

Undergraduate Students' Perception of Social Media and Youth Political Participation in Nigeria's 2023 General Elections

Wilfred Oritsesan Olley^{1*}, Ewomazino Daniel Akpor¹, Latifah Efua Anavberokhai¹, Samson Ighiegba Omosotomhe², Fred Osahon Okunmahie³, Isah Abdulazeez⁴, Frederick Ogbeide³

¹Department of Mass Communication, Edo State University, Uzairue, Nigeria, ²Ambrose Alli University Ekpoma, Nigeria, ³Department of Political Science and Public Administration, Edo State University Uzairue, Nigeria, ⁴Department of Mass Communication, Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi, Nigeria. *Corresponding Author's Email: olley.wilfred@edouniversity.edu.ng

Abstract

Thanks to the platforms made available by social media, which has now become a fully integrated part of almost every aspect of our daily lives, politics and political participation have been redefined. These platforms are strong enough to do and undo as they elevate communication above the constraints of traditional media. While the youths make up the sect that uses social media the most, there is reason to study whether or not these platforms help promote political participation among them, particularly the youths of Nigeria during the 2023 General Elections. In this context, the researcher analysed the perception of undergraduate students of Edo State University Uzairue of social media and the promotion of political participation in youths during the 2023 General Elections. The study used a survey and sampled 341 undergraduate students of Edo State University, Uzairue. The data collected was analysed using tables and percentages. The study indicated that undergraduate students of Edo State University Uzairue are frequent social media users and conversant with political participation. It was also revealed that WhatsApp is the most used social media platform for getting political information and participation. A number of the sampled students were involved during the elections, thanks to the social media platform. They acknowledged social media's importance in promoting and motivating political participation among youths despite the number of issues to be tackled.

Keywords Edo State University Uzairue, Political Participation, Social Media, Students, Youths, General Elections.

Introduction

"In little more than a decade, the impact of social media has gone from an entertaining extra to a fully integrated part of nearly every aspect of daily life for many" (1). Social media, a modern trend in information and knowledge dissemination, has penetrated all levels of the information society and catalysed democratisation and political development. It has taken communication beyond the limitations of the traditional way of communicating and socialising, making it an essential part of people's lives, affecting their social, political and economic activities. The interactive nature of social media makes them fit to be used for many purposes, such as socialisation, education,

entertainment, governance, and political participation. Hence, it promotes connectedness, participation and the opportunity to disseminate information across geographical boundaries (2). In this vein, communication barriers have been reduced to the barest minimum as local events easily became global and vice versa (3). With the help of constantly improving digital technologies, social media has become very popular and important to many of the world's population. However, recent studies have shown that a certain age group mostly uses social media; some people call young adults, and others call youths.

A statistical report on the ages of social media users worldwide "shows that in post-teenage years, the

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution CC BY license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

(Received 10th October 2023; Accepted 17th July 2024; Published 30th July 2024)

older the demographics, the less likely they are to be active on social media this may be because young adults tend to use social media as a go-to source of information while the older generation is typically more sceptical and prefer to rely on traditional mediums like TV and radio for information" (4). There are studies which "have shown the proliferation of the use of social media among youths who are considered to be more technology savvy than the older adults" (2). With youths and young adults occupying the largest demographic group of social media users, they are given a "voice" through the various media platforms that are available at their disposal. In stating its importance for youths, researchers (3) says "youths – through social media – have not only evolved to form an identity of stable consumers of news and political narratives but have also become sources of newsfeeds, and trendy agenda framers concerning leadership, accountability and good governance within the policy".

The social media wave in youths is not absent in Africa and Nigeria, which is the focus point of this study. In recent years, African youths have taken to various social media platforms to speak up against governmental developments. Nigerian youths have also realised that corruption, nepotism, cronyism, incompetence of public officeholders, and a lack of transparency, accountability, and integrity displayed by those currently in power are critical factors in their socioeconomic and political ascent(3). Their strategy has been to nationalise their agenda through serious streams of comments, discussions, newsfeeds, and editorial headlines disseminated via "#" codes, viral videos, and online movements. Today's youths have grown up with the 'viral media' concept and approach their role differently than older generations. Social media platforms have also been used to develop different strategies for demonstrations and mass movements. A good example is the #ENDSARS movement of 2020 and the online protests against the cashless society introduced by the federal government under the leadership of President Muhammadu Buhari. The 2023 General Elections, as against the 2019 General Elections, witnessed a large wave of youth participation through social media like never before.

