SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN EMERGING TOOLS FOR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA: A STUDY OF FACEBOOK

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Abstract

This study examined social media as an emerging tool for political participation in Nigeria: a study of Facebook. The study was aimed at finding out how Facebook contributes to political participation in Nigeria, with special focus on the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. The Uses and Gratification Theory and the Technological Determinism Theory were the anchors of the study. The study made use of the survey research method, with structured questionnaire as instrument for data collection. Findings from the study show that Facebook played a major role in mobilizing the support of the electorate. The study therefore recommends that periodic public enlightenment programmes be organized on the use of Facebook and digital marketing generally, for political purposes, especially among youths. It is also recommended that subtle regulation of the social media be introduced, with the view to checking abuse.

Key words: Facebook, Political Participation, Nigeria, 2023 Elections

Introduction

Digital technology has made it possible for global social media use within the realm of politics, education, business, and international relations (Olabanji 2014). In the past, demographics and psychological factors determined political participation. However, today, evidence suggests that information and communication technology (I.C.T) plays an equally important role.

Facebook, an information network and technology, using a form of communication, utilizing interactive and user produced content, while creating and maintaining interpersonal relationships, is one of the revolutions in political mobilization globally. The emergence of the internet as the new mass medium of the 21st century has changed the mass media and politics substantially.

Owuamalam (2014) states that political advertising refers to messages which contents are political and presented to influence voters' behavior through its perceived persuasive impact. It harasses the guard of the electorate, as it seeks endowment from voters at election period. Political advertising targets the audience for supporting the candidate through the articulate display of manifesto. According to Ozoh (2013), unique selling proposition is based on an identifiable, highly competitive advantage inherent in one brand and which can be asserted over and above competitors.

The message is to motivate the electorates and encourage them to make meaningful electoral decisions. Owuamalam (2014) posited that the message moves a considerable number of voters, who relate the proposal to their respective needs' satisfaction within the political constituency.

The channels for reaching the audience have changed because the new media of communication have taken the centre place of social interaction. It is through this interaction that the political information is exchanged with the electorates. The social media or the new media have been useful in political advertising. The emergence of social media in political advertising came during Barrack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign (Carr, 2008).

Information can be distributed at high speed, low cost and broad scope and as a result, there is egalitarian access to the production and the consumption of news (Prat and Stromberg, 2011).

Today's social media have made the world a "global village" with the quick transfer of information overriding the challenges of time and distance (Friedman,2007).

Facebook has gradually become an important means of influencing the society and this influence is based exclusively on its social aspects of interaction and participation. The popularity of getting political news from social media platforms, especially Facebook is getting increasing. A 2014 study showed that 62% users turn to Facebook to find political news. This social phenomenon allows for political information, true or not, spreading quickly and easily among networks.

Furthermore, Facebook is now encouraging political involvement by uniting like-minded people, reminding users to vote in elections and analyzing user's political affiliation data to find cultural similarities and differences.

Aside from this, Facebook has been used as a weapon to undermine and attack the image of opposing political parties in Nigeria and beyond. In successive elections in Nigeria, for instance, Facebook was a very potent tool and lethal weapon. There were releases in the form of videos, voice notes, headline and broadcasts that made and marred many political parties and individuals (Omojuwa, 2015). For example, in 2015, a publication on Senator Buriji Kashamu almost marred his political ambition and eventually his swearing in. A hate video was also broadcasted on both General Muhammadu Buhari and Senator Bola Tinubu. Ordinarily, these videos might have ended the political ambition of these individuals in some other climes. Facebook has become the most accessible source of information, particularly in the last two general elections (INEC, 2015).

Statement of the Research Problem
The use of social media as a formidable force for social engineering and political electioneering has continued to grow. The technology is participatory, interactive, and cost effective. This has made it the medium of the moment as far as political communication and participation is concerned. It however has its own challenges.

Kaplan and Itaenlein (2010) attribute the challenges of social media in political advertising or marketing to the disparity in the usage of social media, compared to opportunity. The challenges could be attributed to the lack of understanding on how to deal with issues such as negative publicity that can arise from user generated contents, loss of absolute control of their brand, legal and security issues, among others.

Information is passed freely and unregulated. The information can come in the form of broadcast on Facebook. The benefits of Facebook and other social media platforms notwithstanding; there appears to be the challenge of the absence of regulation. Often, posts on Facebook do not seem to reflect the truth and capable of misleading the citizens, while derailing the process. The study therefore seeks to interrogate social media as an emerging tool for political participation in Nigeria, with focus on Facebook.

Objectives of the study
The objectives of this study are: -
1. To find out how Facebook contributes to political participation in Nigeria.
2. To identify the challenges with the use of Facebook for political participation in Nigeria.
3. To identify the ways public participation through Facebook has contributed to the overall success of elections in Nigeria.
4. To determine the lessons learnt from the use of Facebook for political participation in Nigeria.

