

Chapter 84

Social Media and Youth Interest in Politics in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The youth in Kenya are by far the majority age-group, yet their role in politics is hampered by their inability to access mainstream political information. The objective of the study is to determine whether there is any relationship between the level of youth engagement on social media and their level of interest in politics. The study uses the post-test quasi experiment to compare political interest between a naturally occurring group of Facebook users and a naturally occurring group of non-Facebook users. The findings of the study reveal that Facebook has provided the youth with a platform where they can access political information in formats that are appealing to them. Consequently, young people have been able to mobilise themselves online and push for a political agenda. There is, therefore, need to open up online exchanges in order to create a place for young people in mainstream political discourse in Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

Kenya gained independence from Britain in 1963 and has since experienced autocratic single-party regimes, a failed coup, pluralistic democracy (multi-partism), ethnic conflicts, and a contested presidential election that left the country on the brink of civil war. Throughout this period, the Kenyan youth have been sidelined, making them gullible to the machinations of politicians (Siurala, 2002; Forbrig, 2005; Kenya National Assembly, 2007). During Kenya's post-election violence in

2007/2008, as indeed in other political theatre in the country, the youth tend to be more relevant as instruments for achieving goals defined by, and relevant to, the much older politicians, rather than using their numbers to direct political discourse and subsequently electoral outcomes. No doubt, such a power arrangement often undermines youth interests, and renders the most significant Kenyan demographic largely powerless in national politics.

It has been argued that the Kenyan youth face many hurdles that often undermine their ability to fully play their role in the country's politics

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(Imoite, 2007), yet this was not always the case. For example, at independence, there was a significant number of youth in prominent political positions, such as, Tom Mboya, J. M. Kariuki, Martin Shikuku, Mwai Kibaki, Jean-Marie Seroney and Pio Gama Pinto. Six decades later, all of them except the demised remain fairly active and influential in national politics yet it is now even harder for the youth to rise to the stage. This is despite the fact that the youth form the single-largest voter block based on Kenya's latest census which put the national population at 38,610,097 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Of these, ages 0-35 years make 79% (30,501,977), of which the youth (15-35 years) are 11,285,731, making 37% of those under 35. This shows how potentially influential the youth vote can be in Kenyan politics. The emergence of new media, and the fact that the youth drive adoption of such new information sources, may yet provide them an opportunity to play their role and exert deliberate influence in Kenya's politics. Of interest is whether political information delivered through youth-friendly channels such as social media can have implications on them truly influencing national politics.

This article, therefore, discusses the use of social media as a source of political information for the youth. It explores existing discourse in and around the general area of youth interest in politics and further reveals the extent to which social media is an effective provider of political communication to the Kenyan youth. It is fairly agreed that the use of the Internet to discover and disseminate political information seems to be growing (Borgida & Stark, 2004). However, what is of concern is the extent to which this new media platform provides true change and new practical opportunities. While no one can dispute the fact that the Internet is likely to have a significant impact on social life, there remains substantial disagreement as to the nature of the impact (Bargh & McKenna, as cited by Borgida

& Stark, 2004). For example, there are questions about whether the Internet affords people who have little or no political interest a chance to develop and sustain such interest, or it merely allows those already politically interested to seek relevant information and escalate their attitudes. Consequently, the study was designed to establish the extent to which social media influences youth interest in politics in Kenya given new media's growing importance to information consumption.

THE PLACE OF THE YOUTH ON THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF KENYA

The youth comprise a critical constituency in any country. In Sub-Saharan Africa, the youth are the most abundant asset because of the demographic transition in the region (Garcia & Fares, 2008). For instance, Kenya's last census data shows that 79% of the population is below 35 years of age, and the youth comprise 70% of those eligible to vote (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2009). Further, among the registered voters, the youth comprise 5.9 million, but despite this, youth interests have been subordinated in decision making, policy formulation and execution (Njonjo, 2010). In the general elections held in 2007, the registered voters under the age of 40 were nearly 70% (Kanyinga, Okello, & Akech, 2010). The previous statistics reveal a trend which has been referred to as the youth bulge (Garcia & Fares, 2008; Muthee, 2010). Scholars such as Goldstone (2001) and Reno (2007) associate youth bulges in population trends with youth revolutions in the affected countries or societies. This has immense implications, given the stage of Kenya's democratic development and recent happenings in the political scene; such as the violently contested results of the presidential elections at the end of 2007 and the increasing evidence of frustration with the political leaders' management of national affairs. It, therefore, follows that because the youth population in Kenya

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