Voting for the right candidate and voting because it is the right way to bring change to the country are two arguments frequently made during the campaign season on social media. The argument was that the leader elected into power would either lead Nigeria in the right direction or usher in an era worse than the one we are leaving behind. There are also some who believe that the leader Nigeria needs is one who will fight for their rights and not for their (the leaders') pockets and selfish interests. One major theme among the youth this election season was the online campaign for Labour Party's Presidential candidate, Peter Obi and his running mate, Yusuf Datti Baba-Ahmed. Some Nigerians believe that the country's political structure needs a shakeup rather than the usual practise of handing the reins of government back and forth among the same old faces.

History has taught us that it is one thing to be vocal online and another to be physically present in the political process. Still, many young Nigerians are speaking out and becoming more involved in political campaigns and discussions to encourage Nigerians to cast informed votes without bias for one thing or another. This paper, therefore, seeks to find the perception of students – the majority who fall under the age range of youths/young adults – of the influence of social media in promoting political participation among youths in the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria.

The study has the following objectives:

- To find out the level of social media usage by Edo State University (EDSU) undergraduate students.
- To ascertain the level of conversance with the idea of political participation of EDSU undergraduate students.
- To find out the most used social media platform used by undergraduate students in getting political information and political participation in the 2023 General Elections.
- To determine the extent EDSU's undergraduate students are involved in political discourse and movements of the 2023 General Elections, thanks to the social media platforms they frequent.
- To evaluate the perception of EDSU's undergraduate students of the influence of social

media in promoting political participation among youths in the 2023 General Elections.

Materials and Methods

Conceptual Framework

Political Participation

Political participation is defined as "any action a citizen takes to influence their political system...it simply means that a person is participating in the political process by making their opinions and beliefs known. In social sciences, the term is often used to describe an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of a political issue. It takes up several forms such as voting, protests, public consultations, jury duties, petitions, donations, and volunteering" (5). It is also loosely defined as citizens' activities affecting politics. Voting, demonstrating, contacting public authorities, boycotting, attending party gatherings, guerilla gardening, blogging, volunteering, joining in flash mobs, buying fair-trade goods, and even protesting by committing suicide are all on the list (6). Thus, he says, the extent and scope of political participation are important – perhaps even decisive – criteria for assessing the quality of democracy.

Social Media

In 2019, social media was defined as forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and micro-blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos, 7). It is also defined by (8) as a collective term for websites and applications focusing on communication, community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. People, according to them, use social media to stay in touch and interact with friends, family and various communities. In contrast, businesses use social media applications to market and promote their products and track consumers. Social media promotes users to share content with others and display content to enhance a particular brand or product (9).

Youths

For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines youth as aged between 15 and 24. However, as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural

Organization (UNESCO) states, the definition is not universal. The Commonwealth defines youth as individuals between the ages of 15 and 29. The African Youth Charter, on the other hand, defines youth as any individual between 15 to 35 years of age and seeks to resolve longstanding debates about defining youth within the African context and based on Africa's development realities.

The Nigerian National Youth Policy in 2009 defined youth as individuals between 18 and 35. However, in 2019, the definition changed to an individual between 18 and 29. In an ideal Nigerian society, this definition captures individuals at the tertiary (both undergraduate and postgraduate) level and those who have embarked on their chosen career paths.

Social Media and Political Participation among Youths

"Social media has given rise to entirely new forms of action and interaction that can only happen in a digitally networked space, such as online petitions and commenting on politicians' posts. Social networks allow for non-institutionalised and horizontal modes of engagement, often favoured by young adults" (10).

