

IMAGE MARKETING OF POLITICAL CANDIDATES AND VOTER ACCEPTABILITY IN SOUTH-SOUTH, NIGERIA.

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Abstract: This study explored how image marketing of political candidates relates voter acceptability in the South-South region of Nigeria. The research focused on three key aspects of political image marketing—personal image, professional competence image, and ideological or policy image—and examined how they relate to major indicators of voter acceptability, including favourability or approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study. Data were gathered from registered voters in the South-South geopolitical zone using a structured questionnaire. Respondents were selected through a multi-stage sampling procedure to ensure adequate representation. The data collected were analysed using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) to determine the nature and strength of the relationships among the study variables. The results indicate that personal image is strongly associated with voter acceptability, particularly with voters' intention to support candidates during elections. The findings also show that professional competence image has a significant positive relationship with favourability ratings, party identification, and voting intention, suggesting that voters tend to support candidates whom they perceive as capable, knowledgeable, and experienced in governance. In addition, the study found that ideological and policy-related image significantly contributes to voter acceptance, as voters are more inclined to support candidates whose policy positions and ideological orientation reflect their interests and expectations. Overall, the findings highlight the important role that effective image marketing plays in shaping voters' attitudes and electoral behaviour in the South-South region of Nigeria. The study concludes that candidates who successfully project credible personal qualities, demonstrate leadership competence, and communicate clear policy positions are more likely to gain voter approval and electoral support. The study therefore recommends that political actors adopt deliberate image marketing strategies that emphasize credibility, competence, and policy clarity in order to strengthen voter confidence and democratic engagement.

Keywords: *Image marketing; personal image; professional competence; ideological image; voter acceptability; approval ratings; party identification; voting intention.*

I. Introduction

In democratic political systems, the legitimacy and sustainability of governance depend largely on citizens' participation in the electoral process and their willingness to support political actors through voting behaviour. Elections constitute the most visible mechanism through which citizens evaluate political actors, express preferences for leadership, and hold public officials accountable. In this regard, the concept of voter acceptability has become an essential element in electoral politics because it reflects the extent to which voters perceive political candidates or parties as credible, trustworthy, and capable of representing their interests. Scholars argue that the health of a democratic system is strongly linked to the degree of public approval, support, and participation

exhibited by voters in electoral processes (Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2025). Where voter acceptability is high, citizens are more likely to participate actively in elections and legitimize the outcomes, thereby strengthening democratic consolidation. Conversely, low voter acceptability often results in political apathy, distrust in political institutions, and declining voter turnout.

The importance of voter acceptability has increased significantly in contemporary democratic politics because electoral competition is no longer determined solely by party structures or ideological alignments but also by the perceptions voters hold about candidates and their political messages. Modern electoral campaigns increasingly emphasize the strategic presentation of candidates' personal traits, professional competence, and policy positions to enhance their appeal to voters. Studies on electoral participation emphasize that voter behaviour is shaped by several psychological and sociopolitical factors, including perceptions of leadership competence, trust in political actors, and identification with political parties (Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2025). These factors influence whether voters view a candidate as acceptable or suitable for public office. In essence, voter acceptability represents a critical determinant of electoral outcomes because voters tend to support candidates who project favourable images and align with their political expectations.

Voter acceptability can be conceptualized as the degree to which voters perceive a political candidate, party, or government as legitimate, credible, and worthy of electoral support. It is often reflected through indicators such as favorability or approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention. Favorability or approval ratings measure the extent to which voters hold positive or negative attitudes toward political actors. Party identification refers to the psychological attachment voters have toward a political party, which often influences their political choices. Voting intention, on the other hand, indicates the likelihood that voters will support a particular candidate or party during elections. These indicators collectively provide insight into how voters evaluate political actors and whether such actors are likely to gain electoral support. Research in political behaviour suggests that voters' perceptions of candidates and their policies significantly influence their electoral decisions and political participation (Ayobolu, 2025).

Despite the theoretical importance of voter acceptability, the Nigerian electoral system has historically faced numerous challenges that undermine voters' confidence and participation. One of the most prominent challenges is voter apathy, which manifests in low voter turnout and limited political engagement among citizens. Voter apathy has been attributed to several factors, including distrust in political institutions, dissatisfaction with political leadership, electoral malpractice, and perceived lack of accountability among elected officials. Studies indicate that many Nigerian voters have developed skepticism toward electoral processes due to recurring issues such as vote buying, electoral violence, and irregularities in election administration (Umeh, Ifedi, & Okonkwo, 2025). These challenges weaken the relationship between citizens and political actors and reduce the level of voter acceptability for candidates and political institutions.

Another significant challenge affecting voter acceptability in Nigeria is the persistence of identity-based politics, particularly ethnic and religious considerations in voting behaviour. Empirical studies on Nigerian elections reveal that many voters tend to support candidates based on ethnic or religious affiliations rather than objective evaluation of their competence or policy proposals (Agbo, Nnamani, & Nnadi, 2021). Such patterns of voting behaviour can undermine the development of issue-based politics and weaken the role of rational political evaluation in determining voter support. Consequently, voter acceptability may become influenced more by identity politics than by the perceived qualities or policy orientations of candidates.

In addition to identity politics, the influence of media and communication technologies has introduced new dynamics into the relationship between voters and political actors in Nigeria. The rise of social media and digital communication platforms has transformed political campaigns and enabled candidates to interact directly with voters. Through these platforms, political actors can promote their achievements, communicate policy proposals, and shape public perceptions about their personalities and competence. However, the same platforms also facilitate the spread of misinformation and political propaganda, which can distort voter perceptions and influence electoral

outcomes (Chukwu, 2025). The interaction between media narratives and voter perception underscores the importance of strategic communication and image marketing in contemporary electoral politics.

