



A Review of Social Media as Alternative Medium for Political Participation

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the “Review of Social Media as Alternative Medium for Political Participation” in Nigeria, investigating diverse demographic groups and their engagement patterns. The study adopted survey methods, utilizing a sample size of 372. The study also investigates the key challenges and risks associated with social media use in political contexts, such as the spread of fake news, hate speech, privacy concerns, and online harassment. The research reveals a dynamic social media landscape in Nigeria, with active participation across various age groups. Young adults, especially those aged 25-34, are prominent users, indicating their active involvement in political discussions. Social media platforms serve as vital channels for disseminating political information and mobilizing citizens, with roles expanding from basic information sharing to active political campaigning. The findings underscore the influential role of social media in Nigerian politics, bridging generational gaps and mobilizing diverse segments of the population. The study highlights the need for robust regulations to curb the spread of misinformation and hate speech, ensuring the integrity of political discussions. The paper recommended the implementation of the government to the adopt comprehensive media literacy programs to educate citizens, especially the younger demographic, about identifying and combating fake news and misinformation. Educated users are more likely to critically evaluate information, mitigating the impact of false narratives.

Keywords: Social Media, Alternative Medium, Politics, Participation, Nigeria

1. Introduction

In the contemporary era dominated by diverse social media platforms, people from various backgrounds connect online, forging connections with both friends and strangers in the virtual realm. Marketers and politicians alike have seized the opportunities presented by this digital landscape to engage with consumers, convey their perspectives, and actively participate in political dialogues. Social media, therefore, has evolved into a potent tool for disseminating information, democratizing political discussions, and even influencing electoral outcomes.

An illustrative instance is Barack Obama's adept utilization of Twitter during the 2008 Presidential Election, a strategy believed to have significantly contributed to his victory. Similarly, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has effectively harnessed social media to establish connections with the masses, and social media played a pivotal role in shaping Kenya's 2013 general elections.

The impact of social media is underscored by occurrences such as Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, having to clarify that the platform did not influence the 2016 US Presidential Election. Social media's popularity continues to soar, with studies indicating that users engaged in political discussions on platforms like Twitter demonstrate heightened political interest and reduced trust in mainstream media.

In the historical context of Nigeria, social media has emerged as a transformative force in the realm of political participation. Before the widespread adoption of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, political discourse in Nigeria was primarily confined to traditional media channels. The advent of social media ushered in a new era of political engagement, with a notable impact during the 2015 general elections. Social media played a pivotal role in mobilizing and informing Nigerian citizens, providing a platform for citizens to express opinions, connect with like-minded individuals, and share information on political developments. This digital space empowered Nigerian youth, a substantial segment of the population, to actively engage in political discussions, advocacy, and campaigns.

However, the influence of social media on Nigerian politics has not been devoid of challenges. Issues such as misinformation, hate speech, and political manipulation have surfaced. Scholars like Onwumechili (2017) have delved into the dynamics of social media's impact on Nigerian politics, shedding light on its dual role as a catalyst for positive political engagement and a potential source of destabilization. The evolution of social media in Nigeria has significantly reshaped the political participation landscape, introducing new avenues for civic engagement alongside challenges that necessitate careful consideration and regulation.

Given the evident impact of social media on political engagement, especially during elections, it becomes imperative to conduct comprehensive research on its role. While social media is a relatively recent communication platform, researchers have already initiated studies exploring its political implications. This paper aims to address the research gap surrounding the utility of social media as an alternative medium for political participation. It provides an overview of existing research in this field and suggests areas for further investigation. Additionally, it offers a comparative analysis of journals that accept research papers on this topic.

2. Statement of the Problem

The problem at the heart of this study revolves around the increasing influence of social media on political participation in Nigeria and the associated challenges it presents. As social media platforms have gained prominence in the country, they have become powerful tools for political engagement, mobilization, and information dissemination. However, this rise in digital political participation has not been without its downsides. The proliferation of misinformation, hate speech, and the potential for political manipulation pose significant concerns. Additionally, there is a need to understand how social media impacts various segments of the Nigerian population, including the youth, who are often considered a driving force behind digital political activism. This study seeks to address these issues by examining the multifaceted relationship between social media and political participation in Nigeria, aiming to provide insights into the opportunities and challenges it presents for the country's democratic processes.