Since such forms of political engagement only exist and can be exercised within social media, they must also be treated as a separate sub-dimension of political engagement. Overall, the various forms of engagement can be described as either institutionalised (e.g. voting) or non-institutionalised (e.g. protest behaviour, 10). This distinction is relevant because young adults are disproportionately more likely to participate through non-institutionalised means, especially online (10).

It is generally assumed that social media fosters political engagement (participation) in youths because social media's networking function helps young citizens develop skills and psychological dispositions that promote offline participation (11). As another direct impact of social media on political participation, it has been argued that social media usage, such as news sharing, can strengthen social relationships and increase social cohesion, which in turn may catalyse collective action and group engagement (10).

In Nigeria, the use of social media for political participation by youths has steadily been on the rise over the years, particularly during elections, despite the gap in the literature on how social media tools enhance youths' political participation. It is argued that social media has helped Nigerian youths overcome the deficiencies of traditional media, which hitherto denied them political participation and mobilisation (3).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the Social Media Political Participation Model established by Johannes Knoll, Jorg Matthes and Raffael Heiss in 2020. The model holds that social media can foster participation only when a chain of subsequent conditions is met (10). This concept states that for young individuals to be exposed to political content on social media—either knowingly or unknowingly—assess it as relevant to other content that is also there and that there must be a mismatch between the existing state and the desired state. They need to believe that a participation goal is attainable in a future desired state. This goal must be dominant in a real behavioural situation, where other behavioural goals may exist. According to Knoll et al., through the model, if one of the conditions is not met, social media may not increase offline political participation, so young adults' efforts to participate are frequently fleeting. They can increase significantly during protests but stay low during national elections.

Methodology

The quantitative research method is employed in this paper, with the survey as the data collection technique. Surveys are used as a tool by researchers to understand better individual or group perspectives relative to a particular concept or topic of interest (12). In this paper, the researcher used the survey to collect data from Edo State University undergraduate students to get their perception of social media and promote political participation among youths.

The population of this study covers the undergraduate students of Edo State University

Uzairue. According to the Students Affairs Department, the university's undergraduate population is 3,000 (three thousand) students across all the available departments. Using the Krejcie and Morgan sample size formula, the sample size of this paper is 341 students. The sampling technique used by the researcher is the simple random sampling technique which gives every member of a study's population an equal chance of being selected. The researcher uses this sampling technique as the survey is online based, courtesy of the election break during which this study was carried out.

The questionnaire issued to the respondents shared across various social media platforms consists of 27 (twenty-seven) open and closed-ended questions distributed into two sections: the first for socio-demographic elements and the second for the thematic issues upon which this paper is built. The information from the respondents will be assessed using percentages and displayed using tables.

Results

This study's questionnaire was shared via various social media platforms with Edo State University undergraduate students, and responses were collected until the study's sample size was reached. Research Objective 1: To determine the level of social media usage by Edo State University undergraduate students. Research Objective 2: To ascertain the level of conversance with the idea of political participation of EDSU undergraduate students. Research Objective 3: To find out the most used social media platforms by undergraduate students in getting political information and political participation in the 2023 General Elections. Research Objective 4: To determine the extent EDSU's undergraduate students are involved in political discourse and movements of the 2023 General Elections, thanks to the social media platforms they frequent. Research Objective 5: To evaluate the perception of EDSU's undergraduate students of the influence of social media in promoting political participation among youths in the 2023 General Elections (Table 1 – 14).

Table 1: How often do you use social media?

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Very Often	209	61.4
Often	95	27.8
Not so often	37	10.8
I don't use social media	0	0.0
Total	341	100

Table 2: How many hours would you spend on social media daily?