Image marketing refers to the deliberate efforts by individuals, organizations, or political actors to influence how they are perceived by the public. In political communication, image marketing involves the strategic presentation of a candidate's personality, professional competence, and ideological orientation in ways that enhance public trust and electoral support. Political candidates often employ various communication strategies—such as media engagement, public relations campaigns, and symbolic political messaging—to construct favourable images that resonate with voters. Scholars note that political image construction plays a crucial role in shaping public perception because voters often rely on symbolic cues and mediated representations when evaluating political leaders (Inobemhe, Ja'afaru, & Garba, 2024).

Within the context of electoral politics, image marketing can be categorized into several dimensions, including personal image, professional image, and ideological or policy image. Personal image relates to the perceived character traits, integrity, and moral reputation of political candidates. Voters often evaluate candidates based on attributes such as honesty, humility, and empathy, which contribute to their personal appeal. Professional image refers to the perceived competence, experience, and leadership capability of political actors. Candidates who project strong professional credentials, administrative experience, and policy expertise are more likely to gain the confidence of voters. Ideological or policy image, on the other hand, concerns the political beliefs, policy proposals, and governance philosophies associated with a candidate or political party. Voters often assess whether these policy orientations align with their personal interests and societal expectations. The relationship between image marketing and voter acceptability is particularly significant in modern electoral politics because voters increasingly rely on perceptions and mediated representations when making political decisions. Political candidates who effectively manage their public image may enhance their favourability ratings, strengthen party identification among supporters, and increase the likelihood that voters will support them during elections. Conversely, negative public images or reputational crises can significantly reduce voter confidence and electoral support. Research on political communication suggests that the framing and representation of political candidates in the media can shape voter attitudes and influence electoral behaviour (Okoye & Agbanu, 2025). Therefore, image management has become an indispensable component of contemporary political campaigns.

In Nigeria, several studies have examined the relationship between political communication, media representation, and voter behaviour. For instance, research on the influence of media narratives during the 2023 general elections highlights how public perception of candidates was shaped by media framing and online discourse (Ayobolu, 2025). Similarly, studies on social media and political communication reveal that digital platforms have become critical tools for political image construction and voter mobilization (Chukwu, 2025). These studies demonstrate that the ways in which political actors present themselves and communicate their policy positions can significantly influence how voters perceive them. However, while these studies provide valuable insights into political communication and voter perception, they often focus broadly on media effects rather than examining specific dimensions of image marketing and their implications for voter acceptability.

Furthermore, empirical studies on Nigerian electoral behaviour have primarily concentrated on factors such as ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic conditions, and institutional performance. For example, research on voting patterns in Nigeria emphasizes the influence of ethno-religious identities and regional affiliations on electoral choices (Agbo et al., 2021). Other studies focus on voter turnout, political participation, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria (Chiamogu & Chiamogu, 2025). Although these studies contribute significantly to understanding Nigerian electoral dynamics, they pay limited attention to the strategic role of candidate image management in shaping voter acceptability. As a result, the relationship between the marketing of personal, professional,

and ideological images and voters' approval, party identification, and voting intention remains insufficiently explored in the Nigerian context.

The gap in existing literature becomes more evident when considering the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The South-South region, which includes states such as Rivers, Bayelsa, Delta, Edo, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River, occupies a strategic position in Nigeria's political landscape due to its economic significance and vibrant political competition. The region has witnessed intense electoral contests and dynamic political campaigns characterized by strong party rivalry and active voter engagement. Despite the importance of the region in national politics, scholarly attention to the role of image marketing in influencing voter acceptability within the South-South remains limited. Most existing studies focus on broader national trends or on specific aspects such as electoral violence, resource politics, or voter turnout, leaving a gap in understanding how candidates' personal, professional, and ideological images affect voter perceptions in the region.

Given the growing importance of political communication and public perception in electoral politics, it is necessary to examine how different dimensions of image marketing influence voter acceptability within specific regional contexts. Understanding this relationship is particularly relevant in the South-South region, where political campaigns often involve complex interactions between media narratives, identity politics, and issue-based appeals. By exploring how voters evaluate candidates' personal integrity, professional competence, and ideological positions, scholars can gain deeper insight into the factors that shape electoral preferences and democratic participation in the region. Against this background, the present study departs from previous research by focusing specifically on the relationship between image marketing and voter acceptability in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Unlike earlier studies that emphasize institutional or identity-based determinants of voting behaviour, this study examines how strategic presentation of personal image, professional image, and ideological or policy image influences key indicators of voter acceptability, including favorability or approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention. By doing so, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on political communication and electoral behaviour in Nigeria.

The point of departure for this study therefore lies in its attempt to bridge the existing gap between research on political image marketing and studies on voter behaviour in Nigeria. Specifically, it investigates how different dimensions of political image influence voter perceptions and electoral choices in the South-South region. Through this approach, the study aims to provide empirical insights that can enhance understanding of the role of candidate image construction in shaping voter attitudes and democratic participation. Ultimately, the findings of this study may contribute to broader discussions on electoral communication strategies, political accountability, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to ascertain the relationship between image marketing and voter acceptability in South-South, Nigeria. These objectives will be met by this paper;

- i. Determine the relationship between personal image and voter acceptability (favourability/approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention) in South-South, Nigeria.
- ii. Examine the relationship between professional competence image and voter acceptability (favourability/approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention) in South-South, Nigeria.
- iii. Assess the relationship between ideological/policy image and voter acceptability (favourability/approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention) in South-South, Nigeria.

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated specifically for this study:

- H₀₁** - There is no significant relationship between personal image and favourability/approval ratings in South-South, Nigeria.
- H₀₂** - There is no significant relationship between personal image and party identification in South-South, Nigeria.
- H₀₃** - There is no significant relationship between personal image and voting intention in South-South, Nigeria.
- H₀₄** - There is no significant relationship between professional competence image and favourability/approval ratings in South-South, Nigeria.
- H₀₅** - There is no significant relationship between professional competence image and party identification in South-South, Nigeria.
- H₀₆** - There is no significant relationship between professional competence image and voting intention in South-South, Nigeria.
- H₀₇** - There is no significant relationship between ideological/policy image and favourability/approval ratings in South-South, Nigeria.
- H₀₈** - There is no significant relationship between ideological/policy image and party identification in South-South, Nigeria.
- H₀₉** - There is no significant relationship between ideological/policy image and voting intention in South-South, Nigeria.

