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Communication Strategies, Theatrical Performances and Political Mobilization in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the intersection of communication strategies and theatrical performances in the context of political mobilization in Nigeria. Anchored on Play Theory and Social Identity Theory, it examines how political parties engage the electorate through performative tactics during rallies. Utilizing an online survey method, data were collected from 600 respondents across four Nigerian states: Edo, Lagos, Kaduna, and Enugu. The findings reveal a dominant preference for musical performances (67%) over local comedies (24%) or cultural dances (2%), indicating a strategic shift toward celebrity-driven engagement. Moreover, 64% of respondents perceive these performances as propaganda rather than substantive political communication. These results suggest that theatrical strategies are widely used not merely to inform, but to entertain, emotionally charge, and shape group-based political identities. The study calls for a balanced integration of cultural authenticity and civic education in campaign performances to enhance democratic engagement and national cohesion.

Keywords: Political Communication, Theatrical Performance, Mobilization, Voter Perception

A. INTRODUCTION

Strategic political communication plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception, mobilizing the electorate, and influencing democratic outcomes. In a multi-ethnic, multilingual, and religiously diverse society like Nigeria, the complexity of reaching heterogeneous audiences necessitates tailored communication methods that transcend conventional political rhetoric (Oso & Pate, 2011). Politicians increasingly employ integrated strategies—combining traditional media, digital platforms, and performative elements—to construct persuasive narratives that resonate with identity-based electorates.

Theatrical performances, particularly during political rallies, have become an integral part of campaign communication. These include the use of music, drama, symbolic gestures, and celebrity figures to emotionally engage supporters and simplify political messages (Street, 2019; Thompson, 2019). Such tactics are especially prevalent in rural and peri-urban areas, where community-based performances serve to educate, entertain, and persuade voters in accessible formats (Uka, 2011; Peterside, 2023). The line between performance and propaganda, however, remains contested, as the electorate's reception of such strategies varies significantly based on political affiliation, cultural orientation, and trust in political actors (Marcus & Sullivan, 2020).

Furthermore, the rise of social media and mobile connectivity has expanded the reach and impact of performative communication. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp allow political messages—often packaged in theatrical formats—to rapidly circulate among digitally connected voters, particularly youth demographics (Akinbobola, 2017; Aniche & Oluka, 2021). This phenomenon aligns with the principles of Play Theory (Stephenson, 2024), which posits that communication, especially in media-saturated environments, often serves as a form of entertainment and psychological gratification. Similarly, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how political performances reinforce group-based affiliations, thereby fostering loyalty and polarization.

Despite their prevalence, empirical research on the intersection between theatrical political communication and voter perception in Nigeria remains limited. Previous studies have focused on the influence of media (Haryono et al., 2022), gender-based political communication (Amin & Ritonga, 2022), and the use of satire in digital skits (Ogbonna & Ihentuge, 2024). However, a critical gap persists in understanding how theatrical elements at political rallies—such as music concerts, dramatic speeches, and mascot performances—shape voter attitudes and mobilization outcomes across Nigeria's geopolitical zones.

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This study therefore seeks to examine: 1) the dominant communication strategies adopted by political parties in Nigeria; 2) the types of theatrical performances preferred at rallies; and 3) how the electorate perceives these performances in terms of authenticity, manipulation, or civic engagement. By integrating theoretical and empirical lenses, this research contributes to the broader discourse on political performance, identity construction, and strategic mobilization in emerging democracies.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategic Political Communication in Multi-ethnic Democracies

Political communication is a central pillar in electoral democracy, shaping public opinion, mobilizing voter turnout, and influencing political loyalty. In heterogeneous societies like Nigeria, communication strategies must navigate complex interplays of ethno-religious identities, linguistic variation, and digital divides (Oso & Pate, 2011). Political campaigns in the contemporary era integrate both traditional media—such as radio, television, and print—and digital platforms, including Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook, to reach diverse demographic groups (Akinbobola, 2017; Enli, 2017). Message framing is a core aspect of political communication. Politicians often utilize emotional appeals (such as hope, fear, and nationalism), issue salience, and identity-based messaging to resonate with target groups (Lakoff, 2004; West, 2018). In Nigeria, ethnic and religious frames are recurrent, often exacerbating identity cleavages rather than unifying the electorate (Olasupo, 2022). Campaign strategies are increasingly personalized, aided by data-driven targeting and segmented outreach (Chadwick, 2017), yet this personalization often sidelines deliberative content in favor of spectacle.