Conceptual Discussion
Social Media
When we talk of social media, we mean those Internet-based tools that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online. In other words, the social media are interactive web-based media platforms that offer citizens opportunity and place to connects, share opinions, experiences, views, contacts, knowledge, expertise, as well as other things like job and career tips. They

belong to a new genre of media that focuses on social networking that allows users to express themselves, interact with friends and share information with greater freedom as well as publish their views on issues on the World Wide Web (www).

Chatora, (2012) observed that it is this interactive or collaborative nature of these tools that makes them social. According to Ahlqvist et al (2008), social media refer to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based application that build on the ideological and technological foundation of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of users-generated content. Social media emerged with the advent of the internet and the World Wide Web. They are usually associated with the term "Web.2.0" which is used to describe websites that provide opportunity for users to interact with the sender of the message. Nwabueze, (2012) observed that "Web 2.0" refers to the state of the web from 2004 till date; a period when interactive websites emerged as opposed to "Web 1.0" which describes the state of the web prior to 2004. Web-based communities, social networking sites video-sharing sites, wikis, and blogs are among examples of web.2.0 sites (Allen, Ekwugha and Chukwulete 2011). Furthermore, social media depend on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms in which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated conduct. It introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities, and individuals (Kietzman & Kristopher, 2011).

Social media are different from traditional/industrial media in many aspects such as quality, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy, and permanence (Nigel, Graham, and Ant, 2012). There are many effects that arise from internet usage. According to Nielsan (2012), internet users continue to spend more time with social media site than any other type of site.

Mayfield (2008) describes these social media as online platforms that promote participation, openness, conversation, and connectedness. Nation (2010) sees them as social instruments of communication which are different from the conventional instruments like newspapers or magazines. They are online content, created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies to disseminate information across geographical boundaries, providing interaction among people (Adibe, Odoemelam and Orji 2012). They support democratization of knowledge and information, thereby making the people both information producers and consumers.

Political Participation

In a simple approach, political participation is citizens' involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives. It refers to various mechanisms through which the public express their political views and/or exercise their influences on the political process (Chatora 2012).

Abubakar (2011) sees it as the involvement of people, (not necessarily active) in any political process before a collective decision is arrived. In other words, political participation entails citizens' engagement in the discourse of socio-political and economic issues, which serve as yardsticks for choosing would-be leaders. It may also include assessing the capabilities of the incumbencies and advocating ways of ameliorating societal ills for a more prosperous country. Political participation includes such activities as political discourse, political campaigns, voters' registration, the actual voting, writing, and signing of petitions, attending of civil protests, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, political advocacy, monitoring and reporting of cases of violation of the electoral process such as fraud, rigging, intimidation, violence, inducements, underage voting, etc.

With the problem, coupled with that of insecurity and fear of possible outbreak of violence, citizens' active participation in the political process was/is heavily compromised. Good enough, the coming of social media in the last few years is fast changing the situation as we now resort to and participate in political discourse (Abubakar 2011). Mayfield (2010) attributes the social media capacity of boosting participation to its connectedness and textual/audio-visual characteristic appeal. No doubt, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, the 2go, GSM-SMS/calls, blackberry services, etc, have made political participation much easier, faster and even more cost effective than ever before.

Relationship Between Facebook and Politics

The arrival of Facebook has greatly enhanced all aspects of human communication. The new technology, due to the participatory, interactive, and cost-effective nature has barely made everyone who can use it a mass communicator. This brings to fruition, the prediction of Marshal McLuhan in 1964 that the world would someday become a "global village" where what happens in one part of the world would be known instantly and simultaneously worldwide. Today, one can stay right in his bedroom and access information, entertainment, events and enjoy full interaction with the world, just by processing a button. Writing on this development, Abide and Odoemelam (2010) observe that the new media of communication have in no small measure helped human society to be aware of each other. This agrees with the submissions of Baran (1998:121) that:

> *..as the media shrinks the world, people become increasingly involved in one another's live, and as people come to know more about others who were hitherto separated from them by distance, they will form new beneficial relationships.*

Baran's argument is relevant to the discourse as it draws attention to what Facebook is doing in human communication today; especially, as it concerns the fostering of relations and interaction among people. In many parts of the world today, individuals, groups, organisations and even nations are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by Facebook and other e-media platforms to mobilize millions of people to support and advance their course. In the political sphere, it has become a veritable tool for interacting and mobilizing citizens towards active participation in the political process and democratic projects. This agrees with the submission of Okoro and Dirim (2009) that it is through the media that people can participate freely in discussions relevant to the public good.

