

Chapter 40

Social Media, Nigerian Youths and Political Participation: A Thematic and Methodological Review

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ABSTRACT

This article is a study of the influence of social media on political participation of youths in Nigeria through a review of the methodology, research themes and theoretical trends. The research method was a content analysis of forty-four relevant empirical articles. Findings showed that the predominant themes were political participation, social media and ethnicity. Most of the reviewed studies employed surveys, desktop research or critical review of literature as their research method. Most reviewed studies either adopted quantitative or qualitative research method and without a theoretical framework. It was evident that many studies in the global north did not link political participation to ethnicity, unlike those that were carried out in Nigeria. In addition, there were few studies on the influence of social media on the political participation of youths. Consequently, research in this area has to contextualize the Nigerian experience, adopt a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative research methods with a strong theoretical base.

INTRODUCTION

Political participation of young people is on a decline in Western countries (Putnam, 1995a, 1995b, 2000; Rahn & Transue, 1998). This apparent decline may be connected to expired paradigm that defined political participation as only voting in elections (Verba & Nie, 1973). Consequently, this has affected researches in political participation which depended solely on survey data generated during elections as the principal means of measuring political participation (Salisbury, 1975). Obviously, this erroneous definition has been challenged by scholars who insist that political participation is sum total of citizens engagement in the political process of their community (Tam Cho & Rudolph, 2008; Loewen, 2010; Eesuola, 2013; Falade, 2014).

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On the other hand, the influence of digital media on political participation has been studied by from various perspectives like the following: internet and political participation in the global north (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003; Best & Krueger, 2005; Oser, Hooghe & Marien, 2013) and in a developing nation like the Philippines (Lim, 2009; Shirky, 2011). However, it seems that with time, studies have narrowed down on social media as against the broader internet. This was due to the Arab Springs of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya which emphasized how youths used social media for collective action (protests) – (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011; Chebib & Sohail, 2011; Harlow & Johnson, 2011; Hamdy & Gomaa, 2012; Lim, 2012; Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Douai & Moussa, 2013; Olorunnisola & Ojebode, 2013). Other studies on social media and politics/elections are: (Bennett, 2012; Carlisle & Patton, 2013). Sadly, all these studies either interpreted political participation as voting in elections alone or focused on youth's political participation as a means to protesting and/or collective action. The only exception was: Gil de Zuniga (2012) which studied the influence of social media on political participation (from all aspects of civic engagement till voting in elections) while Kahne and Middaugh (2012) that looked at how social media influenced political participation of young people in US.

In Nigeria, social media have advanced political participation through civic, online and offline engagements (Said-Moorhouse, 2015). Nigeria has a population of about 170 million people, out of which 86,219,965 are Internet users, with an internet penetration of 46.1% which contributes 2.5% to the over 3.4 billion global Internet users (InternetLiveStats, 2016). The top ten most visited sites by Nigerians are: Google.com, Google.com.ng, Facebook.com, Yahoo.com, Youtube.com, Twitter.com, Jumia.com.ng, LinkedIn.com, Nairaland.com and Instagram.com (Alexis, 2016). This shows that Facebook and Twitter are two of the most frequented social media sites in Nigeria. *The Economist* (2010) declared that Facebook was the second most popular site on the internet after Google. The use of Facebook by Nigerians stands at 7.1 million daily and 15 million each month (Mbalu, 2015). Nigeria is the most active African country in political conversations on Twitter, followed by South Africa, Ethiopia, Burundi and Egypt (Portlands – How Africa Tweets.com, 2016).

Again, studies were only limited to the influence of social media on Nigerian elections (Ifukor, 2010; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Aleyomi & Ajakaiye, 2014; Ezebuanyi, Ejimnkeonye, Daniel & Onuigbo, 2014; Olabamiji, 2014; Oyenuga, 2015). On the other hand, there is an aspect of political participation which seems peculiar to the African continent: ethnicity. Reviewed literature on political participation influenced by social media in the continent focused on ethnocentric messages. For instance: social media was employed in spreading ethnic hatred after the Kenyan elections in 2007 (Makinen & Kuira, 2008; Njoroge, Kimani & Kikech, 2011). Thus, political participation, even that enabled by the social media, may not be free from ethnicity in African countries. It is pertinent to emphasize that Nigeria is an ethnic fault-line state. Sadly, few studies investigated the influence of social media and ethnicity in Nigeria (Ukiwo, 2015; Chilwa, 2016).

Consequently, there seems to be a dearth of scholarly work that synthesizes social media, political participation and ethnic identity within the Nigerian context. Many of the reviewed literature were skewed exclusively to social media and political participation (with very few focusing on the youth population) or to political participation and ethnic identity. Even within the context of social media and political participation, the focus was many times on collective action and voting in elections. Therefore, this paper hopes to fill this gap by empirically evaluating the influence of social media exposure on the political participation of youths in Nigeria and also determine if ethnicity influences their political attitudes on social media platforms.

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