Theatricality and the Spectacle of Political Performance

Theatrical performances—encompassing music, dance, mimicry, symbolic costuming, and dramatic speeches—have become integral to modern political rallies (Street, 2019; Thompson, 2019). These performances serve dual functions: emotional stimulation and political messaging. According to Atkinson (2018), charismatic oratory that employs repetition, rhythm, and gesture enhances rhetorical efficacy. Nonverbal communication, such as body language and symbolic gestures, further reinforces the perception of authenticity and connection (Mehrabian, 2017). In the Nigerian context, celebrity musicians and comedians are frequently featured at rallies to attract crowds and simplify campaign messaging through entertainment (Ajibade, 2012; Okonkwo, 2013). While such theatrics can improve visibility and voter enthusiasm, they risk trivializing the democratic process by shifting attention from policy to personality. Scholars such as (Edelman, 2020; Entman, 2018) argue that modern political communication increasingly functions as a symbolic spectacle—a performance designed to manipulate emotional responses rather than inform.

Voter Perception and the Efficacy of Political Performance

Audience reception to theatrical political communication varies based on sociopolitical alignment, demographic background, and media literacy. Studies show that while emotionally resonant performances can enhance turnout and engagement, they are also perceived by many as manipulative or propagandistic (Marcus & Sullivan, 2020; Dorsey, 2021). Bennett and Collins (2018) critique such performances as "political spectacle" that undermines substantive discourse. In Nigeria, cultural factors influence these perceptions. While youth and urban voters are more receptive to musical and digital theatrics (Garcia & Lopez, 2021), older or rural populations may view them as distractions from core policy debates. This divergence reflects what (Ibeanu, 2007) characterizes as "ritualistic performance politics"—where style supersedes substance, eroding democratic accountability.

Theoretical Anchors: Play and Social Identity

Play Theory (Stephenson, 2024) provides a framework for understanding why political performances gain traction. It views communication not only as an exchange of information but also as a form of entertainment, an escape, and a means of reinforcing identity. Political rallies, especially when saturated with music and drama, function as public "playgrounds" where voters engage with content emotionally rather than rationally (Gaydos & Nardo, 2022). Complementing this, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how political performances affirm group affiliation. Music, color symbolism, and linguistic cues in campaign performances reinforce in-group identity and create emotional distance from out-groups (Huddy, 2001). In a deeply divided polity like Nigeria, such identity reinforcement can both mobilize and polarize, depending on context and intention.

Empirical Research Gaps

Recent studies have addressed digital political communication (Haryono et al., 2022), the communicative efficacy of female politicians (Amin & Ritonga, 2022), and the pedagogic role of satirical skits in voter education (Ogbonna & Ihentuge, 2024). However, a thematic gap remains in understanding how live theatrical performances—distinct from digital satire—shape voter perceptions across Nigeria's ethno-regional landscape. Little is known about which forms of performance resonate most, and whether voters interpret them as authentic political engagement or mere propaganda. This study contributes to filling this gap by offering empirical insights into voter preferences for different theatrical formats (music, drama, comedy, dance) and evaluating how these strategies affect perceived legitimacy, emotional resonance, and political mobilization.

C. METHODS

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design, utilizing an online survey method, to investigate the communication strategies and theatrical performances employed during political mobilization in Nigeria. The methodological approach was grounded in the principles of cross-sectional design, aiming to capture voters' perceptions during the 2023 election cycle.