II. Literature Review

Theoretical Review: Image Theory

Image theory provides a useful theoretical lens for explaining how individuals form perceptions about political actors and how such perceptions influence electoral choices. The theory suggests that individuals rely on mental representations or “images” when evaluating actors or situations, particularly in contexts where complete information is unavailable. In political communication research, voters frequently rely on perceived images of candidates rather than detailed policy analysis when making electoral decisions. These images are shaped by media narratives, campaign communication, and personal experiences with political actors (Perloff, 2021).

According to image theory, decision-making involves evaluating the compatibility between an individual’s values and the perceived attributes of a candidate. Voters tend to support political actors whose perceived values align with their own expectations and interests. The theory also emphasizes trajectory assessment, which involves evaluating whether a candidate’s policy direction promises positive societal outcomes. Strategic evaluation further involves assessing the candidate’s competence and capacity to implement proposed policies effectively. These evaluative processes shape voters’ perceptions of political actors and influence their willingness to provide electoral support.

In contemporary electoral politics, the relevance of image theory has increased due to the growing influence of mass media and digital communication. Political actors often engage in deliberate image construction through media appearances, campaign messaging, and symbolic communication. These strategies are designed to create favourable impressions that resonate with voters and enhance political acceptability. Research on political communication emphasizes that image construction has become an integral component of electoral campaigns because public perception significantly influences voter behaviour (Priyowidodo & Indrayani, 2023; Semande, 2024).

Furthermore, political marketing literature emphasizes that the marketing of candidate image has become a strategic tool in democratic competition. Political parties and candidates invest substantial resources in branding strategies that emphasize personal credibility, competence, and ideological alignment with voters. These strategies are consistent with the assumptions of image theory, which posits that favourable cognitive images influence individual decision-making.

Concept of Image Marketing

Image marketing refers to the strategic process through which individuals or organizations attempt to influence how they are perceived by others. In political communication, image marketing involves deliberate efforts by political actors to shape public perception of their personality, competence, and ideological orientation. These efforts typically involve public relations activities, campaign communication, media engagement, and reputation marketing strategies.

Semande (2024) describes political image marketing as a public relations process aimed at influencing public opinion and strengthening the credibility of political actors. Through carefully designed communication strategies, political candidates attempt to highlight favourable attributes and minimize negative perceptions. Image marketing therefore becomes a crucial instrument for political actors seeking to gain public trust and electoral support.

The expansion of digital media has significantly transformed the practice of political image marketing. Social media platforms allow political actors to interact directly with voters and disseminate political messages without relying solely on traditional media gatekeepers. This development has increased the speed and reach of political communication while also intensifying competition for public attention. Scholars observe that digital platforms enable political actors to project carefully curated personal and professional images that appeal to different segments of the electorate (Agbaka, 2025; Alkadrie, 2025).

Political communication literature often conceptualizes image marketing as consisting of three key dimensions: personal image, professional competence image, and ideological or policy image. These dimensions collectively shape voters' perceptions of political actors and influence the level of acceptability they enjoy among the electorate.

Personal Image

Personal image encompasses the perceptions that voters hold about a political leader's character, personality, and ethical qualities. It reflects attributes such as honesty, integrity, empathy, humility, and reliability, which shape how citizens emotionally and cognitively relate to a candidate. Within political communication research, personal image is considered a key factor in voter evaluation, particularly in contexts where detailed knowledge of policies is limited and voters rely on character cues to guide their choices (Tshuma, 2024; Semande, 2024). Academics define personal image as the intentional projection of behavioral and personal traits that create a recognizable and favorable public persona. Through speeches, media appearances, interviews, and community engagements, political actors communicate qualities that align with voters' expectations for ethical and trustworthy leadership (Newman & Perloff, 2020). Beyond mere perception, personal image acts as a symbolic indicator of credibility, often influencing voters' assessments of competence and reliability (Lilleker, 2021).

Empirical studies underscore the importance of personal image in electoral behaviour. Tshuma (2024) found that candidates who present consistent, relatable, and authentic personal narratives are more likely to earn voter trust and positive evaluations. In Nigeria, Semande (2024) observed that voters place significant emphasis on a candidate's perceived honesty, moral integrity, and engagement with community concerns, sometimes prioritizing these traits over policy issues. Similarly, Chukwu (2025) reported that politicians who strategically manage their public persona through media and campaign communication are better able to cultivate voter confidence and engagement. These findings highlight that personal image is central to political branding and electoral strategy. By demonstrating ethical behavior, relatability, and moral credibility, political leaders can foster trust, strengthen emotional connections with the electorate, and increase their chances of achieving favorable voter support. As such, personal image remains an indispensable element of contemporary political campaigns.

Professional Competence Image

Professional competence image refers to the perception that a political candidate possesses the skills, knowledge, and experience necessary to perform effectively in public office. This dimension reflects voters' assessment of a candidate's leadership capability and capacity to address societal challenges.

Competence is widely recognized as a critical determinant of voter support because elections involve selecting individuals who will manage governance responsibilities. Voters frequently evaluate competence based on indicators such as educational qualifications, professional background, and prior leadership experience. Candidates who project strong professional credentials are often perceived as better equipped to implement policies and deliver effective governance.

Political marketing research demonstrates that perceptions of competence significantly influence voters' attitudes and voting intentions. Abbas, Adnan, and Abbas (2024) argue that the perceived competence of political actors contributes to the development of a strong political brand image, which enhances voters' willingness to support such candidates during elections. Campaign communication plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions of professional competence. Political debates, manifestos, and policy discussions provide opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their expertise and leadership capabilities. Media coverage of governance performance also contributes to shaping public perceptions of competence. Consequently, candidates who effectively communicate their professional achievements are more likely to gain the confidence of voters.

