



Branding and Image Management in Politics: A Rhetorical Analysis of Obi-Dient Movement in Nigeria

¹John, Arit Emmanuel & ²Nsikak Solomon Idiong (Ph.D)

^{1&2}Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,
University of Uyo, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This study examined branding and image management in politics with a rhetorical appraisal of the Obidient movement during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. The study focused on how branding, image management, rhetorical devices, and supporter-generated artefacts shaped the political image of Peter Obi and sustained the movement. A survey research design was adopted with a population of Uyo residents, and a sample of 379 respondents was determined using Taro Yamane's formula. Data were collected with a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings showed that 74% of respondents believed branding increased visibility, 73% agreed it differentiated Obi from other candidates, and 71% reported it mobilised youths. On image management, 82% highlighted social media promotion as most effective, while 76% pointed to integrity-based narratives. For rhetorical devices, 82% recognised slogans as powerful, 77% noted emotional appeals, and 76% highlighted memes. Supporter-generated artefacts were also significant, with 80% of respondents acknowledging their role in sustaining visibility and 79% noting the impact of hashtags in boosting recognition. The study concluded that branding and grassroots-driven communication were central to the success of the Obidient movement. It recommends that political actors adopt participatory strategies that integrate grassroots innovations with formal campaign approaches.

Keywords: Branding, image management, political communication, rhetorical devices, obedient movement

Introduction

The sight of thousands of young Nigerians wearing the same orange, chanting the same refrains and sharing the same memes online made the 2023 presidential contest feel less like a competition between parties and more like the birth of a brand. The “Obi-dient” phenomenon, a loosely organised youth-led movement around Labour Party candidate Peter Obi, turned rallies, viral images and WhatsApp memes into instruments of political persuasion and identity formation (Aboh & Okoi, 2023; Agbim et al., 2023). That striking convergence of street-level enthusiasm and digital creativity raises urgent questions about how political actors and their supporters craft, manage and defend images in an era when a single meme can do more reputational work than a full-page advert (Adebomi, 2025). This study opens by examining how branding and image management operate as rhetorical practices in contemporary Nigerian politics, using the Obidient movement as a focal case.

Political branding refers to the deliberate construction and communication of a political actor’s personality, values and promises so that voters perceive them as a recognisable, trustworthy and desirable “brand” (Jain, et al., 2025; Speed et al., 2015). In political marketing literature, branding borrows commercial concepts such as positioning, equity and personality and adapts them to leaders, parties and movements. The candidate becomes a human brand whose symbolic meaning is marketed to constituencies (Speed et al., 2015; Jain et al., 2025). Recent bibliometric syntheses emphasise that branding now includes visual identity, narrative framing and digital signals, and not only party manifestos, as decisive inputs into voter choice (Jain et al., 2025). Image management in politics is the set of communicative and organisational practices used to build, repair or transform public perceptions of an individual or group (Aronczyk, 2022; Jain et al., 2025). This concept covers routine media strategies such as press releases and staged appearances and emergent tactics such as memes, influencer endorsements and decentralised supporter campaigns. Scholars stress that image management is both proactive, creating favourable impressions, and reactive, countering attacks or correcting misperceptions. They also argue that the boundary between candidate-led branding and supporter-driven image work is increasingly porous in digitally mediated campaigns (Jain et al., 2025; Agbim et al., 2023).

Rhetorical appraisal, the analytic lens this study privileges, examines how language, symbols and multimodal artefacts such as images, video and memes persuade audiences and constitute collective identities (Kuypers, 2009; Adebomi, 2025). Rather than treating branding as merely marketing, rhetorical approaches interrogate the arguments, metaphors, frames and emotional appeals embedded in

branding artefacts. In the Obidient case, memes and hashtags function rhetorically to depict Peter Obi as a deliverer, a victim of corrupt elites and a vessel of national renewal. These rhetorical framings do political work by shaping moral evaluations and by signalling belonging to a youthful political community (Adebomi, 2025).

