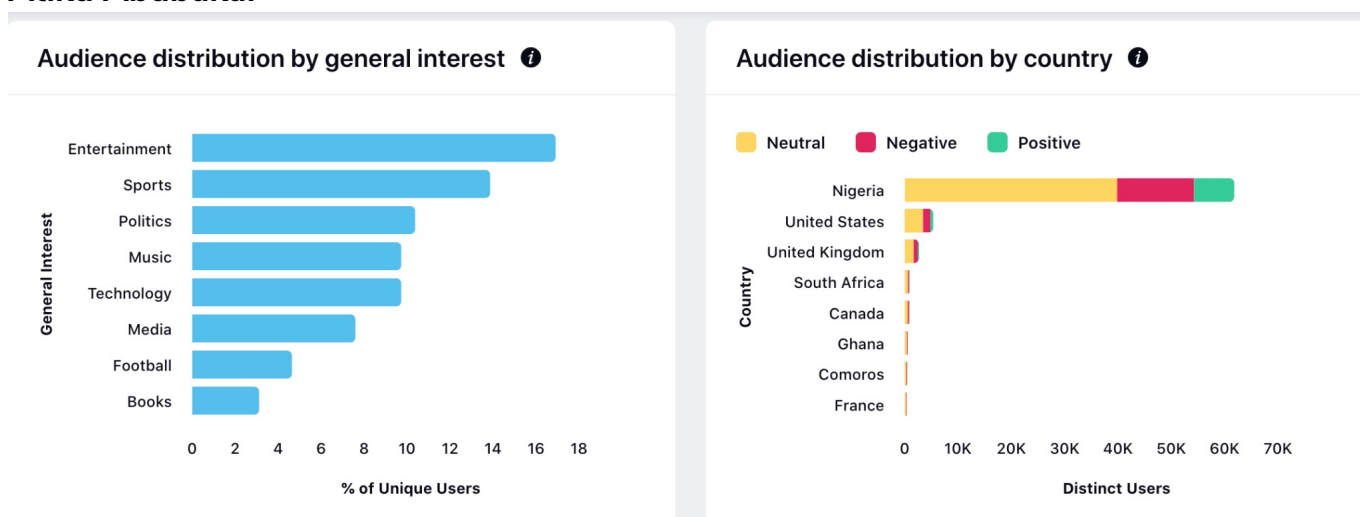
Audience distribution by age category ⓘ
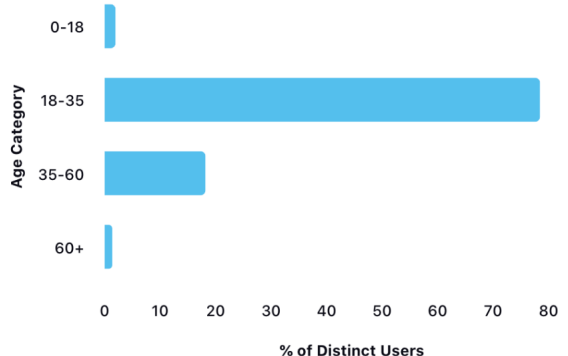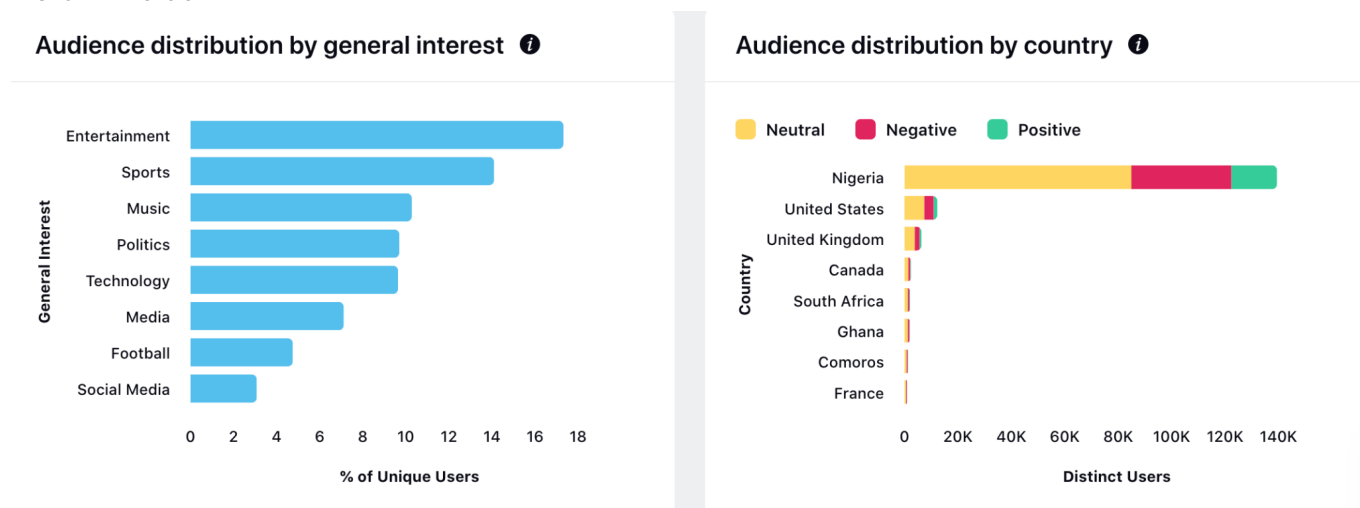