Population and Sampling Technique

The target population consisted of residents from four purposively selected Nigerian states: Lagos (South West), Enugu (South East), Edo (South South), and Kaduna (North Central), representing major geopolitical zones and cultural diversity. According to 2023 population projections, the combined population of these states was 32,491,100 individuals. A non-probability quota sampling technique was applied to ensure proportional representation from each state, based on population size. A total sample of 600 respondents was drawn as follows: Lagos (253), Kaduna (169), Edo (90), and Enugu (88). This sample size is consistent with recommendations for political communication surveys within large populations (Akpan & Aniema, 2024). Eligibility criteria included Nigerian citizenship, residency in one of the four states, and access to internet-enabled mobile devices.

Instrument and Data Collection

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire developed on Google Forms, comprising 10 items organized around three thematic areas: 1) dominant communication strategies, 2) preferred forms of theatrical performances, and 3) perception of theatrical elements. The instrument was reviewed for content validity by two communication scholars and pilot-tested with 20 respondents to ensure clarity and reliability. The questionnaire link was disseminated via email and social media (WhatsApp and Facebook) using a contact database obtained through collaboration with mobile network service providers. All respondents provided informed consent digitally prior to participating in the survey. Participation was voluntary, and respondents had the option to withdraw at any point.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical standards in the collection, processing, and storage of personal data. Approval for this research was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Topfaith University, Nigeria. Informed consent was obtained explicitly through a pre-survey agreement form, and participants' anonymity was guaranteed. No identifiable personal data were collected, and results are reported in aggregate form only.

Data Analysis

Data collected were exported to Microsoft Excel and analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques. Frequency distributions and percentages were computed and presented using tables and bar charts to identify patterns across variables. Although inferential statistical testing was not employed, the study focused on highlighting the dominant trends that emerged from the respondents' evaluations. Cross-tabulations and chi-square analysis are recommended for future studies seeking deeper relational insights..

D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Dominant Communication Strategies at Political Rallies

To identify the most common communication strategies employed at political rallies, respondents were asked to select the dominant message frame they observed. The data revealed a striking emphasis on ethnic-based appeals, while narratives emphasizing patriotism or inclusivity of gender were marginal.

Table 1. Dominant Political Communication Frames Observed at Rallies

Communication Frame	Frequency (n=600)	Percentage (%)
Ethnic Framing	365	61%
Religious Appeals	115	19%
Gender-Based Messaging	66	11%
Patriotism/National Unity	54	9%

Source: Research data, 2025

The data reveal an overwhelming dominance of ethnic framing (61%), which is significantly higher than any other category. This suggests that political discourse in Nigeria remains heavily influenced by primordial affiliations, aligning with the predictions of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In this context, ethnicity serves as a salient identity marker through which voters interpret political messages, align with candidates, and assess issues. Politicians deliberately leverage ethnic identity as a shortcut to trust, mobilization, and loyalty—often at the expense of cross-ethnic solidarity. The use of religious appeals (19%) also plays a substantial role in shaping political discourse. In a country with deep religious cleavages between predominantly Muslim North and Christian South, the mobilization of faith-based symbols, language, and narratives is a powerful tool. However, this strategy risks instrumentalizing religion for short-term political gain, reinforcing sectarian divides, and undermining inclusive democratic norms. It reflects what (Entman, 2018) calls "symbolic engineering"—the intentional use of cultural codes to trigger alignment without substantive policy dialogue.

The gender-based messaging category (11%)—though more marginal—suggests that Nigerian politicians still employ traditional gender norms in their communication. Rather than promoting equity, these messages often reinforce stereotypes or evoke fears about gender roles to maintain patriarchal dominance. This observation confirms earlier findings by (Ibrahim & Salihu, 2020), who argued that gender is often misrepresented in political discourse, serving more as a rhetorical device than a transformative agenda. The least employed strategy, patriotism or national unity (9%), is particularly revealing. It suggests that the idea of a collective national identity is not prioritized in political communication, despite Nigeria's historical and contemporary challenges with unity, conflict, and fragmentation. This finding is consistent with (Olasupo, 2022) critique that patriotic messages in Nigerian politics are often superficial—deployed as rhetorical devices devoid of actionable commitments or policy substance. In essence, appeals to "One Nigeria" remain largely ceremonial and lack resonance among an electorate disillusioned with elite-driven narratives.