Digital activism and social-media mobilisation are the channels through which many contemporary branding and image projects are executed. Empirical studies of the Obidient movement show that Twitter, now X, WhatsApp and Instagram were not just distribution channels but environments in which image work was co-produced by supporters and circulated as persuasive content (Agbim et al., 2023; Owagboriaye, 2024). Researchers argue that these platforms amplified affective ties, accelerated message diffusion and enabled rapid reframing, all of which complicate traditional top-down accounts of campaign messaging (Owagboriaye, 2024; Aboh & Okoi, 2023).

Scholars investigating the Obidient movement have begun to map these intersections. Agbim, et al. (2023) analyse Twitter activity and find that hashtags and coordinated tweeting played a measurable role in mobilisation and visibility. Adebomi's multimodal framing analysis (2025) demonstrates how internet memes employed semiotic devices such as colour, visual salience and metaphor to represent Obi as "the deliverer" and to cast opponents in delegitimising frames. Owagboriaye's quantitative study of X (2024) documents engagement patterns and the instrumental use of hashtags in shaping attention. Commentators at the LSE and elsewhere emphasise the movement's capacity to reawaken youth political consciousness and to reconfigure voter registration and turnout dynamics (Aboh & Okoi, 2023). Collectively, these studies show that the Obidient movement combined branding, image management and rhetorical tactics in new ways, yet they remain dispersed across disciplinary lenses such as media studies, political marketing and digital sociology and across methods such as content analysis, framing and surveys.

Despite this growing literature, important gaps remain. Existing work has richly described what Obidient supporters did online and which memes or hashtags trended (Agbim et al., 2023; Adebomi, 2025; Owagboriaye, 2024), and commentators have reflected on the movement's political significance (Aboh & Okoi, 2023). However, few studies systematically subject the Obidient movement to a combined rhetorical and branding appraisal that links micro-level discursive strategies such as metaphor, visual composition and narrative arcs to macro-level outcomes in image formation and political legitimacy. Put differently, scholars have catalogued tactics and spikes in engagement, but they have not fully theorised how



those tactics function as sustained rhetorical branding practices that shape long-term candidate image, partisan realignment and normative claims about leadership.

This study therefore argues that a focused rhetorical appraisal of branding and image management in the Obidient movement will fill a conceptual and empirical gap by integrating multimodal rhetorical analysis with political-marketing theories of human branding, and by tracing how supporter-generated artefacts such as memes, hashtags and grassroots visuals interact with formal campaign strategies to produce durable reputational effects. The rationale is to move beyond description toward an explanatory account that shows how contemporary political brands are co-crafted, rhetorically sustained and politically consequential in Nigeria's evolving democratic field.

Statement of the Problem

Where traditional party loyalties have weakened and trust in state institutions is fragile, the emergence of the Obidient movement revealed how a candidate's image can become the centrepiece of political participation. Peter Obi was not merely evaluated on his manifesto but was branded and rebranded by supporters as a symbol of integrity, renewal and generational change. This branding operated across both physical rallies and digital platforms, underscoring a real-world problem: in contemporary politics, the strength of a candidate's image may matter more than the policies they articulate. Yet, while image-driven politics can foster inclusivity and civic engagement, it also raises concerns about the sustainability of movements that rely heavily on rhetorical branding rather than institutional structures.

Scholars have attempted to grapple with this problem from various disciplinary angles. Media and communication researchers have analysed the social media practices of the Obidient movement, showing how hashtags, memes and online discourses shaped mobilisation. Political marketing scholars have applied branding frameworks to explain the candidate-as-brand phenomenon, drawing attention to the adaptation of commercial branding tools for political purposes. Others have examined rhetorical framings, highlighting the persuasive strategies embedded in memes and digital artefacts. These studies provide useful insights into the digital creativity, symbolic framing and mobilisation strategies that defined the Obidient movement. However, most of these attempts have remained fragmented, focusing either on the mechanics of digital participation, the symbolic aspects of memes, or the broad outlines of political branding, without integrating these into a comprehensive account of how branding and image management coalesce into a sustained rhetorical project.

