


Power to the People: Social Media as a Catalyst for Political Participation in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of social media in activating civic engagement and political participation among Nigerian citizens by age. It used a substantial secondary data set from the Afrobarometer Index (N=45,823 from 34 African countries; N=1,600 respondents across Nigeria) to examine the relationship between getting news via social media, and how it predicted civic engagement and political participation. Consuming news on social media significantly predicted civic engagement with family and neighbors and increased political participation from contacting a government official to joining a political party to voting. Young Nigerians were the most likely to get news via social media but the least likely to vote.

KEYWORDS

Africa, Civic Engagement, Journalism, Mobile Phones, News, Nigeria, Political Participation, Smartphones, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Internet use has become ubiquitous in global society and has created opportunities for more, and more diverse, civic engagement and political participation (Ohme, 2019). Use of the Internet and especially social media or social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, has expanded on a global scale; two-thirds of the world's 7.8 billion people are now online (Kemp, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2018). SNS use in emerging and developing countries, especially, has empowered citizens to engage with the outside world, organize, and to engage in social and political activism (Howard, et al., 2011; Mano & Ndlela, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2018). SNS also allows tools for discreet commentary, like disarming memes, for users to challenge authoritarian rule (Moreno-Almeida, 2021). Social media has proven to be so effective as a tool of communication and organization that some authoritarian national leaders are nervous about it (Campbell & Quinn, 2021).

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The social media boom is changing the political landscape of Africa (orfonline.org, 2019). With an estimated population of 1.3 billion inhabitants, more than 200 million now use social media, and people in Africa are more likely per-capita to access the Internet and social media via mobile device than those in the West (Ovuorie, 2022; internetworldstats.com, 2020). Increasingly, they use mobile and social media to partake in political debates, even in ways which challenge authority (Mano & Ndlela, 2020; Ovuorie, 2022).

Social media use is strong and steady in developing countries. For example, the percentage annual increase in the number of people using social media in Ghana (22%), South Africa (20%), Kenya (15%) is higher than United States (5%); and percentage of time spent on social media in Egypt (3.09hrs), Nigeria (3.02hrs), and Ghana (2.56hrs) is higher than the United States (2.07hrs) (internetworldstats.com, 2020). Yet, it is noteworthy that much of the research efforts in this area are limited to Western democracies (Boulianne, 2015; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016). This study attempts to add to that body of knowledge by examining the relationship between social media, civic engagement, and political participation in Nigeria.

Nigeria (a country the size of Oklahoma and Texas states combined) accounts for about half of West Africa's population with approximately 202 million people, including one of the world's youngest populations (median age, 18.4 years) and the continent's largest economy (Worldbank.org, 2020). Nigeria adopted party politics in 1999 after four decades of military rule and held her seventh consecutive democratic elections in 2023. Nigerians have also expressed preference for democratic form of government (aceproject.org, 2020) – yet voter turnout has declined steadily through each election (Abang, 2019; IDEA, 2020; Reuters, 2019; Yusuf, 2023). An election observer said young voters reported that they didn't trust Nigeria's electoral system and that they felt their votes didn't count (Abang, 2019); in the latest iteration, turnout fell to 29% (Yusuf, 2023). Interviews before the prior election suggested apathy among young Nigerians, partly because the two leading presidential candidates were in their 70s and couldn't "offer any real hope" for change (Adigun, 2020, p. 21). Low turnout in the 2019 election helped inspired the creation of "We Are Restless," an advocacy organization led by and targeting young Nigerians (Olasupo, 2021), yet it failed to deliver youth vote in higher numbers in 2023, despite the presence of a relatively younger candidate (Peter Obi, age 61) on the ballot (Yusuf 2023).

Lastly, Internet penetration in Nigeria is 61.4% - higher than the global average (58.8%), and nearly double the average on the African continent (39.6%); SNS use is at 30.9% (Kemp, 2022). Social media use has been found to be adopted more quickly by younger users first – although, in the West, social media has been shown to be inferior as a news source than attention to news outlets (Kaufhold, 2014; Shehata & Ströback, 2018). Newspaper consumption is waning in Nigeria much as it is in the West, but two exacerbating factors contribute to the weakness of newspapers in Nigeria compared to broadcast and online sources: cost; and the lack of a single dominant national paper, like The Guardian in the UK (Nigeria Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Finally, eight in 10 Nigerians (83%) have smartphones which are, overwhelmingly, the primary way Nigerians access the Internet, accounting for more than nine out of 10 (92.4%) website visits (Akinpelu, 2020; Oyelola, 2021).

Social media has long served as a source for news and political information (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). SNS are mostly used for personal reasons: networking with friends, presenting a public persona, and entertainment. But the capability is there for users to follow, and engage in, public debates over salient issues (Hilbert, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2020; Sveningsson, 2015). Of interest to this study is the relationship between Nigerians' rapid growth in social media use but declining political participation.

BACKGROUND

Until the 1990s, when a profound democratization process emerged on the scene, African nations largely lacked democratically elected political structures. Although there was enormous variety and

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