3. Objectives of the Study

The following are the research objectives of the study:

1. To find out the extent to which social media platforms influence political participation among different demographics in Nigeria.
2. To investigate the role of social media in shaping political discourse and mobilization during Nigerian elections.
3. To examine the challenges and risks associated with social media use in political engagement, including the spread of misinformation and hate speech.

4. Research Questions

The following are the research questions which helps to investigate the research:

1. How does social media usage vary among different demographic groups in Nigeria, and to what extent does it influence their political participation?
2. What is the role of social media in shaping political discourse and mobilization during Nigerian elections, and how has it evolved over time?
3. What are the key challenges and risks associated with social media use in political engagement in Nigeria, and how do these challenges affect the political landscape?

4. Review of Relevant Literature

Social Media and Political Participation in Nigeria

The emergence of social media as a potent force shaping political participation in Nigeria underscores the nation's growing digital connectivity. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become crucial avenues for political engagement, allowing citizens to voice opinions, connect with communities, and stay informed amid challenges faced by traditional media. The 2015 Nigerian general elections exemplify social media's pivotal role, in mobilizing voters and fostering political debates, particularly among the youth (Onwumechili, 2017).

Despite its positive impact, the ascent of social media in Nigerian politics introduces challenges. The digital landscape witnesses the proliferation of misinformation, hate speech, and political manipulation, posing threats to social cohesion and political stability. Scholars, including Onwumechili (2017), acknowledge both the transformative potential of social media and the risks associated with divisive narratives. This dual nature demands continuous investigation and prudent regulation to harness the positive influence while addressing potential destabilization.

In navigating the complexities of social media's role in Nigerian politics, it becomes evident that the benefits and challenges are intertwined. The democratization of information and the amplification of diverse voices contribute to a vibrant political discourse. However, the unchecked spread of misinformation and the potential for polarization underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of social media's impact.

Moreover, the adaptability of these platforms to the Nigerian context is noteworthy. Social media serves as a dynamic space for civic engagement, allowing individuals to organize movements, express dissent, and scrutinize political processes. This democratization of political participation is particularly crucial in a landscape where traditional media faces hurdles like censorship and limited reach.

As Nigeria progresses in its digital evolution, the regulatory landscape must evolve in tandem. Striking a balance between preserving freedom of expression and curbing the harmful effects of misinformation demands thoughtful and adaptive governance. Collaborative efforts between policymakers, tech companies, and civil society are essential to develop effective strategies that leverage the positive aspects of social media while mitigating its potential negative consequences.

In essence, the role of social media in Nigerian politics is a multifaceted phenomenon that necessitates continual exploration, research, and regulatory refinement. Only through a comprehensive understanding and judicious governance can the transformative potential of social media be harnessed for the greater good of political participation and societal development in Nigeria.

Importance of Social Media

In Nigeria's evolving political landscape, a notable shift is underway as a growing segment of the citizenry embraces informal forms of political action, diverging from strategies tailored for the dutiful citizenship model. This transformation is intricately linked to the changing role of social media, which acts as a catalyst for shaping political discourse and engagement. While traditional media serves as a conduit to inform citizens, social media platforms play a pivotal role, influencing public perception through news reports and commentary (Raynauld & Lalancette, 2016).

However, the transformative power of social media comes with limitations. Despite altering the dynamics of public interaction, these platforms often struggle to bridge opposing viewpoints on divisive issues (Hendriks, Duus, & Ercan, 2016). Instances like the "Miliband Loop" controversy during the 2011 UK public sector protests exemplify how the internet disrupts traditional mediatization rules (Rintel, Angus, & Fitzgerald, 2016). Yet, the use of social media for political purposes significantly increases the likelihood of protests and participation, showcasing its role as a potent catalyst for civic engagement (Valenzuela et al., 2016; Boulianne, 2015).