Professional competence image denotes the perception held by the public regarding a political actor's ability, knowledge, and skill to effectively execute the responsibilities of public office. It captures voters' assessment of whether a leader possesses the expertise, judgment, and administrative capacity necessary to manage governance processes and implement policies efficiently (Lilleker, 2021; Newman & Perloff, 2020). In political communication, competence is a critical component of a candidate's overall image, as voters often rely on perceived ability rather than detailed policy information to make electoral choices.

Scholars define professional competence as a combination of knowledge, practical skills, attitudes, and experience that enable an individual to perform effectively in a given professional role (Febriana, 2023). In politics, this concept translates into voters' perceptions of a candidate's capacity to govern, including their administrative experience, policy understanding, and leadership qualities. These perceptions are influenced by campaign strategies, media coverage, political debates, and the candidate's prior public service record.

Professional competence also relates to public trust and credibility. Leaders who demonstrate expertise, accountability, and effective communication are more likely to be viewed as capable and reliable, enhancing their overall image among voters (Bennett & Livingston, 2021; Sharueva, 2021). Research in political marketing shows that voters frequently use competence cues as heuristics to evaluate candidates, particularly in contexts where access to detailed policy information is limited (Newman & Perloff, 2020). Evidence further indicates that candidates perceived as competent tend to enjoy higher approval ratings and stronger voter support, highlighting the importance of competence in shaping electoral outcomes.

In the Nigerian context, professional competence image is particularly salient due to widespread public demand for effective governance and accountability. Voters increasingly consider educational background, leadership experience, and policy expertise when evaluating candidates (Opeibi, 2021). Political actors who successfully project competence through their achievements, communication strategies, and policy proposals are therefore more likely to earn voter confidence and secure electoral acceptability.

Overall, professional competence image is a central element of political image marketing. By shaping voter perceptions of a candidate's ability to govern, it plays a critical role in influencing favourability ratings, voter confidence, and electoral decision-making.

Ideological or Policy Image

Ideological or policy image refers to the perception that voters form about a political actor's values, beliefs, policy priorities, and overall vision for governance. It reflects how citizens evaluate the alignment between a candidate's stated policy agenda and their own interests, expectations, or societal concerns. Within political communication scholarship, ideological image is considered a fundamental aspect of candidate evaluation, as it provides insight into the likely direction and impact of governance if the candidate assumes office (Priowidodo & Indrayani, 2023; Semande, 2024). Academics define policy or ideological image as the deliberate presentation of coherent policy positions, political ideology, and governance philosophy to demonstrate credibility and reliability to the electorate (Newman & Perloff, 2020). Voters assess candidates not only based on personal traits or professional competence but also on the perceived feasibility and consistency of their policy commitments. Ideological image thus functions as both a symbolic and practical indicator of a candidate's capacity to address societal issues effectively.

Empirical evidence underscores the significance of ideological and policy image in shaping voter perceptions. Semande (2024) reported that candidates who consistently communicated clear policy positions and demonstrated ideological coherence were more likely to gain public trust and higher favourability ratings. In Nigeria, Chukwu (2025) found that voters often judge candidates based on the perceived alignment of their policy proposals with community needs, especially in areas such as economic development, security, and infrastructure. Moreover, Priowidodo and Indrayani (2023) observed that the use of digital platforms for policy communication improved voters' understanding of candidates' ideologies, particularly among younger electorates, enhancing their engagement and favourable disposition toward the candidates. These findings suggest that ideological and policy image is central to voter evaluation and acceptability. In contexts where policy literacy varies, such as Nigeria, candidates who present a coherent and consistent policy agenda can enhance their credibility, strengthen public confidence, and improve electoral prospects. Clearly articulated ideological and policy positions therefore remain an essential strategy in contemporary political campaigns.

Concept of Voter Acceptability

Voter acceptability refers to the extent to which voters perceive a political candidate or political party as credible, trustworthy, and deserving of electoral support. It reflects the overall evaluation voters make regarding the suitability of political actors for public office (Ayobolu, 2025). The concept is closely related to democratic legitimacy because electoral support is influenced by the level of trust citizens place in political institutions and leaders. When voters perceive political actors as credible and capable of addressing societal challenges, they are more likely to express favourable attitudes and participate in elections. Conversely, negative perceptions may lead to voter apathy or political disengagement.

Voter acceptability is commonly measured through several indicators, including favourability or approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention. These indicators capture both attitudinal and behavioural aspects of voter support. Contemporary political communication environments, particularly those influenced by social media, play a significant role in shaping these attitudes by providing platforms for political information and public discourse (Chukwu, 2025).

Favourability or Approval Ratings

Favourability or approval ratings represent the degree to which voters hold positive or negative opinions about political actors. These ratings are typically measured through opinion surveys that assess public perceptions of candidates or political parties. High favourability ratings generally indicate that voters perceive a candidate positively and are satisfied with their leadership qualities or policy positions (Ogbona, 2025). Conversely, low approval ratings may indicate dissatisfaction or distrust among the electorate. Because approval ratings are widely viewed as indicators of political popularity, political campaigns often focus on strategies that enhance favourable public perceptions.

Public opinion can change rapidly in response to political events, media coverage, or policy decisions (Priyowidodo & Indrayani, 2023). Consequently, maintaining a positive public image remains an essential component of sustaining voter support throughout an electoral cycle.

