

Challenges Associated with the Use of Social Media in Electoral Process: Nigerian Youths in Focus

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ABSTRACT

The development of internet and mobile technology has created new possibilities for the provision and consumption of multimedia information in society. Thus, research indicates that social media has much potential which makes it apt for effective political communication and campaign. Through the use of social media, a lot of people especially the youth are able to gain access to lots of information on the internet as a result of media convergence. Scholars also agree that when people access the Internet with their phones, obviously, they often use social media. The implication is that political campaign messages can possibly be on the increase through mobile social media communications, especially among young people that are commonly found online. In the same vein, since young Nigerians acclimatize easily with technological trends, such as mobile devices, the choice of using social media for political communication is very high. Based on this, this study examined the ability of the social media in enhancing youths' participation in Nigeria's electoral process.

Keywords: Youths, Social Media, Electoral process, Nigeria, Participation

INTRODUCTION

The social media is globalizing the 21st-Century world in ways that no one could have ever anticipated [1]. It is becoming a reliably chosen form of communication. [2];[3] explain that social media is a group of internet based applications that are based on ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0. The social media allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content. According to [3], "Social media are tools that are used to give people the ability to connect and unite in a crisis. They raise awareness of an issue worldwide, and usurp authoritarian governments." This implies that social media can be used to increase awareness among people and allow people to help each other irrespective of location. [4] observes that social media networks can trigger informational cascades through their interaction effects with independent media outlets and on the ground organizers. What it means is that the social media is an important tool of communication to the society.

The role of the media continues to be useful in mobilizing and drawing citizens to focus on issues that are perceived as important and in priming public opinion among many Nigerians to get engaged in

the political process of governance and democratization [5]. The digital media, such as cellular phones, have penetrated remote areas in many parts of the country. Research has shown that most Nigerians have mobile phones and there is increase access to the internet through various channels [6]. [7] observe that in 2013, Nigeria had a mobile broadband penetration rate of 10.1 percent and occupied the 93rd position in global ranking as well as the 101st position in the worldwide percentage of individuals using the Internet in line with International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Broadband Commission Report 2014. This shows a rise in new media technology usage in the country, especially among youths.

A critical assessment of the emerging trend in the use of social media generally in Nigeria shows that social media such as Facebook, Messenger, WhatsApp, Twitter, Blog, MySpace, YouTube and Instagram are no longer mainly social with the primary purpose of creating and enabling participation in social networking sites for people to socialize and check out what friends are doing [8], but, have rather, become powerful tools for political

communication and engagement, and a useful means of policing election results in Nigeria and by extension, veritable tools for active political participation. Accordingly, social media has become not only 'sites of information' providing many Nigerians with political voice but also 'sites of action' [9]. This may probably account for why the recent use of social media in Nigerian elections continues to demonstrate how social media have reshaped the structures and methods of contemporary political communication and engagement in the country. As such, social media in relation to Nigerian political environment is perceived as the: most accessible source of political information, deliberations and conversations; the major platform for

media campaign; a key tool for monitoring and announcing election results; a new platform for political accountability; as well as the primary source of political news. As the Reuters 2017 Digital News Report observed, the citizens of many democracies now rely to a greater extent on online rather than broadcast and print news, with social media platforms playing a greater role in disseminating information than newspapers. In consideration of these views, it could be argued that social media now provide new ways for public's political engagement and participation in the country. Thus, this study examines the role of social media in enhancing the participation of youths in electoral processes in Nigeria.

Overview of Internet Adoption in Nigeria

According to [10], the development of internet and mobile technology has created new possibilities for the provision and consumption of multimedia information in the society. [11] affirms that the tempo at which GSM was adopted resulted in its swift growth in the number of subscribers from a paltry 400,000 lines before 2001, to an enormous 135 million active lines by December 2014. The Jumia Mobile Report, 2018 showed that Nigeria is fast becoming a mobile-first country. The report demonstrates that, out of about "1.04 billion mobile subscriptions in Africa, Nigeria with an estimated 193 million population, have 162 million mobile subscriptions, which amount to 84 percent of the population" (Jumia Mobile Report, 2018). There were also about 21 million smart phone users with only 17 million smart phone users active on social media through their mobile phones in 2017 according to the report. In the same vein, the number of internet users in Nigeria increased to 98 million with a 65% penetration in 2017 compared to 53% in 2016 according to the Jumia report. Vanguardngr.com equally agrees with the Jumia Report, having envisaged a 100 percent mobile penetration in 2019 based on the ever increasing number of affordable phones entering the Nigerian market, and the accelerated rate of mobile adoption among the public