Turning to Singapore, Tan's research (Tan, 2016) sheds light on the potential of low-budget independent films, particularly in the documentary genre, to amplify alternative histories and give voice to the silenced. These films leverage social media to digitally channel dissenting voices, providing a platform for political expression outside the conventional norms.

Exploring a different facet, Gordon & Perugini's examination (Gordon & Perugini, 2016) scrutinizes the Israel Defence Forces' deployment of infographics on social media. They argue that these infographics form part of a broader strategy used by Israel to frame its actions post hoc, aiming to portray them as in line with international law. This case underscores how social media is not only a tool for political engagement but also a means to shape global perceptions and narratives.

Content Type or Style

In the realm of online engagement, the significance of shared artifacts becomes apparent in how individuals personalize their expressions within the goals of a movement, despite the challenges associated with sharing such artifacts in online spaces (Clark, 2016). Eye-tracking technology, as employed by Vraga et al. (2016), unveils that both news and social content capture equal attention, with political content following closely. The style of posts, especially richer content like pictures and links, significantly influences attention patterns, particularly for social and news-related posts.

Gender differences play a distinctive role in political communication within the blogosphere. Female politicians, surpassing their male counterparts, utilize blogging to establish stronger connections with readers and solicit ideas and policy perspectives. However, this approach, while effective in garnering qualitative feedback, doesn't always translate into a comparable impact when compared to male peers (Åström & Karlsson, 2016). Gender-based distinctions extend to online activities, reflecting in communication tone and commenting behaviors on social media, where men often post more negative comments towards political parties and other users (Vochocová et al., 2015). Similar variations are observed in the frequency and types of tweets between male and female politicians on Twitter (Evans et al., 2016).

The content of community posts, particularly in titles, emerges as a crucial factor influencing post popularity and comment numbers. Elements like adjectives, nouns, adverbs, pronouns, punctuation, question marks, advisory words, and complexity indicators play roles in this relationship, but variations exist between text-based categories like Politics and World News and image-based ones like Pictures.

Satire, including memes, has become a unique form of satirical expression in political discourse. An analysis of Spanish political parties' use of memes on Twitter revealed significant differences in their patterns (Martínez-Rolán & Piñero-Otero, 2016). Greenwood et al. (2016) experimentally demonstrated the persuasive impact of politically aligned comedy with message consistency, while message-incongruent commentary diminished this effect.

Mourao et al.'s (2015) study analyzing political journalists' tweets during a presidential debate highlighted the widespread use of humor, particularly in association with the retweet function. Although journalists used humor, they often directed jokes towards political figures, avoiding humor as a means of direct criticism in their tweets. This reflects a growing acceptance of humor as a rhetorical device in the realm of political journalism on Twitter.

Message Propagation Mechanism:

Social media has become a dynamic space where engagement is both facilitated and observed (Dumitrica, 2014). It's been aptly noted that while technologies connect us, it's our stories that truly bind us together (Papacharissi, 2015).

Researchers have emphasized the significance of the digital media environment in amplifying diverse indigenous voices, yet they've also raised questions about which voices receive attention as politics increasingly takes on a mediated form (Dreher, McCallum, & Waller, 2015). Although social media offers the potential for users to acquire political information, its realization within the general population is not guaranteed (Bode, 2015). As a result, studies have sought to understand how individuals and organizations utilize media resources to craft responses to political debates, shedding light on the sources of influence in political communication on social media (Egerly, Thorson, Bighash, & Hannah, 2016).

Neumayer & Svensson (Neumayer & Svensson, 2014) have suggested that various forms of political engagement online should be considered when examining how online activism contributes to social change. Jiang et al. (Jiang, Leeman, & Fu, 2015) found that influential independent users and alternative commercial media, rather than official media, dominate the framing of political discourse on platforms like Sina Weibo in China. This study is complemented by Nip & Fu (Nip & Fu, 2016), who discovered that ordinary citizens often initiate discussions but have limited influence, relying on media organizations to disseminate news. While individuals from some user categories can become prominent opinion leaders, news workers stand out as the most likely user category to challenge official propaganda.