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
More than 7 hours	82	24.1
4 to 7 hours	168	49.4
2 to 3 hours	62	18.1
Below 2 hours	29	8.4
I don't use social media	0	0.0
Total	341	100

Table 3: Knowledge of the meaning of Political Participation

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	308	90.4
No	33	9.6
Total	341	100

Table 4: Self consideration as a political participant

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	156	45.8
No	123	36.1
Maybe (I am not sure)	62	18.1
Total	341	100

Table 5: Social media platforms frequently used in getting political information and participation in the 2023 General Elections

Responses	Percentage
Facebook	20.5
WhatsApp	77.1
Twitter	48.2
Instagram	51.8
Blogs/Websites	26.8
LinkedIn	0
Email Subscriptions	6
TikTok	6
Snapchat	2.4
Phoenix Browser	2.4
YouTube	5.6

Telegram	1.2
Opera	5.6

Table 6: Effectiveness of the social media platforms

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	304	89.2
No	12	3.6
Maybe	25	9.6
Total	341	100

Table 7: Respondents' level of involvement in politics and political-related issues revolving around the 2023 General Elections

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Very Involved	58	16.9
Somewhat involved	99	28.9
In the middle (neither here nor there)	103	30.1
Not involved	81	28.9
Total	341	100

Table 8: Relevance of the 2023 Elections information across social media platforms

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	321	94
No	20	6
Total	341	100

Table 9: If the movements, discourse, and information on social media platforms on the elections motivate people

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	247	72.3
No	16	4.8
Not Sure	78	22.9
Total	341	100

Table 10: Sufficiency of social media movements and information on elections in promoting youths' political participation

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	270	79.3

No	50	14.6
Not Sure	11	6.1
Total	341	100

Table 11: Active participation before and during the elections

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	62	18.1
No	220	65.1
I'd rather not say	59	16.9
Total	341	100

Table 12: If social media messages, trends, and information influence youths to vote

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	279	81.9
No	33	9.6
I can't say	29	8.4
Total	341	100

Table 13: The power of social media in promoting youth participation during the 2023 elections

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	308	90.4
No	33	9.6
Total	341	100

Table 14: Importance of social media in getting youths to vote

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	238	69.8
No	13	3.8
Until Nigeria can boast of being a credible country	90	26.4
Total	341	100

Discussion

The study focused on the undergraduate students of Edo State University, Uzairue, to get their perception of social media and political participation among youths in the 2023 General Elections. According to the study's objectives, social media is used very well among most of the undergraduate students of Edo State University, with a large number of them (49.4%) using social media between 4 to 7 hours

daily. Most respondents (90.4%) were familiar with political participation.

The majority of the respondents (45.8%) considered themselves political participants, and WhatsApp was selected as the most used social media platform by 77.1% of the respondents in getting political information and in political participation during the

2023 General Elections. Most respondents (89.2%) consider their selected platforms effective.

Some respondents were politically involved in the 2023 General Elections, with 16.9% being very involved and 24.1% being somewhat involved. 30.1% of the respondents sat in the middle, while 28.9% were uninvolved. Those involved online during the election period were asked to state their activities. They involved supporting preferred candidates, sharing election-related information, getting involved in spaces and discourses, electoral process sensitisation, online campaigns and location checking for voting centres. Those involved in offline activities stated some of those activities as political arguments and debates, attending INEC ad-hoc meetings and sensitisations, campaigns, voting for their preferred candidates, creating social awareness and listening to the political information shared by one individual or the other.

Most respondents (94%) consider political information shared across social media platforms important, even when placed alongside other information that cuts across entertainment and education. Most of them also agree that trends, discourse and movements concerning the elections motivated them politically and someone they knew. Most respondents think that social media movements and information were enough for them to promote political participation, and most of them also think that these online movements and information were enough to promote political participation in youths. While most of them did not vote during the elections, most of those who did (49.4%) feel that social media messages, trends, and information motivated them to vote. A majority (81.9%) also felt social media trends, messages, and information influenced Nigerian youths to vote during the elections.