This study is motivated by the need to address this gap at a critical historical juncture. Nigeria's democracy is marked by growing youth participation, widespread distrust of traditional parties and rapid digitalisation of political communication. The Obidient movement crystallises all these dynamics, making it an urgent and timely case for examining how branding and rhetorical image work shape political mobilisation and legitimacy. Understanding this phenomenon is important not only for Nigerian politics but also for broader debates about democracy in the digital age, where branding and image management increasingly serve as substitutes for institutional trust and programme-based politics. The key question this study therefore poses is: How did branding and image management, as rhetorical practices, shape the rise and influence of the Obidient movement in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, and what does this reveal about the future of political mobilisation in transitional democracies?

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:

- i. Examine the role of branding in shaping the image of the Obidient movement during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election.
- ii. Analyse the strategies of image management employed by both Peter Obi and his supporters to construct and defend his political identity.
- iii. Appraise the rhetorical devices and persuasive resources embedded in the communicative practices of the Obidient movement.
- iv. Assess the interaction between supporter-generated artefacts such as memes, hashtags and grassroots visuals, and the formal strategies of the campaign.

Research Questions

The following questions were formulated for this study:

- i. How did branding contribute to the construction of Peter Obi's image within the Obidient movement?
- ii. What image management strategies were employed to promote and protect this political image during the 2023 presidential election?



- iii. Which rhetorical devices and persuasive strategies characterised the communicative practices of the Obidient movement?
- iv. In what ways did supporter-generated artefacts interact with formal campaign strategies to sustain the movement's image and visibility?

Review of Concepts

Political Branding

Political branding has emerged as a crucial concept in contemporary political communication, as candidates, parties, and movements increasingly adopt marketing strategies to cultivate distinct identities. At its core, political branding is the adaptation of commercial branding tools to political contexts, positioning a candidate or party as a recognisable entity with emotional and symbolic appeal to voters (Jain et al., 2025). Rather than being limited to policy platforms, branding encompasses personality attributes, values, and narratives that are packaged and communicated to build trust and affinity. This approach transforms politicians into “human brands” whose resonance depends on symbolic cues as much as tangible achievements (Speed et al., 2015). In transitional democracies like Nigeria, branding plays a particularly vital role in compensating for weak institutional trust, offering citizens a sense of attachment to political actors rather than to political parties.

Political branding functions across multiple dimensions, including brand identity, brand personality, and brand equity. Brand identity involves the set of values and attributes the political actor projects, while brand personality reflects the human traits voters associate with the actor (Smith & French, 2019). Brand equity captures the symbolic and electoral value generated from these perceptions. Scholars argue that when successfully managed, political branding fosters loyalty and mobilises support, creating enduring associations in the minds of the electorate (Marland, 2020). Importantly, political branding operates not only through candidate communication but also through the symbolic work of supporters who reinforce brand narratives in everyday interactions and digital spaces.

In Africa, political branding has moved beyond elite-controlled messaging to become a collaborative enterprise between leaders and their supporters. For example, youth-led movements such as Nigeria's Obidient campaign illustrate how branding is increasingly co-created through memes, hashtags, and digital narratives that position candidates as reformist figures (Agbim et al., 2023). This shift suggests that branding in politics is no longer static or top-down but dynamic and

participatory. By foregrounding emotional and symbolic cues, such branding can significantly alter voter behaviour, sometimes overshadowing manifestos or policy debates. Thus, political branding provides a framework to understand how Peter Obi's image was shaped and disseminated within the Obidient movement.

Image Management

Image management refers to the deliberate strategies employed by political actors and their supporters to cultivate, protect, or repair public perceptions. In politics, image is inseparable from credibility and legitimacy, and the ability of candidates to project competence, honesty, and relatability often determines their electoral success (Aronczyk, 2022). Image management involves both proactive efforts, such as branding campaigns and public appearances, and reactive strategies, such as damage control in response to criticism. Political leaders increasingly rely on a combination of traditional media and digital platforms to manage impressions, ensuring that their public persona aligns with the expectations of target constituencies.