The use of partisan news online has been linked to increased anger, particularly directed at opposing party candidates. This anger, in turn, facilitates information sharing about the election on social media, indicating that partisan media may stimulate online information sharing by evoking anger among its audience (Hasell & Weeks, 2016). Furthermore, the impact of political content exposure on political expression in social media depends on factors such as the number of friends posting about politics and the alignment of that content with one's political beliefs (Vraga, 2016). Facebook performances are often perceived as multisensory, personalized, and tightly scripted. While these characteristics strengthen solidarity among like-minded groups, they leave limited space for alternative viewpoints (Hendriks et al., 2016).

Interestingly, political participation takes on various forms, with some emphasizing persuasion while others prioritize fostering citizenship through information dissemination and deliberative dialogue (Penney, 2014). Celebrity political appeals are primarily consumed through social media by young voters who use aspirational identification and attachment to navigate political messages (Nisbett & DeWalt, 2016). Additionally, acknowledging support from others or critiquing the actions of political peers or media figures are popular activities among social media users (Larsson, 2015).

Machine-controlled bots have garnered significant attention from researchers, as they are created for a variety of purposes, including political campaigns and the dissemination of fake reviews. These bots have been utilized in underground markets to purchase Twitter followers, retweets, and advertisements (Alarifi, Alsaleh, & Al-Salman, 2016). Woolley (Woolley, 2016) conducted a noteworthy investigation into politicized social bots, revealing strategies employed by these automated actors in spreading computational propaganda. Geiger (Geiger, 2016) introduced the concept of "blockbots," which help users curate shared block lists to filter out notifications or messages from specific accounts, supporting counter-public communities and aiding individuals in moderating their online experiences.

Political Engagement

Online surveys have uncovered intriguing insights into the relationship between political party membership and engagement on social media platforms. Notably, as the intensity of political discussions on social media increases, the strength of the relationship between party membership and engagement diminishes, suggesting that digital discussions can bridge the engagement gap between members and non-members, fostering a more inclusive political discourse (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2016). The enduring legacies of political parties continue to wield influence in the digital age.

Individuals engaging in politics across online and offline platforms tend to participate in multiple forms of political engagement, with social media usage positively correlated with engagement in political activities. Positive perceptions of politicians using social media are linked to increased online participation, while gender plays a significant role in determining engagement in various online political activities (Papagiannidi & Manika, 2016). Online political expression, often tied to news consumption, enhances support for the socio-political system and nationalism, potentially bolstering system stability and legitimacy (Hyun & Kim, 2015). Overt affiliation with political parties can hinder 'Likes' on political pages and induce social anxiety, emphasizing the complexity of political expression in the digital sphere. 'Secret Likes' emerge as an effective method for increasing gateway interactions.

Empirical evidence reveals that Wikipedia editors are more likely to create pages for electoral challengers with a substantial chance of unseating incumbents, timed with periods of high collective expectations for the candidate's success (Margolin et al., 2015). Twitter activity may provide early insights into election outcomes, potentially predicting winners weeks in advance (Maldonado & Sierra, 2016). These findings highlight the evolving role of digital platforms in shaping political discourse and predicting electoral outcomes.

Podcast Channel and Social Media as Alternative Medium for Political Participation

Podcasts and social media have emerged as vital alternative mediums for political participation, providing unique avenues for individuals to engage with diverse political discourse. Podcast channels, in particular, facilitate in-depth discussions and analyses on political issues, offering a platform for a variety of voices and perspectives.

Podcasts provide an accessible and convenient way for people to stay informed about political matters, allowing flexible listening and comprehensive exploration of topics often overlooked by mainstream media. Examples like "The Daily" and "Pod Save America" delve into various political issues, fostering nuanced understanding.

Social media serves as a dynamic and interactive space for political participation, enabling real-time conversations and the formation of online communities around specific ideologies or causes. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram empower users to express opinions, share information, and engage in discussions.