These findings raise critical concerns regarding the quality of democratic engagement. The dominance of ethnic and religious appeals indicates a strategic instrumentalization of identity politics, which while effective for short-term mobilization, can undermine long-term democratic consolidation by fostering distrust and exclusion. It shifts electoral competition away from issues and ideologies toward identity-based allegiances, perpetuating what (Laclau, 2005) describes as "empty signifiers"—messages that mobilize emotion but lack policy anchoring. Moreover, the absence of robust patriotic framing reflects the limited investment of political actors in promoting a unifying national vision. This contributes to a fragile political culture in which fragmentation, rather than integration, defines political behavior and party alignment.

From the lens of Play Theory (Stephenson, 2024), these communication strategies are also performative. Ethnic and religious appeals are not just persuasive devices—they serve as emotionally resonant "scripts" that structure the rally as a ritual space for affirming symbolic identity. Voters are not merely persuaded; they are "entertained" through the invocation of familiar narratives that reinforce group pride and rivalry. This helps explain the emotional intensity and spectacle often seen at Nigerian political rallies. These patterns are not unique to Nigeria. In many emerging democracies, especially across Sub-Saharan Africa, identity-based political communication is a recurring strategy. However, what distinguishes the Nigerian case is the scale, intensity, and entrenchment of identity manipulation, made more potent by theatrical delivery modes and mass media amplification. As noted by (Scammell, 2014), effective political communication must strike a balance between resonance and responsibility—an equilibrium that Nigerian political actors have yet to achieve.

Preferred Theatrical Performances at Political Rallies

Respondents were asked to indicate the type of theatrical performance most frequently used at political rallies. The results overwhelmingly favored musical performances, particularly those involving celebrity musicians.

Table 2. Preferred Forms of Theatrical Performances by Political Parties

Performance Type	Frequency (n=600)	Percentage (%)
Musical Concerts	403	67%
Comedic Skits	143	24%
Dramatic Plays	44	7%
Traditional Dances	10	2%

Source: Research data, 2025

The overwhelming preference for musical performances (67%) reflects a deliberate political communication strategy that prioritizes celebrity influence and entertainment value over civic or ideological engagement. Politicians often enlist popular musicians to draw massive crowds, create emotional atmospheres, and signal socio-cultural alignment with targeted demographics. As noted by (Street, 2019), music in political contexts serves not only as entertainment but also as a mnemonic device for campaign messaging. In Nigeria, these songs are often tailored to specific linguistic or regional identities, thereby reinforcing the social and symbolic proximity between the candidate and the voter. This trend highlights the increasing integration of "politainment"—the fusion of political mobilization with entertainment culture. The rise of this strategy aligns with the principles of Play Theory (Stephenson, 2024), which views media consumption as a pleasurable and identity-affirming activity. Political rallies thus become less about rational debate and more about affective engagement—spaces where voters experience performance rather than policy.

Comedic skits, comprising 24% of responses, also play a significant role in theatrical political communication. These acts, often infused with satire, mimicry, and parody, serve as tools for indirect critique and mass persuasion. They embody what (Ogbonna & Ihentuge, 2024) described as "new media political theatre," where humor serves as a subtle but effective instrument of civic education and elite accountability. Through humor, performers expose political failures, mock corruption, or simplify complex electoral procedures. The effectiveness of this approach lies in its accessibility—particularly in low-literacy or politically skeptical audiences—allowing political messages to be absorbed without overt didacticism. Dramatic plays, though less frequently used (7%), remain important in rural or community-based campaigns. Such performances often portray metaphorical or symbolic representations of governance, justice, or societal change. Rooted in the Theatre for Development tradition (Abah, 2009), these dramatizations have historically been used by NGOs and civil society groups to promote voter education, public health, and civic consciousness. However, their limited use at mainstream rallies suggests that traditional drama may be losing ground to faster-paced, mass-appeal formats such as music and comedy.