Image management is more complex in the digital age, where multiple actors contribute to shaping a candidate's public image (Marland, 2020). Unlike earlier contexts in which campaigns monopolised image construction, today's image work is decentralised, with influencers, activists, and ordinary citizens generating content that either strengthens or undermines official portrayals. This makes political image management a contested and fluid process, requiring leaders to constantly negotiate and adapt to shifting narratives (Lalancette & Raynauld, 2019). Moreover, image management involves symbolic performances such as gestures, dress, and speech patterns, which function as persuasive signals to targeted groups.

In the Nigerian context, image management has been critical given the crisis of trust in political institutions. The Obidient movement provides an illustrative case in which supporters assumed a major role in constructing and defending Peter Obi's image as an incorruptible, people-centred leader (Agbim et al., 2023). Memes, hashtags, and digital artefacts became tools not only of mobilisation but also of reputational defence, particularly when Obi was attacked by rivals or misrepresented in mainstream media. Thus, image management was not confined to campaign professionals but became a shared responsibility, producing a resilient image that outlived formal electioneering.

Rhetorical Appraisal

Rhetorical appraisal offers an interpretive lens for examining how language, symbols, and multimodal artefacts persuade audiences and construct identities.



Rooted in classical rhetoric, contemporary rhetorical analysis extends beyond speeches to include visual and digital artefacts such as memes, videos, and hashtags (Kuypers, 2009). It emphasises the ways in which metaphors, frames, narratives, and emotional appeals shape public judgement and foster collective identification. In political communication, rhetorical appraisal is valuable for uncovering the symbolic resources through which candidates are presented and perceived.

A rhetorical approach treats political branding not simply as marketing but as argumentation embedded in discourse and imagery. It interrogates how rhetorical devices frame candidates as trustworthy or corrupt, visionary or outdated, and in doing so influence voters' affective and cognitive orientations (Charteris-Black, 2019). Scholars argue that rhetorical strategies work by appealing to shared cultural values and social imaginaries, enabling audiences to position themselves within broader political narratives (Kuypers, 2009). For instance, the metaphor of a leader as a "saviour" is not just descriptive but mobilises support by evoking collective desires for transformation.

In the case of the Obidient movement, rhetorical appraisal highlights how digital artefacts functioned as persuasive texts that represented Peter Obi as a reformist deliverer and positioned his opponents as embodiments of corruption and decay (Adebomi, 2025). Memes used visual salience, colour, and humour to amplify rhetorical appeals, while hashtags such as #Obidient created a symbolic community of belonging. These practices were not accidental but constituted a systematic rhetorical project that mobilised emotions, identities, and expectations. Thus, rhetorical appraisal provides the tools to decode how image and branding intersected in the Obidient movement.

Digital Activism and Social Media Mobilisation

Digital activism refers to the use of digital platforms to organise, mobilise, and amplify political participation. In recent years, social media activism has become a defining feature of political campaigns, particularly in contexts where mainstream media are distrusted or dominated by elites. Digital activism allows marginalised groups, especially youths, to shape political narratives and coordinate collective action (Owagboriaye, 2024). Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp provide arenas for discourse, identity construction, and mobilisation.

Social media mobilisation differs from traditional campaign communication because it is decentralised and participatory. Content is generated not only by campaign teams but also by ordinary supporters, influencers, and activists who collectively shape the political agenda (Howard & Hussain, 2013). This horizontal

model of mobilisation enables rapid dissemination of information, creative framing through memes and hashtags, and immediate feedback loops. Scholars argue that this participatory nature strengthens engagement and creates new forms of political legitimacy grounded in digital networks (Marichal, 2020). However, it also raises questions about misinformation, echo chambers, and sustainability beyond election cycles.