(vanguardngr.com). This clearly indicates a high evolving internet adoption rate in Nigeria, and further implies that mobile technology is indeed pervasive, and can be used especially for electoral purposes. Similarly, it signifies an improvement of communication flow considering the potentials of the internet and social media. Research has also shown that mobile devices enable quicker and easier access to information as more people utilize their mobile devices in accessing news sites and reading news [12]. This explains why social media and mobile devices were largely employed in the 2011 and 2015 general elections in Nigeria as veritable tools of civic vivacity and political mobilization. [13] agree that "strong relationships exist between the media and politics", however, the "media can only impact positively or negatively when its target audience has consumed the media content". Thus, the electorates can be mobilized to participate in electoral activities through social media accessed on mobile format if they have access to political contents disseminated on mobile devices like cell phones (that is very handy and affordable), social networks or even smart phones that permit high level of interaction.

In Nigeria, about 32.4 percent of its population constitutes young people who are below the age of 18 years amidst a

total population of about 193 million people [14]. These young populations are mostly youths who fall within the voting age in line with constitutional provisions. The Nigerian National Youth policy (2001, sec 1.2), categorizes youths as comprising all young person between the ages of 18 and 35 years who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Federal Ministry of Youth Development in a report termed: 2012 National Youth Baseline Survey Report, however, estimated the population of Nigerian youths (15 - 35years) to be 64.1 million. This implies that most young Nigerians were born in the new media age and are likely to access information on social media especially those on elections and political matters. A 2017 report by ITU shows that in 104 countries, more than 80% of the youth populations are online [15]. These figures clearly indicate that young people actively use the internet from their mobile devices. Generally, societies are becoming increasingly attuned to using social media in conducting elections in this 21st century. The techno-savvy nature of youths and the level of participation they display during elections have equally opened up a new vista in the field of political communication. The Nigerian general election of 2015 largely witnessed the extensive use of social media for campaigns. This provided a new public sphere to the candidates and the electorates to actively participate in the electoral process.

Use of Social Media for Electoral Processes in Nigeria

[16] report that, politicians have diverted from the use of the traditional media such as the print (newspapers) and the electronic media (television and radio), to the use of the social media during electioneering to actualize their political goals. Today, politicians have embraced the use of social media, which is one of the fastest ICT tools in the 21st century to carry out their campaign aspiration. They now reach their prospective voters through phone calls, mobile text messages, social media chats, and online post and updates. This was clearly

portrayed by the Obama campaign in 2008, as social media was a major tool in his campaign. "During the 2008 presidential campaign of the then Senator Barack Obama, social media sites and content (such as YouTube videos, Facebook Fan Pages and Twitter accounts) were used to reach out to constituents and electorates with an exceptional success rate" [17]. Similarly, [18] point out that "Nigerian politicians actively utilized social media in their campaigns as they sent bulk text and voice messages in unprecedented numbers. They made massive use of Facebook pages and other social media platforms to win supports and canvass for votes. President Jonathan for instance, declared his intention to run for the presidency on Facebook and subsequently became the second most "liked" head of state in the world after US President Barack Obama." Globally, social media penetration is vast and increasing with Facebook, for example, with over 1.86 billion monthly active users in 2018 (statista.com). Data published on Pew Research Center data affirms that most Americans are increasingly accessing news through social media despite concerns about its accuracy (journalism.org). Apparently in Nigeria, using mobile social media apps such as Whatsapp and Facebook messengers are free and cheaper than sending an SMS, text or email. This clearly underlines the fact that mobile social media apps can be effectively deployed by political candidates to reach many people due to its reduced cost. In recent times, many countries in Africa have also experienced growth in the use of social media in politics due to increased availability of the internet. "Social Media networks like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are amongst the most visited websites in Nigeria. Considering their participatory, interactive, and cost-effective nature, they have become veritable instruments for carrying out election campaigns and other electioneering activities, political engagement and mobilization among others" [19].

[20] is of the opinion that social media is now a part of young people's political

culture as today, youths actually rely on the internet for different types of information including political information, perhaps because of ease of use and cost. Even in America, research indicates that social media was found to be preponderantly used for news sources owing to its ease of use (convenience) (21%); and interactivity (8%) in 2018 (www. journalism.com). This implies that the vast amount of political information available to youths on the internet will probably propel them to actively get involved in politics. [12] maintains that knowledge about politics could be acquired through political learning through various sources including exposure to political information on social media. [5] argue that youths' political knowledge and participation in politics are very important to the democratic process in every country as the acquisition of political knowledge is actually a strong predictor of political participation.