The near absence of traditional cultural dances (2%) is particularly telling. Once a staple of public mobilization in Nigeria, such performances have been marginalized, possibly due to the rising preference for urban pop culture, commercial sponsorship, and the commodification of campaign events. This reflects a broader process of cultural displacement, wherein the glamor and marketability of celebrity-driven events eclipses indigenous artistic forms. As (Ajibade, 2012; Okonkwo, 2013) warned, this trend risks eroding Nigeria's rich heritage in performative storytelling and community-based expression, reducing political engagement to spectacle without substance. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides further explanatory power. Musical and comedic performances act as identity affirmers, embedding political messages in culturally familiar and emotionally resonant formats. Campaign songs, slogans, and humor are tailored to specific ethnic or generational cohorts, deepening in-group affinity while also excluding others. This selective inclusivity strengthens political loyalty but may exacerbate intergroup tensions, particularly in regions characterized by competition or post-conflict dynamics.

Civic Implications and Risks

While theatricality enhances attention and recall, its overuse—particularly when decoupled from policy content—can diminish the deliberative function of electoral campaigns. When voters attend rallies primarily for entertainment, the candidate's competence or manifesto may become secondary. This risks reinforcing personality-driven politics, where visibility, charisma, and association with pop culture outweigh governance capability. As (Williams, 2018) argued, voters tend to project emotional or symbolic meaning onto performances, even when those performances lack actionable political content. Moreover, the dominance of music and comedy suggests that economic considerations—such as securing the most popular artist or comedian—may shape political visibility. Candidates with greater financial resources can afford top-tier performers, thus creating an uneven campaign playing field and raising concerns about equity and inclusiveness.

Comparative Insight

This Nigerian pattern reflects a broader phenomenon in African democracies, where performativity and personalization have become central campaign tools. However, unlike countries such as South Africa or Ghana, where cultural dances and indigenous drama still feature in civic engagement, Nigeria appears to be undergoing a more rapid shift toward commercialized performative politics, with deep implications for cultural identity and democratic substance.

Electorate Perception of Theatrical Performances

Respondents were asked to describe their perceptions of the theatrical performances at political rallies. The results show widespread skepticism, with a majority classifying them as propaganda.

Table 3. Electorate Perception of Theatrical Political Performances

Perception Category	Frequency (n=600)	Percentage (%)
Propaganda	386	64%
Deceptive	130	22%
Emotional Engagement	58	10%
Civic/Foundational Value	26	4%

Source: Research data, 2025

The most prominent perception—propaganda (64%)—indicates a deep-seated skepticism among the electorate. A majority of respondents perceive theatrical performances as manipulative tools employed to sway public opinion without offering substantive policy content. This aligns with (Edelman, 2020) notion of the "political spectacle", where theatricality serves to distract and emotionally saturate the public while suppressing rational deliberation. The second-highest perception—deception (22%)—suggests that a significant portion of voters not only distrust the content but also question the intention behind the performance. This reflects an electorate that is politically aware but disillusioned, resonating with (Ibeanu, 2007) argument that Nigerian political communication often serves elite survival rather than public enlightenment. Only a minority of respondents viewed the performances positively: 10% interpreted them as emotional engagement, and a mere 4% saw them as foundational civic instruments. These low figures signal a perceived lack of authenticity, depth, and civic relevance in the use of theatricality in Nigerian campaigns.

From the perspective of Play Theory (Stephenson, 2024), this finding illustrates the paradox of political entertainment: while performances may attract, engage, and temporarily captivate audiences, their inability to connect with voters' substantive concerns leads to disenchantment. The initial "playful" appeal—via music or comedy—becomes counterproductive when audiences recognize it as a substitute for policy-based engagement. Thus, the play loses its legitimacy and becomes propaganda. At the same time, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) helps explain why some groups may still derive emotional reinforcement from these performances. Voters who identify strongly with the ethnic, religious, or cultural symbolism embedded in these performances may overlook their superficiality and instead experience them as affirmation of in-group status. This explains why 10% of people still view them as emotionally meaningful, despite their performative nature.