The Obidient movement exemplifies digital activism in action, as social media platforms became both the arena and the engine of mobilisation. Supporters used hashtags to trend conversations, crafted memes to frame Obi's candidacy, and organised rallies through WhatsApp groups (Agbim et al., 2023; Owagboriaye, 2024). This digital creativity transformed Obi from a third-party candidate into a national phenomenon with global visibility. Digital activism thus served as the bridge between branding, image management, and rhetorical persuasion, demonstrating the centrality of social media mobilisation in contemporary Nigerian politics.

Review of Empirical Studies

Agbim et al. (2023) conducted a content analysis of Twitter activities during the Nigerian 2023 presidential election to examine the role of digital activism in the Obidient movement. Their study revealed that hashtags such as #Obidient and #PeterObi were central to mobilisation, visibility, and agenda-setting. The researchers found that youth participation was significantly boosted by online interactions, which often translated into offline political engagement. The study concluded that Twitter provided both an organising platform and a space for constructing Peter Obi's political brand. This empirical evidence highlights how grassroots digital practices directly shaped the branding and image of the Obidient movement.

Adebomi (2025) employed multimodal discourse analysis to investigate how internet memes framed Peter Obi's candidacy during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election. Findings showed that memes were not merely humorous but functioned as powerful rhetorical devices that constructed Obi as a reformist "deliverer" while delegitimising his opponents. Semiotic resources such as colour, metaphor, and salience were strategically used to reinforce brand identity and manage Obi's image. This study underscores the importance of rhetorical resources in shaping political image, particularly in contexts where digital communication dominates electoral campaigns.

Owagboriaye (2024) undertook a quantitative study of X (formerly Twitter) to analyse the use of hashtags by Obidient supporters during the 2023 presidential election. The findings demonstrated that coordinated tweeting and trending strategies significantly amplified Peter Obi's visibility in national and international discourse. The study also showed that digital mobilisation helped overcome mainstream media bias that tended to sideline third-party candidates. By providing empirical evidence of the interaction between supporter-generated artefacts and broader campaign visibility, the study illuminates how image management is sustained in the digital age.

Lalancette and Raynauld (2019) explored political image construction through Instagram in the case of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Their findings showed that curated visual content, including carefully staged photographs, cultivated an image of relatability, youthfulness, and inclusivity. While focused on a Western context, the study demonstrates the broader trend of using digital platforms as tools of image management and political branding. This comparative insight is significant for understanding how similar dynamics operate in Nigeria, where the Obidient movement employed social media to project Peter Obi's brand identity.

Marland (2020) examined political branding and message control in Canada, focusing on how centralised campaign strategies shape leaders' images. Using interviews and content analysis, the study revealed that branding increasingly involves top-down control of narratives to maintain consistency across platforms. Although situated in Canada, the findings are relevant for Nigeria, where traditional top-down branding strategies were disrupted by the decentralised, grassroots-driven image work of the Obidient movement. This contrast helps to highlight the uniqueness of Nigeria's context, where citizens actively co-produced branding.

Smith and French (2019) carried out a consumer-orientated analysis of political branding in the United Kingdom. Their study applied brand personality frameworks to assess how voters perceive politicians and parties, showing that traits such as honesty, competence, and trustworthiness were decisive in voter choices. The findings highlight that political actors must cultivate distinct brand personalities to secure loyalty and credibility. This aligns with the Obidient movement, where Peter Obi's branding as transparent, accountable, and people-centred became a decisive factor in his appeal, despite institutional disadvantages.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on framing theory, originally articulated by Erving Goffman (1974) and later developed within communication and media studies. Framing theory posits that the way information is presented, organised, and emphasised influences how audiences perceive and interpret reality. In political communication, framing functions by highlighting certain aspects of a candidate, issue, or movement while downplaying others, thereby guiding public interpretation and shaping attitudes. Frames act as organising principles that make complex events more comprehensible, connecting them to shared values, beliefs, and emotions.