While most respondents (90.4%) think that social media was powerful enough to promote political participation in youths during the elections, there were several areas they (the respondents) felt could be worked upon. Those areas include, but are not limited to, online news credibility, security, the officials provided by INEC, free and fair electoral processes, ICT, the engagement of more youths, outreaches in rural areas, actual participation and

not just online participation and the news flow (particularly in regards to the results of the election). Moving forward, most of the respondents (69.8%) think that social media will be really important in getting youths out to vote, and quite a number of them believe that until Nigeria can boast of being a credible country, the opposite will be the case.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the perception of social media and the promotion of political participation of youths during the 2023 General Elections by Edo State University Uzairue undergraduate students is majorly positive. The majority of the students who served as the respondents of this study acknowledge that social media played an effective role in the 2023 General Election in terms of the dissemination of political information and political participation. They (the students) also acknowledge that the social media trends, messages and discourse motivated Nigerian youths to vote. They also believe that social media was powerful enough to promote political participation among Nigerian youths during the elections, even though several areas can be worked on. In future elections or political activities, most students believe that social media will be vital in getting the youth out to vote.

Based on this, the study recommends the following:

1. Social media is considered an important tool in political happenings and dealings in the country, not limited to elections alone.
2. The provision of yardsticks or conditions will be used to assess the credibility of news online, particularly sensitive information such as political news or election results. It will help in majorly dealing with the issue of online news credibility.
3. Electoral and Political processes are as transparent as ever to promote credibility of the country's systems in the youths and every Nigerian citizen.
4. Creation of trustworthy workshops and programmes by political institutions that are youth-inclusive, which will help in political sensitisation and also in the promotion of political participation in youths for the betterment of the country.

Abbreviations

Nil

Acknowledgement

The authors will want to acknowledge the enabling research environment provided by the management of Edo State University Uzairue.

Author Contributions

Wilfred Olley and Ewomazino Daniel Akpor: Conceptualization. Latifah Efua Anav berokhai: Writing, Samson Ighiegba Omosotomhe: Methodology, Edike Frederick Kparoboh and Fidelis Otebe: Supervision.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethics Approval

The consent of all those who participated in the survey were sought. No respondent below the age of 18 was used.

Funding

No funding was received.

References

1. Berger J, Werbach K, Fader P, Yildirim P. The impact of social media: Is it irreplaceable? Knowledge at Wharton: A Business Journal from the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. 2019; Retrieved from <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/impact-of-social-media/>
2. Omotayo FO, Folorunso MB. Use of social media for political participation by youths in Oyo State, Nigeria. Journal of Democracy. JeDEM. 2020; 12(1): 132-157.

3. Obisesan OF. The 'tag generation'; social media and youth participation in the 2019 general election in Nigeria. Africa Development. 2022; 47(2): 107-145.
4. Oberlo C, What age group uses social media the most? 2023y, Retrieved from <https://ng.oberlo.com/statistics/what-age-group-uses-social-media-the-most>
5. Nyman W, White D. Political participation. An online study chapter posted on Study.com on October 12, 2021. 2023. Retrieved from <https://study.com/academy/lesson/what-is-political-participation-definition-forms-examples.html>
6. Van Deth JW. What is political participation? Published online by Oxford Research Encyclopedias 2021; Retrieved from <https://oxfordre.com/politics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore9780190228637-e-68>
7. Merriam-Webster. Social media. Retrieved on February 22, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media>
8. Lutkevich B, Wigmore I. What is social media? An online article published on WhatIs.com on September 3, 2021. Retrieved on February 22, 2023, from <https://google.com/amp/s/www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/social-media%3famp=1>
9. Nikolinakou A, Phua J. Do human values matter for promoting brands on social media? How social media users' values influence valuable brand-related activities such as sharing, content creation, and reviews. Journal of Consumer Behaviour. 2020;19(1): 13-23.
10. Matthes J. social media and the political engagement of young adults: Between mobilisation and distraction. De Gruyter: Online Media Glob. Commun. 2022; 1(1):6-22.
11. Kahne J, Bowyer B. The political significance of social media activity and social media networks. Political Communication. 2018; 35(3): 470-493.
12. Mills JG. Survey research, a simple introduction. 2021, Retrieved from <https://www.supersurvey.com/Research#:~:text=Survey%20research%20refers%20to%20a,concept%20or%20topic%20of%20interest>