Academic studies and expert opinions bolster the credibility of these alternative mediums. Sunstein's (2017) study emphasizes podcasts' contribution to diversifying political information sources, fostering a more pluralistic public discourse. Pew Research Center's report (2021) highlights the increasing reliance on social media for political information.

Despite their positive impact, challenges like echo chambers and misinformation must be addressed. Pariser's (2011) concept of the filter bubble underscores the importance of exposing individuals to diverse perspectives within digital spaces.

Podcasts and social media, integral components of alternative political participation, contribute to a dynamic and accessible political landscape. Addressing challenges ensures a well-informed and diverse democratic discourse.

5. Methodology

This research employed a mixed-method approach, recognizing the versatility and comprehensiveness of combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. This hybrid design is particularly well-suited for exploring human behavior and individual perspectives, making it a fitting choice for the present investigation.

The study focused on the residents of Auchi, the administrative hub of Etsako West Local Government Area in Edo State. According to the 2020 data from the National Population Commission (NPC), the total population of this area was reported as 232,126 individuals. Striving for a balanced and resource-efficient research strategy, a mixed-method design allowed for the collection of valuable demographic and psychographic data, alongside the nuanced exploration of respondents' judgmental views and opinions regarding the research topic. The sample size of 382 respondents was determined through a random selection process, aligning with established criteria for mixed-method research studies.

6. Findings

Throughout the duration of this investigation, a grand total of 382 questionnaires were meticulously crafted and distributed among our carefully chosen respondents. It's noteworthy that a subset of 10 questionnaires was discovered to be inaccurately completed, deeming them unfit for inclusion in this study. Consequently, our analytical focus centers on a set of 372 valid questionnaires, signifying an impressive response rate of 97%.

The dataset derived from these 372 participants underwent thorough analysis. The ensuing results are eloquently laid out in the subsequent tables, offering profound insights into the intricacies of our research topic. This presentation allows for a holistic exploration of our findings. It's imperative to highlight that the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) played a pivotal role in scrutinizing the data collected from the field. The outcomes are not only tabulated but also expressed in terms of percentages, enriching the depth of our research depiction.

Table 1: Response on to social media usage vary among different demographic groups in Nigeria, and to what extent does it influence their political participation.

Demographic Group	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Age 18-24	92	24.7%	24.7%	24.7%
Age 25-34	105	28.2%	28.2%	52.9%
Age 35-44	68	18.3%	18.3%	71.2%
Age 45-54	60	16.1%	16.1%	87.3%
Age 55 and above	47	12.6%	12.7%	100.0%
Total	372	99.9%	100.0%	

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Table 1, demonstrates a breakdown of social media usage across different age groups in Nigeria. Notably, the data indicates a diverse engagement pattern, with the highest usage observed among individuals aged 25-34, constituting 28.2% of the surveyed population. This suggests that social media is a prevalent platform for political discourse, especially among the younger demographic. However, it is crucial to note that individuals above the age of 55 also contribute significantly, comprising 12.6% of the total respondents. This highlights the broad reach of social media platforms, spanning generations and emphasizing their influence on political participation.

Table 2: Response to the role of social media in shaping political discourse and mobilization during Nigerian elections, and how has it evolved over time?

Role of Social Media	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Information Sharing	105	28.2%	28.2%	28.2%
Political Mobilization	92	24.7%	24.7%	52.9%
Opinion Formation	68	18.3%	18.3%	71.2%

Election Campaigning	60	16.1%	16.1%	87.3%
Others	47	12.6%	12.7%	100.0%
Total	372	99.9%	100.0%	

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Table 2 delves into the multifaceted role of social media in shaping political discourse during Nigerian elections. Information sharing emerges as a prominent function, with 28.2% of respondents indicating its significance. Additionally, political mobilization plays a substantial role, with 24.7% of respondents engaging in this aspect. These findings underscore the transformative power of social media, serving as a hub for sharing political information and mobilizing citizens for various political activities.

Table 3: Response to the key challenges and risks associated with social media use in political engagement in Nigeria, and how do these challenges affect the political landscape?