Party Identification

Party identification refers to the psychological attachment that individuals develop toward a political party (Namo & Attah, 2024). This attachment often shapes how voters interpret political information and evaluate candidates. Individuals who strongly identify with a particular political party are generally more likely to support that party's candidates during elections. Political scientists consider party identification to be one of the most stable predictors of voting behaviour because it reflects long-term political loyalty and ideological alignment. For many voters, party affiliation serves as a cognitive shortcut that simplifies political decision-making (Ogbonda, 2025). Rather than evaluating each candidate individually, voters often rely on party labels as indicators of political orientation. However, candidate image can also influence party identification by shaping voters' perceptions of party leadership and credibility. When a candidate projects a favourable image, it can strengthen voters' attachment to the party and enhance electoral support.

Voting Intention

Voting intention refers to the likelihood that a voter will support a particular candidate or political party in an upcoming election. It represents the behavioural component of voter acceptability because it reflects whether favourable attitudes translate into electoral choices. Voting intention is influenced by several factors, including candidate image, party identification, ideological alignment, and political communication strategies (Alkadrie, 2025). Political marketing research indicates that favourable perceptions of candidate credibility and competence significantly increase the probability that voters will express an intention to vote for that candidate (Abbas et al., 2024). Political campaigns therefore devote considerable attention to influencing voter intention through persuasive communication, voter mobilization strategies, and targeted messaging designed to appeal to different voter groups.

Empirical Review

Empirical research on political communication in Nigeria reveals a growing interest in how strategies related to political image influence voter perceptions and behaviour. A study by Nwarisi, Igwe, and Kalu (2021) examined the effect of political rebranding — including party identity, credibility, and public image — on how electorates in Rivers State viewed political parties. Using a descriptive survey with 400 participants and regression analysis, the researchers found that party image was significantly associated with electorate acceptance ($p < .05$) and explained a large proportion of the variation in acceptance. Party identity and trust also had positive impacts on voter attitudes. Therefore, the authors concluded that deliberate efforts to shape credible and distinctive party images enhance voters' acceptance of parties and their candidates.

In a related examination of voter behaviour during the 2023 general elections, Nwanmuoh et al. (2024) investigated how public relations-driven political advertising influenced voter attitudes in the South-East region. Through quantitative surveys and logistic regression modelling, the study demonstrated that intensified campaign advertising significantly increased voter registration and turnout. Importantly, voters exposed to strategic political advertising were also more likely to accept election results. The authors argued that carefully constructed political messaging — a central component of image marketing — can positively influence how voters perceive electoral processes and outcomes.

Research focusing on digital media and political communication further highlights the role of image in the Nigerian context. Chukwu (2025) employed a comparative design to assess how social media has shaped political communication across the 2015, 2019, and 2023 elections. While increased social media usage helped mobilize citizens and shape public opinion, the study also found that

misinformation and unregulated content sometimes distorted voters' perceptions of candidates. Chukwu concluded that although social media facilitates engagement, it can also undermine voter confidence when image content is manipulated or misleading.

Similarly, Inobemhe, Ja'afaru, and Garba (2024) assessed how multimedia communication tools influenced voter attitudes during the 2023 elections using a mixed-methods approach. Their findings indicated that exposure to broadcast and digital media significantly shaped public perceptions of political actors and election issues. The study suggested that the strategic use of multimedia is instrumental in constructing public images that influence how voters interpret campaign messages and make electoral decisions. In addition, Ayobolu (2025) analyzed public narratives and media coverage surrounding the 2023 elections using content analysis. The study found that the way candidates and electoral bodies were portrayed in the media shaped citizens' confidence in electoral integrity and credibility. Voters who encountered positive portrayals of candidates tended to express higher acceptance of election outcomes, highlighting the influence of mediated images on voter attitudes.

Exploring the role of audience interpretation of political content, Fagbemigun and Akase (2024) conducted a quantitative survey among voting-age residents in Abuja to investigate how social media reporting influenced perception and voter trust. Although some respondents saw social media as a credible source of political information, many also expressed skepticism due to concerns about misinformation. The authors concluded that voters' interpretation of political imagery and messaging affects their confidence in political actors, which in turn influences acceptability.

Ogbonda (2025) examined the relationship between political brand personality and voter loyalty in Rivers State and found that positive perceptions of political brand attributes significantly influenced voter loyalty to political parties. The study concluded that political actors must cultivate favourable brand associations in order to sustain voter support. Similarly, Namo and Attah (2024) examined the role of identity politics in Nigeria's presidential elections and found that ethnic and religious considerations continue to influence voting behaviour in the country. The study concluded that identity politics remains a powerful factor in electoral decision-making and may overshadow policy-based political evaluation. Olayiwola (2024) investigated the influence of poverty on voting behaviour in Nigeria and found that socioeconomic conditions significantly affect electoral participation and voting choices. According to the study, economic hardship can increase political vulnerability and influence how voters respond to campaign incentives or political messaging.

Collectively, these empirical studies demonstrate that image marketing practices — including political branding, public relations advertising, and digital media communication — play a significant role in shaping voter acceptability in Nigeria. While positive and coherent image strategies can enhance voter trust, engagement, and acceptance of political entities and electoral outcomes, poorly managed or misleading portrayals can erode public confidence. However, there remains a gap in research specifically linking distinct dimensions of image marketing — such as personal, professional, and ideological/policy images — with measurable aspects of voter acceptability (e.g., favourability ratings, party identification, voting intention), particularly within geopolitical zones like the South-South. Addressing this gap would deepen understanding of how strategic image components influence voter behaviour in regional electoral contexts.

III. Research Methodology

This study will employ a cross-sectional mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to investigate the influence of different aspects of political image marketing on voter acceptability—encompassing favourability, party affiliation, and voting intentions—in Nigeria's South-South region. Cross-sectional designs allow researchers to capture relationships between variables at a specific point in time, offering insights into voters' perceptions and decision-making processes (Awah & Igwe, 2022; Nzezele Ehio & Willie, 2025).

The research will focus on the six South-South states of Nigeria: Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Rivers. The population will comprise eligible registered voters aged 18 and above.

This region was chosen due to documented evidence that political communication strategies significantly influence voter perceptions and behaviours (Awah & Igwe, 2022; Nwarisi et al., 2021).