Framing has been widely applied in analysing political campaigns, particularly in contexts where symbolism, narratives, and visual cues play decisive roles in image construction. Scholars argue that political actors rely on frames to present themselves as credible, trustworthy, or visionary, while simultaneously framing opponents as incompetent or corrupt (Entman, 1993). Importantly, frames do not only originate from official campaign teams but also emerge from media, activists, and grassroots supporters, who co-construct narratives in participatory ways. This makes framing particularly useful for understanding contemporary movements, where supporters engage actively in shaping how candidates are perceived through memes, hashtags, and digital storytelling.

The Obidient movement provides a unique case to apply framing theory because its success was not rooted in traditional campaign machinery but in symbolic framing by digitally empowered supporters. Through memes, slogans, and hashtags, Peter Obi was consistently framed as a reformist leader, a deliverer from corrupt elites, and the embodiment of youthful aspirations. At the same time, his opponents were framed in delegitimising ways, reinforcing contrasts that enhanced Obi's brand identity. This study adopts framing theory as a lens to appraise the rhetorical practices of branding and image management in the Obidient movement. By doing so, it explains how specific frames, circulated both online and offline, influenced voter perceptions and mobilisation during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design to collect primary data from residents of Uyo in 2025. The population of the Uyo metro area was estimated at 1,457,020 individuals for 2025 (World Population Review, 2025). Using Taro Yamane's formula for sample size determination with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error (e) of 0.05, the sample size (n) was calculated as $n = 1 + N(e)^2/N =$

1+1,457,020(0.05)2/1,457,020 $\approx$ 399 respondents. Sampling was conducted in two stages: first by cluster sampling, which divided Uyo into geographic clusters (wards or neighbourhoods), and then within selected clusters, simple random sampling was applied to choose individual respondents. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire that contained items measuring perceptions of political branding, image management practices, rhetorical frames used in digital media, and levels of political engagement among respondents. Prior to full deployment, the questionnaire was piloted on about 10% of the calculated sample (approximately 40 respondents) in clusters outside the main sample to assess reliability, and Cronbach's Alpha was used as the coefficient of internal consistency; a threshold of 0.70 or higher was considered acceptable. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, to summarise respondent characteristics and views.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Table 1: The role of branding in shaping the image of the Obidient movement

Item (Branding)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Branding increased Peter Obi's visibility among Nigerians	120 (32%)	160 (42%)	50 (13%)	30 (8%)	19 (5%)	379 (100%)
Branding helped differentiate Obi from other candidates	135 (36%)	140 (37%)	60 (16%)	25 (7%)	19 (5%)	379 (100%)
Consistent branding enhanced trust and credibility	110 (29%)	150 (40%)	70 (18%)	30 (8%)	19 (5%)	379 (100%)
Branding contributed to youth mobilisation and engagement	140 (37%)	130 (34%)	55 (15%)	35 (9%)	19 (5%)	379 (100%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 1 shows that most respondents agreed that branding significantly shaped the image of the Obidient movement. Over 74% of respondents believed branding enhanced visibility, while 73% noted its role in differentiating Obi from opponents. These findings confirm branding as a vital driver of credibility and mobilisation.

Table 2: Respondents' assessment of image management strategies

Item (Image Management)	Very Effective	Effective	Neutral	Ineffective	Very Ineffective	Total
Use of social media to promote Obi's image	150 (40%)	160 (42%)	40 (11%)	20 (5%)	9 (2%)	379 (100%)
Response to negative propaganda and criticism	120 (32%)	140 (37%)	70 (18%)	30 (8%)	19 (5%)	379 (100%)
Strategic endorsements and alliances	110 (29%)	145 (38%)	65 (17%)	40 (11%)	19 (5%)	379 (100%)
Consistent emphasis on integrity and competence	160 (42%)	130 (34%)	50 (13%)	20 (5%)	19 (5%)	379 (100%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 2 showed that social media promotion (82%) and emphasis on Obi's integrity (76%) were rated most effective. Propaganda management and endorsements received weaker support, reflecting respondents' belief that image management relied more on grassroots digital communication than elite-driven strategies.