The dominance of propaganda and deception perceptions underscores a democratic deficit: theatrical strategies, instead of fostering critical engagement, are seen as tools of manipulation. This erodes political trust, discourages civic participation, and may contribute to rising voter apathy—especially among undecided or first-time voters. As Marcus and Sullivan (2020) observe, emotional politics without substantive follow-up breeds disillusionment and cynicism. Moreover, this perception pattern has long-term implications for the legitimacy of campaigns and the credibility of politicians. Voters who view political events as mere entertainment may disengage entirely or become susceptible to reactionary populism, especially in volatile electoral environments. The minimal support for the view that performances are foundational (4%) also reveals a crisis of democratic education. Civic messaging is either absent, poorly delivered, or drowned in noise. This corroborates (Dorsey, 2021) assertion that campaigns relying solely on affective triggers fail to educate voters on governance priorities and rights.

It is worth noting that urban, internet-savvy, and younger voters—who are more likely to participate in online surveys—tend to be more critical and policy-oriented. This may partially explain the overwhelming negativity in the perception results. In contrast, in rural or less-educated populations, where political rallies are among the few public spectacles available, theatrical elements may still hold symbolic and emotional power, even if this is not captured in the dataset. Additionally, class and literacy play a role in how theatrical performances are interpreted. For economically marginalized groups, music and comedy might be perceived as temporary relief

from socioeconomic hardships, whereas for middle-class voters, these same performances may appear as distractions from systemic policy failures.

The observed pattern reinforces the idea that Nigerian political culture is characterized by symbolic overperformance and content underdelivery. Campaign rallies become more about showmanship than manifestos, more about presence than platforms. This reflects what (Olatunji, 2016) terms the "inversion of message substance"—a reversal where delivery overshadows detail. This approach may yield short-term electoral success but weakens democratic consolidation in the long run. As (Huddy, 2001) warns, political mobilization based on affective performance can create echo chambers of loyalty without fostering cross-cutting understanding or national integration.

Discussion

This study examined the strategic use of communication and theatrical performances in Nigerian political rallies, with a focus on the electorate's perception of their purpose and effectiveness. The findings reveal an increasingly performative communication landscape that is emotionally charged and identity-driven—yet perceived by the majority of voters as manipulative and superficial. This paradox between strategic intention and audience interpretation warrants a deeper analytical reflection. The first key finding—the dominance of ethnic framing (61%) as a communication strategy—reflects the enduring power of identity politics in Nigerian electoral culture. Rather than promoting shared civic ideals or national development agendas, political actors exploit ethnic loyalties to consolidate support. This practice is consistent with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which posits that individuals derive self-worth from group affiliation, often leading to in-group favoritism and out-group antagonism. In the Nigerian context, the political deployment of ethnic and religious symbols functions as a shorthand for trust and belonging, yet simultaneously undermines efforts to foster national unity. The lack of emphasis on patriotic or inclusive messaging (9%) further confirms that nation-building rhetoric is neither prioritized nor persuasive in campaign strategies.

Second, the overwhelming preference for musical performances (67%) over traditional cultural forms or dramatic reenactments suggests a shift in political communication toward entertainment. Political rallies are increasingly resembling staged spectacles, where the presence of celebrity musicians takes precedence over policy discussion. This aligns with Play Theory (Stephenson, 2024), which explains how political engagement is being reshaped from a deliberative activity to a leisure activity. Voters attend rallies not for ideological education, but for entertainment and emotional satisfaction—an observation supported by (Edelman, 2020) concept of the "political spectacle." However, this transformation risks trivializing democratic discourse, as campaign messages become submerged in the spectacle, and visibility substitutes substance. The third major insight concerns how voters interpret these theatrical strategies. The data show that 64% of respondents perceive political performances as propaganda, and an additional 22% as deceptive. Only a marginal proportion (4%) recognizes them as instruments of civic education. This highlights a growing credibility gap between political actors and the electorate. While campaigns are increasingly sophisticated in form, they remain shallow in content—fueling distrust, cynicism, and disengagement. The negative perception of theatricality undermines its intended function as a mobilization tool, reinforcing instead the electorate's skepticism toward political elites.