A multi-stage sampling strategy will be employed:

1. Stratification of each state into urban and rural areas.
2. Proportional allocation to select Local Government Areas (LGAs) from each stratum.
3. Systematic random sampling of registered voters within each LGA, ensuring a representative sample.

The study will target a minimum of 400 respondents, consistent with prior research on voter behaviour and political image in Nigeria (Chioma & Igwe, 2025; Nwarisi et al., 2021).

A structured questionnaire will be used to measure:

- Personal image: candidate likability, charisma, and relatability.
- Professional competence image: qualifications, performance record, and problem-solving capability.
- Ideological/policy image: perceived commitment to key policy issues.
- Voter acceptability: favourability/approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention.

Responses will be captured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, following established practices in political branding research (Bukari et al., 2025).

Variables will be operationalized based on recent empirical studies:

- Personal image: perception of candidate's appeal and public persona (Stoyanov, 2023).
- Professional competence image: perceived ability, expertise, and credibility.
- Ideological/policy image: alignment with voters' policy preferences and ideological positions.
- Favourability/approval rating: overall positive evaluation of the candidate.
- Party identification: strength of voter affiliation to a political party.
- Voting intention: reported likelihood to vote for the candidate or party.

Data will be processed using SPSS. Analyses will include:

- Reliability testing using Cronbach's alpha.
- Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis to examine relationships between image marketing and voter acceptability variables.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The distribution of the structured questionnaire, and the response is seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Response Rate

<i>Copies of Questionnaire distributed & Number returned.</i>		<i>Percentage</i>
Number of Distributed Questionnaire	400	100.00%
Number of Valid Retrieved Questionnaire	337	84.25%
Number of Retrieved Unusable Questionnaire	14	3.50%
Number of Unretrieved Questionnaire	49	12.25%

Source: Field Report, 2026

From Table 1, a total of 400 copies of questionnaire were distributed to respondents across the six South-South States in Nigeria. Out of these: 337 copies of questionnaire were valid and usable, representing a response rate of 84.25%, 14 copies of questionnaire were retrieved but found to be incomplete or improperly filled, rendering them unusable. This accounts for 3.50% of the total. 49 copies of questionnaire were not retrieved, making up 12.25% of the distributed copies. The high valid response rate of 84.25% indicates a strong level of participation and provides a reliable basis for data analysis.

Decision rule: the Table 2 shows the direction and strength of the relationships.

Table 2: Description on Range of correlation Pearson values and the corresponding level of association

Range of Pearson with positive and negative sign values	Strength of Association
± 0.80 – 0.99	Very Strong
± 0.60 – 0.79	Strong
± 0.40 – 0.59	Moderate
± 0.20 – 0.39	Weak
± 0.00 – 0.19	Very Weak

Source: Adopted from Bryman & Bell, 2003

Significance Level (Sig. or p-value): Indicates whether the correlation is statistically significant. If $p < 0.05$, the correlation is significant, meaning there is strong evidence of an association between the variables. If $p > 0.05$, the correlation is not statistically significant, suggesting that any observed relationship may be due to chance.

Table 3: Correlations between personal image and voter acceptability

		Personal	Favour	Party Identity	Intention
Personal	Pearson Correlation	1	.776**	.829**	.943**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	337	337	337	337
Favour	Pearson Correlation	.776**	1	.856**	.842**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	337	337	337	337
Party Identity	Pearson Correlation	.829**	.856**	1	.866**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	337	337	337	337
Intention	Pearson Correlation	.943**	.842**	.866**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	337	337	337	337

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson Product–Moment Correlation analysis was conducted to determine the extent to which personal image relates to the various indicators of voter acceptability, namely favourability/approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention.

The analysis revealed a strong positive correlation between **personal image and favourability/approval ratings** ($r = 0.776$, $p = 0.000$). This result indicates that voters who perceive a political candidate’s personal image more positively are more likely to express favourable opinions and higher approval of that candidate. The correlation coefficient of 0.776 suggests a substantial relationship between the two variables, while the significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$) shows that the relationship is statistically significant. In practical terms, this finding implies that the personal qualities and public perception of a candidate can significantly shape voters’ levels of approval and overall evaluation.

The results also show a very strong positive relationship between **personal image and party identification** ($r = 0.829$, $p = 0.000$). This suggests that voters who hold favourable impressions of a candidate’s personal characteristics—such as integrity, relatability, and charisma—are more likely to develop or strengthen their identification with the candidate’s political party. The magnitude of the correlation coefficient indicates a strong association between these variables, and the statistically significant p-value confirms that the relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance. Furthermore, the analysis indicates an extremely strong positive correlation between **personal image and voting intention** ($r = 0.943$, $p = 0.000$). This finding demonstrates that voters’

perceptions of a candidate’s personal image are closely connected to their willingness to support the candidate at the polls. The correlation coefficient, which is very close to 1, suggests a particularly strong relationship, implying that improvements in a candidate’s perceived personal image may significantly increase the likelihood that voters will intend to vote for that candidate. The statistical significance of the result further reinforces the reliability of this relationship.

Taken together, these findings suggest that personal image plays a critical role in shaping voter acceptability, influencing not only how voters evaluate candidates but also how they align themselves politically and their eventual voting intentions. Among the three indicators examined, the relationship between personal image and voting intention appears to be the strongest, followed by party identification and favourability/approval ratings. This pattern highlights the importance of personal image as a key factor in electoral decision-making within the study context.

Table 4: Correlations between professional competence image and voter acceptability

		Competence	Favour	Party Identity	Intention
Competence	Pearson Correlation	1	.835**	.827**	.895**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	337	337	337	337
Favour	Pearson Correlation	.835**	1	.856**	.842**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	337	337	337	337
Party Identity	Pearson Correlation	.827**	.856**	1	.866**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	337	337	337	337
Intention	Pearson Correlation	.895**	.842**	.866**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	337	337	337	337

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson Product–Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis was carried out to assess the relationship between professional competence image and the components of voter acceptability, namely favourability/approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention.