Table 3: Evaluation of rhetorical devices used in the movement

Item (Rhetorical Devices)	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Use of slogans (e.g., “We are Obidient”) strengthened solidarity	170 (45%)	140 (37%)	40 (11%)	20 (5%)	9 (2%)	379 (100%)
Use of memes and satire enhanced political persuasion	160 (42%)	130 (34%)	60 (16%)	20 (5%)	9 (2%)	379 (100%)
Religious and cultural references increased relatability	140 (37%)	135 (36%)	55 (15%)	40 (11%)	9 (2%)	379 (100%)
Emotional appeals (hope, frustration, change) mobilised support	150 (40%)	140 (37%)	60 (16%)	20 (5%)	9 (2%)	379 (100%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 3 explains that respondents strongly endorsed rhetorical devices as key to persuasion and mobilisation. Slogans (82%) and emotional appeals (77%) were particularly effective, demonstrating the power of symbolic and affective language in sustaining the Obidient movement.

Table 4: Respondents' perceptions of supporter-generated artefacts vs formal campaign strategies

Item	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very Low	Total
Supporter-generated memes increased visibility beyond campaign adverts	145 (38%)	160 (42%)	50 (13%)	15 (4%)	9 (2%)	379 (100%)
Hashtag campaigns (#Obidient) boosted national and international recognition	160 (42%)	140 (37%)	60 (16%)	10 (3%)	9 (2%)	379 (100%)
Grassroots visuals (flyers, posters, rallies) reinforced formal campaign messages	135 (36%)	145 (38%)	65 (17%)	25 (7%)	9 (2%)	379 (100%)
Interaction between online and offline strategies sustained momentum	150 (40%)	135 (36%)	60 (16%)	25 (7%)	9 (2%)	379 (100%)

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 4 revealed strong support for the interaction between supporter-generated artefacts and formal strategies. Over 79% of respondents agreed that hashtags and memes amplified visibility, while 76% believed grassroots visuals reinforced campaign messages. The synergy between digital activism and structured campaigns was thus central to sustaining the Obidient movement's visibility and legitimacy.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: How did branding contribute to the construction of Peter Obi's image within the Obidient movement?

Branding contributed significantly to the construction of Peter Obi's image. A majority of respondents (74%) agreed that branding increased Obi's visibility, while 73% believed it effectively differentiated him from other candidates. Furthermore, 69% acknowledged that consistent branding enhanced trust and credibility, while 71% emphasised its role in youth mobilisation. These results confirm that branding was a central mechanism through which the Obidient movement projected Peter Obi as an alternative candidate and mobilised support. These findings align with Smith and French (2019), who showed that branding enhances political differentiation and strengthens voter trust. Similarly, Speed, Butler and Collins (2015) argued that human branding in politics is a persuasive tool for positioning political leaders as

credible and trustworthy. Within the Nigerian context, Agbim et al. (2023) demonstrated how digital branding in the Obidient movement boosted youth mobilisation during the 2023 election. The results also resonate with framing theory, which posits that consistent branding frames a candidate's personality, values, and credibility in ways that simplify political choice for the electorate.

Research Question 2: What image management strategies were employed to promote and protect this political image during the 2023 presidential election?

Social media promotion and emphasis on integrity were the most effective image management strategies, endorsed by 82% and 76% of respondents, respectively. In contrast, responses to negative propaganda and strategic endorsements received less favourable ratings, with 69% and 67% agreement. This implies that Peter Obi's image was largely protected by grassroots-driven digital strategies rather than elite endorsements or traditional propaganda responses. This supports Lalancette and Raynauld's (2019) findings that social media imagery can powerfully construct and protect political images by creating relatability and accessibility. Similarly, Marland (2020) emphasised the growing role of centralised message control, but the current study highlights a departure: instead of top-down image management, the Obidient movement relied heavily on bottom-up, citizen-led social media promotion. From the lens of framing theory, this reflects the decentralisation of framing processes, where supporters actively created counter-frames to resist negative propaganda while sustaining a frame of Obi as competent and transparent.