However, these performances still serve a dual symbolic function. For core supporters, particularly those aligned ethnically or generationally, music and symbolic gestures act as identity reinforcers, validating shared values and collective grievances. This duality is crucial: theatrical political communication can simultaneously mobilize loyalty and alienate critical publics, depending on the audience's interpretive lens. In this regard, performances reflect more about group belonging than governance orientation. Furthermore, the decline in the use of traditional cultural expressions—such as indigenous dances and dramatizations—raises questions about cultural continuity and authenticity in public communication. The marginalization of these forms (2%) in favor of commercialized popular culture suggests a broader shift in political aesthetics. Politicians increasingly rely on urban-centric, celebrity-driven formats that may resonate with youth and media audiences but alienate rural or traditional constituencies. This dynamic contributes to what (Okonkwo, 2013) describes as a process of cultural alienation, wherein performative modernity displaces indigenous civic forms.

From a normative democratic standpoint, these findings reflect an urgent need to reclaim political performance as a medium of civic engagement. Performative strategies are not inherently negative; when grounded in policy substance and delivered with cultural sensitivity, they can enhance participation and emotional resonance. The problem arises when performance becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to political education and accountability. This study also raises important methodological reflections. Given that data were

collected via online survey tools, the sample likely overrepresents urban, literate, and digitally active voters. This group may exhibit more critical media literacy and skepticism, which helps explain the dominant negative perceptions. Future research should incorporate mixed methods, including ethnographic or observational techniques, to capture the emotional and symbolic value of theatricality in offline, rural settings. In a comparative perspective, Nigeria's experience reflects broader patterns in electoral communication across Africa and the Global South, where politics is increasingly mediated, personalized, and emotionalized. However, Nigeria's scale of ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity makes the stakes of performative politics uniquely high. In such a context, the misuse of theatricality can easily deepen polarization, distract from governance priorities, and exacerbate public distrust.

E. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the intersection of strategic communication and theatrical performance as tools of political mobilization in Nigeria, revealing a complex and contested landscape. The findings highlight three major dynamics. First, communication strategies employed at political rallies are overwhelmingly framed around ethnic and religious identities, with minimal emphasis on national cohesion or issue-based messaging. This reflects a tactical use of identity politics, aligning with Social Identity Theory, yet undermining efforts to foster a unified democratic culture. Second, the dominant preference for musical performances, particularly those involving celebrity figures, underscores a shift toward entertainment-driven mobilization. Political rallies are increasingly becoming spectacles rather than platforms for ideological contestation. While these performances attract attention and foster emotional connection—as Play Theory suggests—they often substitute substance with style, diluting the deliberative core of democratic engagement. Third, and most crucially, the electorate largely perceives these theatrical strategies as propagandistic or deceptive, rather than educational or empowering. This perception points to a growing credibility gap between political actors and the public. It suggests that while theatricality may serve short-term mobilization goals, it risks eroding trust, encouraging cynicism, and deepening democratic disengagement in the long run.

Conceptually, the study contributes to political communication theory by demonstrating how performative strategies can both mobilize and alienate, depending on audience interpretation, cultural context, and narrative framing. Theatricality in politics is not inherently manipulative; its democratic value lies in the integration of cultural authenticity, civic relevance, and message transparency. Practically, the findings call for a strategic recalibration of campaign communication in Nigeria. Political actors must move beyond symbolic performance and adopt substantive, inclusive, and culturally grounded messaging that both educates and entertains. Only by aligning political performance with voter expectations and democratic principles can Nigeria advance from performative pluralism toward participatory pluralism. In an era where political visibility is increasingly mediated through spectacle, the challenge is not to abandon theatricality but to reclaim it—as a legitimate and constructive medium for political education, civic engagement, and democratic renewal.

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