Source: Sprinklr

Similarly, the majority of this young active online audience discussing the candidates are also simultaneously interested in entertainment, sports, music, and technology. This truly corresponds with the average Nigerian youth's topic of interest online.

Perhaps, one easily negligible chart is the chart on the right, showing audience distribution by country; afterall, majority, if not all, of the online engagements have to come from Nigeria. But the chart also offers a quick glance at the diasporic composition of Nigeria's online political discussants. For Atiku, the top 3 engagements outside of Nigeria come from the USA, UK, and South Africa; for both Tinubu and Obi, this comes from the USA, UK, and Canada, respectively.
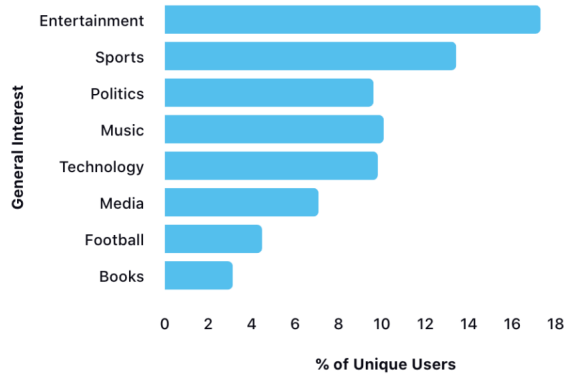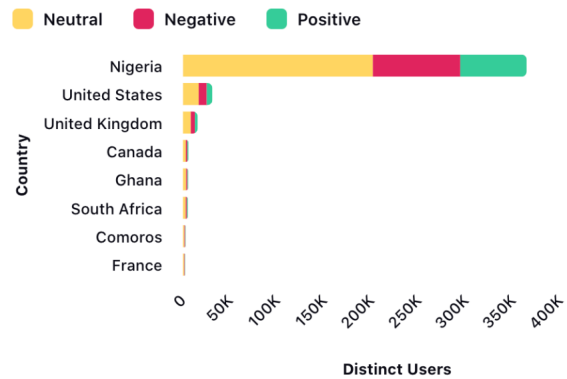
Atiku Abubakar

Audience distribution by general interest

Audience distribution by country

Bola Tinubu

Audience distribution by general interest

Audience distribution by country

Peter Obi

Audience distribution by general interest ⓘ

Audience distribution by country ⓘ

Source: Sprinklr

Conclusion

Measuring digital political advertising in Nigeria is a not-so-straightforward task, not the least because of stakeholders' lack of transparency on politicians' digital ad records. Even where such data exists, compiling and presenting it into measurable insights is an arduous task. Besides, a meaningful evaluation of digital advertising would also require ample data on politicians' traditional advertising budgets (for comparison) — something quite difficult to obtain.

Yet, by zooming in on the 3 major contenders in the 2023 presidential elections, this piece has offered some important insights into the current nature of digital advertising in Nigerian politics. It is by no means comprehensive; however, it provides a window of discussion into some crucial questions every democracy grapples with in this age of digital revolution; such as, "might there be a link between the online world of heated political discourses and the offline political world of compromises and deal-cutting?", "how might continuous digital advertising in the coming months impact voter behaviour in the 2023 general elections?" The puzzle is indeed endless.

Dataphyte

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