[1] state that studies have revealed that political participation in Africa is highly gendered, as men are significantly more politically active than women [11], however, in view of the fact that social media platforms are free and interactive, it is most likely to favor equal gender participation by reason of its ease of use and access. This will make more women become more interested in politics. Such changes in media use pattern will lead to increased online political participation in Nigeria. [17] corroborates that the Internet presently possesses unique potentials to improve civic engagement and democracy unlike what obtains in the traditional mass media. The constant evolving of the world has brought about the changes and modifications of various systems and structures, including the political system. The political system has embraced the use of social media to advance their cause. Social media in the 21st century has been used as a tool for not just political awareness, but also for political mobilization, and eventual selection of leadership, by the electorates. The social media have been playing a leading role in mobilising support for or

against unpopular leadership. Recent happenings in Nigeria such as the 'End SARS' protest, and 'Bring Back our Girls' campaign have clearly demonstrated the effects of the social media on political mobilization of the youths to effectively checkmate leaders as well as social vices. It is also on record that, the recent 'Black Lives Matters' that took the world by storm were hinged on the power of social media.

Furthermore, a closer look at the 2015 presidential elections reveals that there were two major contenders; Muhammadu Buhari of the APC and Dr. Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP; the former wielding a slogan of 'change' while the later 'transformation'. Despite the fact that the social media platforms did not choose the votes in the midst of all the sentiment surveys facilitated by various media platforms, it impacted the perception, expectations, and an ultimatum of straightforwardness from the masses. [6] posits that one of the grounds on which elections in Nigeria is contested is on social media. Thus, as a result of the growing infiltration of smart phones, traditional barriers like access to broadband internet are eliminated and a zealous populace is ready to air their opinions through the social media on various issues such as the purchase of presidential jets, fuel subsidy and mismanagement of public funds. Oluwatola added that while contents are paid for on traditional media, the social media is a combination of pure citizen participation and monetary interests. In Nigeria just as a good number of electorates were paid to vote with cash, bags of rice, clothing materials and other gestures, people were or are also paid to provide contents on social media. Hence, the 2015 presidential elections saw a large participation of users on Twitter, Facebook, Blogs and online news platforms. A few of the pro Jonathan and pro Buhari twitter handles and hash(#) tag include: #febuhari, #forwardnigeria, #thisisbuhari, #gejvictory2015, #GMB15, #goodlucknigeria, #ichoosGMB, #gejnigeria, @profosibanjo,

Social Media and Youths Participation in Electoral Processes

Proponents of social media have highlighted its successes in the 2015 elections where the role of youth shifted towards social agents for change, and this was reflected in the political space. The 2011 elections were also marked by the adoption of social media, especially Facebook, by politicians and political parties for political participation [18], having taken a direct cue from the Obama 2008 United States Presidential election that popularized the influence of the social media on electioneering and elections. For example, INEC officials had toward the beginning of March 2011 received the help of public society volunteers with its Facebook and Twitter accounts and another new media circumstance room which got input from people in general and later started to give ongoing data and addressed constituent inquiries [10]. Meanwhile, as of September 2020, about 27 million Nigerians were registered on Facebook while about 22% of Nigerians were connected on Twitter. Studies indicate that almost all the institutions involved in the 2011 Nigerian election conducted aggressive outreach through social media including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, candidates, media networks, civic societies, and the police officials [15]. Many online platforms such as “Enough is enough Nigeria, Reclaim Naija, WangoNet and IamLagos” were established to allow citizens to report election-related incidents using pictures, videos, text messages, and voicemails. Additionally, smart phone applications such as ‘Revoda’ designed by Gbenga, an IT consultant were utilised to upload complaints or report any forms of delay in voting materials or presence of gangs at the local polling stations. This way of reporting allowed many users especially youths from within and outside the country to follow the election process. There were ‘social media activists’ who looked out for riggings and the potential

spread of bombing at polling stations. According to [3], the extensive use of social media played an important role in the 2011 elections which made it the ‘freest and fairest’ Nigeria’s election history. This suggests the extent to which social media offers participatory democracy, promoting transparency, citizen engagement, greater accuracy in the political process, and overall speedy release of election results [19].