The results indicate a strong positive correlation between **professional competence image and favourability/approval ratings** ($r = 0.835$, $p = 0.000$). This finding suggests that when voters perceive a political candidate as competent, capable, and experienced in governance or leadership roles, their level of approval and favourable evaluation of the candidate tends to increase. The correlation coefficient of 0.835 reflects a high degree of association between these variables, while the significance value ($p < 0.05$) confirms that the relationship is statistically significant and unlikely to have occurred by chance.

The analysis also reveals a strong positive relationship between **professional competence image and party identification** ($r = 0.827$, $p = 0.000$). This implies that voters’ perceptions of a candidate’s expertise, qualifications, and leadership ability may influence their attachment to or identification with the candidate’s political party. The relatively high correlation coefficient indicates that perceptions of professional competence can contribute to strengthening voters’ alignment with a party. The significance level further indicates that this association is statistically reliable.

In addition, the findings demonstrate a very strong positive correlation between **professional competence image and voting intention** ($r = 0.895$, $p = 0.000$). This result suggests that voters who perceive a candidate as professionally competent are more likely to express a willingness to vote for that candidate during elections. The strength of the correlation indicates that competence-related perceptions—such as effectiveness, experience, and problem-solving capacity—play a

substantial role in shaping voters' decisions at the ballot box. The statistically significant p-value further confirms that this relationship is meaningful.

Overall, the PPMC results show that professional competence image is strongly associated with all three indicators of voter acceptability examined in this study. Among these indicators, the strongest relationship is observed with voting intention, followed by favourability/approval ratings and party identification. These findings suggest that voters' perceptions of a candidate's professional ability and leadership competence are important factors that influence how voters evaluate candidates, identify politically, and ultimately decide whom to support in elections.

Table 5: Correlations between ideological/policy image and voter acceptability

		Ideology	Favour	Party Identity	Intention
Ideology	Pearson Correlation	1	.841**	.766**	.822**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	337	337	337	337
Favour	Pearson Correlation	.841**	1	.856**	.842**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	337	337	337	337
Party Identity	Pearson Correlation	.766**	.856**	1	.866**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	337	337	337	337
Intention	Pearson Correlation	.822**	.842**	.866**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	337	337	337	337

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between ideological/policy image and the different measures of voter acceptability, namely favourability/approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention.

The findings reveal a **strong positive relationship between ideological/policy image and favourability/approval ratings** ($r = 0.841$, $p = 0.000$). This result indicates that when voters perceive a political candidate or party as having clear, credible, and appealing policy positions or ideological orientation, their level of approval and favourable evaluation of that candidate tends to increase. The correlation coefficient of 0.841 reflects a high level of association between the two variables, while the significance level ($p < 0.05$) confirms that the relationship is statistically significant and unlikely to be due to random variation.

The analysis also shows a **strong positive correlation between ideological/policy image and party identification** ($r = 0.766$, $p = 0.000$). This suggests that voters are more likely to identify with a political party when they perceive its ideological stance and policy agenda as consistent with their own beliefs and interests. Although slightly lower than the other coefficients, the correlation value still indicates a substantial relationship between these variables. The significance value further demonstrates that this association is statistically meaningful.

In addition, the results demonstrate a **strong positive relationship between ideological/policy image and voting intention** ($r = 0.822$, $p = 0.000$). This implies that voters who view a candidate or party as having well-defined and convincing policy positions are more likely to express an intention to vote for them in an election. The relatively high correlation coefficient suggests that policy credibility and ideological alignment play an important role in shaping voters' electoral preferences. The statistical significance of the result confirms the reliability of this relationship.

Overall, the findings indicate that **ideological/policy image is significantly associated with all three measures of voter acceptability** examined in this study. The strongest relationship is observed with **favourability/approval ratings**, followed by **voting intention**, while **party identification** shows a slightly lower but still substantial correlation. These results highlight the importance of policy clarity and ideological positioning in influencing voters' attitudes and electoral decisions.

Discussion of Findings

This section interprets the results of the study by relating them to existing scholarly literature on political communication, political marketing, and voter behaviour. The discussion focuses on how the three dimensions of image marketing—personal image, professional competence image, and ideological/policy image—relate to the indicators of voter acceptability, namely favourability/approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention in the South-South region of Nigeria.

Personal Image and Voter Acceptability: The findings indicate that **personal image has a strong and statistically significant relationship with voter acceptability**, including favourability or approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention. The correlation results demonstrate that voters tend to show higher levels of approval, stronger attachment to political parties, and greater intention to vote for candidates whose personal attributes are viewed positively. This suggests that the personal qualities associated with political candidates—such as integrity, approachability, charisma, and general public conduct—play an important role in shaping voters' perceptions and electoral preferences.

This outcome aligns with recent studies in political communication which emphasize that voters often form impressions of candidates based on their perceived personality traits and public image. Scholars have noted that the increasing personalization of politics has made candidate image an essential component of political campaigns and electoral strategies (Agustiani et al., 2024). In many electoral contexts, voters tend to evaluate candidates not only on their policies but also on their character and public demeanor.

Similarly, research in political marketing suggests that carefully managed personal branding can significantly influence voter attitudes and behaviour. Candidates who successfully project favourable personal qualities are more likely to gain public trust and attract voter support (Alhaimer, 2023). Personal image therefore serves as an important heuristic that voters use when assessing political actors, especially in environments where access to detailed policy information may be limited.

Furthermore, studies have shown that voters frequently rely on symbolic cues and personality-based evaluations when forming political preferences (Park & Joo, 2023). In the South-South region of Nigeria, where interpersonal relationships, reputation, and social networks often play a strong role in political mobilization, such personal attributes may strongly influence voter evaluations and political alignment. The strong association found between personal image and voting intention in this study particularly underscores the importance of candidate personality in influencing electoral choices.