Research Question 3: Which rhetorical devices and persuasive strategies characterised the communicative practices of the Obidient movement?

Slogans (82%), emotional appeals (77%), and memes (76%) were the most powerful rhetorical devices, while religious and cultural references were moderately effective (73%). These rhetorical strategies functioned to reinforce solidarity, mobilise emotions, and translate dissatisfaction into a persuasive call for change. The prominence of emotional appeals reflects the electorate's desire for transformation, which was effectively tapped into by the Obidient movement's communicative practices. These results corroborate Adebomi's (2025) analysis of memes as multimodal rhetorical devices that positioned Obi as a reformist while delegitimising opponents. They also align with Charteris-Black's (2019) assertion that rhetorical devices (particularly metaphors, slogans, and appeals to emotion) are crucial in building persuasive political discourse. Within Framing Theory, these rhetorical

practices served as framing devices that structured public interpretation of Obi's candidacy as both hopeful and morally superior to the political establishment.

Research Question 4: In what ways did supporter-generated artefacts interact with formal campaign strategies to sustain the movement's image and visibility?

Supporter-generated artefacts such as memes and hashtags were perceived as highly effective in sustaining visibility, with 80% of respondents acknowledging their contribution beyond campaign adverts. Similarly, 79% noted that hashtags boosted both national and international recognition, while 74% agreed that grassroots visuals reinforced formal strategies. This indicates a high level of synergy between supporter-driven artefacts and formal campaign efforts, suggesting that the Obidient movement was sustained by hybrid mobilisation strategies that blended grassroots creativity with structured campaign initiatives. This finding echoes Owagboriaye's (2024) quantitative analysis, which showed that hashtag campaigns amplified visibility and overcame mainstream media bias. It also supports Agbim et al. (2023), who found that supporter-led Twitter activism provided momentum for offline mobilisation. Unlike Marland's (2020) study of centralised branding control, the Obidient movement illustrates a participatory model of branding where citizens become co-creators of political imagery. Framing Theory explains this interaction as a collaborative framing process, where both formal and informal communicators continuously constructed and reinforced frames that projected Obi as a credible reformist.

Conclusion

This study examined the interplay of branding, image management, rhetorical practices, and supporter-generated artefacts in shaping the Obidient movement during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. The findings revealed that branding enhanced visibility, differentiation, and mobilisation; that grassroots-driven digital promotion and integrity-centred narratives were key to image management; that rhetorical devices such as slogans, memes, and emotional appeals effectively mobilised solidarity; and that supporter-generated artefacts complemented formal campaign strategies in sustaining momentum. Compared with previous studies, these results underscore the distinctive nature of the Obidient movement, which departed from elite-controlled campaign strategies by embracing participatory, citizen-driven communication practices. Interpreted through the lens of framing theory, the study demonstrates that political images and legitimacy are co-



constructed through both formal campaign strategies and grassroots rhetorical practices. Ultimately, the study highlights the transformative potential of branding and participatory communication in deepening political engagement in Nigeria, while also pointing to the need for institutionalising strategic communication practices in African electoral processes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made from the findings made:

- i. Political candidates in Nigeria should adopt branding as a central campaign strategy by developing consistent narratives, visual identities, and symbolic cues that enhance visibility and credibility.
- ii. Campaign teams should prioritise grassroots-driven digital engagement and values-based narratives of integrity and competence rather than relying heavily on elite endorsements or propaganda responses.
- iii. Political communicators should deliberately integrate rhetorical devices such as slogans, memes, and emotional appeals into campaign messaging to mobilise solidarity and broaden voter appeal.
- iv. Political movements should embrace participatory communication by encouraging supporter-generated artefacts like memes and hashtags while aligning them with official campaign strategies for sustained visibility.

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