[14] write that when it comes to youth participation in the electoral processes, the 2015 elections in Nigeria have been praised by many. The reason is due to the peaceful campaigns conducted by youth organisations throughout the country in various forms such as “peace promotion, popular participation, and political education, election monitoring and polling administration” [9]. Youth organisations such as the Youth Initiatives for Advocacy Growth and Advancement (YIAGA) Africa, the Youth Alliance on Constitution and Electoral Reform, Niger Delta Coalition for Change (NDCC), the Young-starts Development Initiative (YDI), and the Commonwealth Youth Council (CYC) campaigned for a peaceful election. They did so by urging fellow youths not to commit violence while stressing the fact that politicians should not involve the youths in acts of violence before, during, and after elections. The Youth Peace Accord was signed on February 3, 2015, by faith-based youth groups, civil societies, and youth development organisations to display their commitment to peaceful elections [15]. Additionally, youth groups also took active steps towards voter education and utilised social media to carry out voter education on national issues [7]. Thus, young people made sure that their voices were heard using the social media.

Challenges of the Use of Social Media in Electoral Process

[1] observe that regardless of the positive effects of social media, social media has aided unreliable source of information, fake news as well as bad mouthing of candidates during campaigns. Furthermore, the social media also

promote hate speeches and violence during electioneering which eventually affects the outcome of the elections. Some researchers have argued that despite the unhindered political sensitization and awareness that the social media command, it has also been used as a tool for conflicts between opposing parties during elections. [15] explains that "although the social media have enhanced political awareness and interaction, they are also being used in Nigeria to malign, intimidate, and discredit political opponents, thus triggering conflicts. According to him, websites, blogs, and social media platforms are used strategically to describe politicians' curriculum vitae, present political ideology, outline achievements, enumerate their agenda, canvass for votes, and at times disparage opposition.

Although the Nigerian Broadcasting Code in Article 3.3.3 states that, "all sides to any issue of public interest shall be equitably presented to ensure fairness," media observers note that elections in the country have consistently witnessed outright disregard for the directives of the NBC as well as the engagements of parties and their candidates through the use of vulgar language, offensive words, inciting confrontational and highly divisive comments during live broadcast and camp demonstrations that will then make its way into the social media.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The social media has gradually permeated our daily lives while equally having a huge influence on the way individuals react to socio-economic, religious and political affairs in the country. More so, social media have helped in the propagation of politics, making it more interactive and participatory especially for the youths. In any case, the use of social media for campaigns in Nigeria has become of utmost significance. The social media gives power to the electorates who before now, have been inactive, voiceless, and under represented. Thus, with the use of social media during elections, the electorates have become more active participants of the process and are able

Unfortunately, the social media with its wide reach and audience of mostly young people are usually flooded with such unchecked, unguarded, uncensored and unverified contents. These targeted deceptions and purposeful misinformation are often peddled by party loyalists for the gains of their favorite candidates. For instance, issues such as the misappropriation of public funds, presidential fleet of aircrafts, wasting of taxpayers' funds on unnecessary trips abroad were all peddled against the incumbent president Dr Goodluck Jonathan, whereas, his opponent's age, role in past military coup, economic downturn in previously led administration and non-presentation of secondary school certificates were some of the popular allegations against his opponent and eventual winner of the 2015 elections. In like manner, Social media can influence popular conversations and debates, through the spread of disinformation. These debates usually stimulate popular view and can, directly and indirectly, affect elections, increase tensions within the country, and spread hate and violence. A study by [20] found that in Nigeria, religion and ethnicity have been utilised as political tools to create divisive narratives and disinformation played a central role in causing division, undermining democracy, and stifling the democratic processes.

make useful contribution during election. Accordingly, it is essential for the people especially the youths, to understand the usefulness of social media in governance and the various ways by which it can be utilized as an effective political communication tool. Relevant stakeholders such as the Nigerian Communication Commission should also help maintain high standards among mobile network providers in Nigeria to triumph over the persistent cases of high data tariff and poor network receptions in the telecom industry. political parties and electoral candidates should learn to apply caution and expertise in what they post on social media. Most often, a particular

content if not properly interpreted or decoded, may bring about possible violence when it goes viral on social media. Also, electoral candidates and their supporters should desist from the use of fake or false information, hate speeches, and defamatory words to misrepresent and defame another candidate's image during campaigns. Most importantly, INEC, civil society organizations, and relevant security agencies should try and create strategies to systematically verify information reported by citizen on social media. Lastly, social media platforms should implement methods of fact-checking on

their applications. For example, the current feature on Twitter [12] reminds you to ensure the information you are retweeting, or liking is credible, it requests you to take another look and ensure the credibility of the information you are spreading. On other platforms like Instagram and Facebook [18], posts (stories, photos, and videos) deemed 'fake' by the application programmers are flagged and stopped from being shared. Measures like this will ensure that social media users take time to read and ensure the information they are about to share is credible and will not endanger those receiving it due to its 'fake' nature.

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