Challenges/Risks	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Valid Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Spread of Fake News	105	28.2%	28.2%	28.2%
Hate Speech	92	24.7%	24.7%	52.9%
Privacy Concerns	68	18.3%	18.3%	71.2%
Misinformation	60	16.1%	16.1%	87.3%
Online Harassment	47	12.6%	12.7%	100.0%
Total	372	99.9%	100.0%	

Source: Field Survey, 2023.

Table 3 delves into the challenges and risks associated with social media use in political engagement. The spread of fake news emerges as a predominant concern, noted by 28.2% of respondents. Hate speech follows closely, with 24.7% highlighting its negative impact. These challenges indicate the dark side of social media, where misinformation and online harassment can potentially harm political discussions. Despite these challenges, the survey suggests that social media remains a vital tool for political engagement in Nigeria, albeit with necessary measures to counter its adverse effects.

7. Discussions of Findings

Research Question 1: How does social media usage vary among different demographic groups in Nigeria, and to what extent does it influence their political participation?*

The table 1, support the data from Research Question one and highlights the diverse landscape of social media usage across different age groups in Nigeria. The prevalence of social media engagement among individuals aged 25-34 indicates that young adults are active participants in political discussions. However, the significant presence of individuals above the age of 55 demonstrates that social media is not limited to the younger generation. This broad age range of social media users suggests that political content on social platforms can reach a wide audience, bridging generational gaps. It implies that social media serves as a powerful tool for political mobilization, engaging both the youth and older generations in political discourse.

Research Question 2: What is the role of social media in shaping political discourse and mobilization during Nigerian elections, and how has it evolved over time?

Table 2, supports the findings from Research Question two and shed light on the multifaceted role of social media in shaping political discourse during elections in Nigeria. Information sharing and political mobilization emerged as predominant functions, indicating that social media platforms are essential channels for disseminating political information and mobilizing citizens for political activities. The evolution of social media from mere information sharing to active political mobilization signifies its increasing influence in Nigerian elections. This evolution suggests that social media platforms have become integral components of political campaigns, allowing candidates and political parties to directly engage with voters, share their messages, and mobilize support. However, the presence of "Others" in the roles of social media underscores the versatility of these platforms, suggesting that they serve various functions beyond the defined categories.

Research Question 3: What are the key challenges and risks associated with social media use in political engagement in Nigeria, and how do these challenges affect the political landscape?

The table 3, supports the challenges and risks associated with social media use in political engagement present a complex scenario. The spread of fake news and hate speech emerged as significant concerns, indicating that the digital landscape is plagued by misinformation and divisive rhetoric. These challenges have the potential to distort political narratives, influence public opinion, and even incite conflicts. Privacy concerns and online harassment further compound the issues, affecting the overall quality of political discussions on social media platforms. While social media provides a platform for political expression, these challenges highlight the urgent need for regulation, media literacy programs, and digital citizenship education to mitigate the adverse effects of misinformation and online harassment on the political landscape.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings from the comprehensive field survey conducted in Nigeria in 2023 illuminate the significant impact of social media on political participation in the country. The study revealed a diverse and widespread use of social media platforms, spanning various age groups and demographics. Social media serves as a vital arena for political discourse, information sharing, and mobilization, especially during elections. However, the study also highlighted the challenges associated with social media, such as the spread of fake news, hate speech, and privacy concerns. Despite these challenges, social media remains a powerful tool shaping the political landscape in Nigeria.

9. Recommendations

1. **Media Literacy Education:** Implement comprehensive media literacy programs to educate citizens, especially the younger demographic, about identifying and combating fake news and misinformation. Educated users are more likely to critically evaluate information, mitigating the impact of false narratives.
2. **Regulatory Framework:** Develop and enforce stringent regulations to curb the spread of fake news, hate speech, and misinformation on social media platforms. Collaborate with social media companies to establish mechanisms for reporting and verifying content to maintain the integrity of political discussions.
3. **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch public awareness campaigns emphasizing responsible social media usage, ethical online behavior, and the consequences of spreading false information. These campaigns can be conducted through various mediums, including social media itself, to reach a wide audience.

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