Overall, the findings suggest that personal image remains a significant factor in determining voter acceptability within the study area, reinforcing the importance of effective image marketing in contemporary electoral politics.

Professional Competence Image and Voter Acceptability: The results also reveal a strong and statistically significant relationship between **professional competence image and voter acceptability**. The analysis indicates that perceptions of a candidate's competence are positively associated with voters' approval ratings, identification with political parties, and willingness to vote for particular candidates. This implies that voters tend to favour candidates whom they perceive as knowledgeable, capable, and experienced in leadership or governance.

These findings are consistent with the literature on competence-based voting, which suggests that voters often evaluate candidates according to their perceived ability to manage public affairs and deliver effective governance. Research has shown that voters are more likely to trust and support candidates who demonstrate leadership ability, professional expertise, and a record of achievement (Abbas et al., 2024).

In addition, studies on political branding highlight that perceptions of competence contribute significantly to the credibility of both candidates and political parties. When voters perceive a candidate as capable of addressing societal challenges, they are more inclined to view the candidate and the associated political party favourably (Bukari et al., 2025). This perception can strengthen party identification and influence voter loyalty during elections.

In the Nigerian political context, competence-related perceptions are particularly relevant due to increasing public concern about governance performance and accountability. Political communication research suggests that credibility and expertise can enhance the persuasive power of political messages and increase voter confidence in leadership (Akinyemi-Oke, 2024). Candidates who demonstrate competence through professional achievements or governance experience are therefore more likely to gain public approval and electoral support.

The results of this study reinforce the argument that professional competence image plays an important role in shaping voter evaluations and electoral behaviour. Voters appear to consider leadership capability and experience when deciding which candidates and parties deserve their support.

Ideological/Policy Image and Voter Acceptability: The findings further show that **ideological or policy image is strongly related to voter acceptability**. The analysis indicates that voters' perceptions of a candidate's policy positions and ideological orientation are significantly associated with their approval ratings, identification with political parties, and intention to vote. This suggests that voters are more likely to support candidates whose policy proposals and ideological positions resonate with their own beliefs and interests.

This result is consistent with theories of issue-based voting, which propose that voters frequently assess candidates based on their stance on key political and socio-economic issues. Empirical studies have demonstrated that voters tend to support candidates who present policy agendas that align with their priorities and expectations (Muhammad et al., 2025).

Similarly, research on political image and party branding indicates that policy clarity and ideological consistency can enhance voter confidence and strengthen political alignment (Bukari et al., 2025). When candidates clearly communicate their policy objectives and ideological direction, voters are better able to evaluate whether those positions reflect their own preferences.

Political communication studies also highlight that policy alignment can strengthen the relationship between voters and political parties. When voters perceive that a party or candidate represents their ideological outlook or policy interests, they are more likely to identify with that party and support its candidates during elections (Balci et al., 2025).

Within the South-South region of Nigeria, policy issues such as economic development, infrastructure provision, environmental concerns, and resource marketing remain highly significant to voters. Candidates who present credible policy solutions to these issues may therefore gain higher levels of approval and electoral support.

Overall, the findings suggest that ideological and policy considerations remain an important element of voter evaluation. Although personal and competence-based perceptions play significant roles, voters also consider policy orientation and ideological positioning when forming political preferences and making electoral decisions.

V. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study investigated how image marketing influences voter acceptability in the South-South region of Nigeria, focusing on three key dimensions of political image marketing: personal image,

professional competence image, and ideological/policy image. These variables were examined in relation to important indicators of voter acceptability, namely favourability or approval ratings, party identification, and voting intention. The objective was to understand how the way political actors present themselves affects the attitudes and decisions of voters.

The findings of the study reveal that image marketing is a significant factor in shaping voter perceptions and electoral choices. The analysis showed strong and statistically significant relationships between the three dimensions of image marketing and the measures of voter acceptability. This suggests that voters in the South-South region do not rely solely on party affiliation or campaign promises when making political decisions; rather, they are also influenced by the overall image projected by candidates and political parties.

The study further demonstrates that personal image plays an important role in influencing voter attitudes and intentions. Candidates who are perceived as trustworthy, approachable, and possessing admirable personal qualities tend to receive higher levels of approval from voters. Such personal characteristics often create positive impressions that strengthen voters' willingness to support a candidate during elections.

In addition, the findings indicate that perceived professional competence significantly contributes to voter acceptance. Voters appear to place considerable value on candidates' ability to demonstrate leadership capacity, knowledge, and experience in governance. When political actors are viewed as capable of addressing societal challenges and managing public affairs effectively, voters are more likely to express favourable opinions and support them electorally.

The study also shows that ideological and policy-related images influence voter evaluations and political alignment. Voters tend to respond positively to candidates whose policy positions and ideological orientations appear credible and relevant to their needs. Clear articulation of policy priorities can therefore strengthen voter confidence and contribute to increased electoral support.

Overall, the study highlights that effective political engagement in the South-South region requires a balanced combination of appealing personal qualities, demonstrated competence, and clear policy orientation. Candidates who are able to manage these aspects of their public image effectively are more likely to attract voter approval, strengthen party identification, and improve their prospects in electoral contests.

Recommendations

1. Political candidates and parties should place greater emphasis on developing and maintaining a positive personal image. This can be achieved by demonstrating honesty, accessibility, and responsible public behaviour, which can help build stronger trust and credibility among voters.
2. Political actors should consistently communicate their competence and leadership capabilities to the electorate. Highlighting professional experience, achievements in public service, and the ability to address governance challenges can enhance voters' confidence in their suitability for political office.
3. Political parties and candidates should present clear and well-structured policy agendas that address the specific needs of the South-South region. By communicating realistic and relevant policy proposals, political actors can strengthen voters' confidence in their commitment to addressing pressing regional issues and thereby increase voter support.

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