Adelabu (2011) noted that the success of President Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 and his eventual emergence as first black president of the United States was largely credited to his active use of Facebook to mobilize millions of volunteers and voters. Information sharing has greatly improved, allowing citizens to discuss ideas, post news, and ask questions and share links. With Facebook, politicians reach the masses with the aim of assessing the political atmosphere even before venturing into the campaign. Facebook is perhaps, one of the best tools to assess the popularity of a candidate, especially by the young people and craft the best language to use as campaign slogans. Facebook also provides a politician with the opportunity to be informally free with the public. This free connection through Facebook helps politicians to communicate their humor, indicating their approachability and accessibility to the public. With Facebook, politicians appeal to citizens and this makes them seem more personable and gives them advantage of keeping in constant contact with their supporters. Social media grant many people the chance to participate actively and get involved fully in political discourse by adding their voice on issues posted on social media sites. Facebook is a tool for creating Awareness and stirring participation in Election.

The 2023 General Elections in Nigeria and Use of Facebook

Since 2008 that Barrack Obama broke new grounds by using Facebook in his political campaigns in ways never seen before, many politicians have continued to fall along this line. Nigeria had her first real test of Facebook use for political purposes during the 2011, and later 2015 and 2019 general elections. INEC officials had in early March 2015, 2019, and 2023, welcomed the assistance of civil society volunteers with its Facebook account as well as new media situation room which received feedback from public and later began to provide real time information and answered constituent questions.

Nigeria politicians actively utilized Facebook in their campaigns. They sent bulk text and voice messages in unprecedented numbers. They made massive use of Facebook to win support and canvass for votes. President Jonathan as mentioned earlier declared intention to run for the presidency on Facebook and subsequently became the second most "liked" head of the state in the world after US President Barack Obama (fanpagelist.com). Text, photos, pictures details and videos from polling stations were quickly uploaded to Facebook. (Omenugha, 2015) observed that the massive use of social media culminated in the success of the election acclaimed the freest and fairest in the history of the country. Meanwhile, this disagrees with the observations of Adeyanju and Harana (2016) who believed that the technology did the nation greater harm than good as it provided avenue to disseminate provocative and inciting messages that eventually

precipitated the post-election violence and tensions witnessed in many parts of the country, particularly, in the north.

Empirical Studies

A 2018 study by Amadi Uchechi examined the impact of new media on political advertising during the 2015 general elections in Imo State. In particular, the study sought to determine the impact of social media on political advertising in the 2015 governorship election in Imo State; the nature of political messages needed on social media; ascertain the challenges of political advertising on social media, as well as to determine the effects of social media advertising messages on the voting behaviour of the electorates in the 2015 governorship election in Imo State. To achieve this, the study used the survey method, with the questionnaire as research instrument. Through random sampling, 400 respondents were selected using Taro Yamani's method and the questionnaire. The major finding revealed that the electorate in Imo State was well exposed to political advertising, but that the new media were not the most effective channels for political advertising in the 2015 general election in Imo State.

According to the study, new media political campaigns did not influence the electoral behaviour and voting pattern of Imo electorates in the 2015 governorship elections. The study therefore concluded that the new media were not effective in political advertising and did not have much impact during the 2015 general elections.

The study recommended that political advertising agencies should ensure that the advertisement on the new media reflects the basic needs of the people so as to draw public attention and motivate them to make favourable voting decisions. Anchored on the Agenda setting and Technological Determinism theories, the study further recommended that politicians should use political advertisement as a way of highlighting their unique selling points, as it is the most captivating message in advertisement.

Another study by Uwaje Esther in 2017 examined the influence of Facebook advertising on Madonna University students' (Okija Campus) patronage of telecommunication data bundles, using Airtel Nigeria as a case study. The study emerged from the frequent patronage of Airtel Nigeria data services by students of Madonna University (Okija Campus), despite other mind-blowing packages and bonuses provided by other telecommunication service providers. The study was aimed at ascertaining the factors that influence Madonna University students' patronage of Airtel services. The study was based on the Uses and Gratification theory. The Survey method was adopted for this study, using a multi-stage sampling technique in which faculties, departments and levels were randomly selected and research instruments purposively administered to the respondents. The study had two (2) research instruments: structured questionnaire and personal interview. The survey received a 97.7 percent response rate from a sample of 254 of the 260 drawn from the population. Responses were also gotten from in-depth interview on 3 purposively selected course representatives of Madonna University. Data gathered were analyzed using simple tables, frequencies, and percentages. Chi-square test was also conducted on the hypothesis statements.

Findings from the study revealed that network quality and wide coverage were the major factors that influence students of Madonna University in their patronage of Airtel data services. It also revealed that social media is a veritable means for advertising, especially, when such ads are targeted towards youths/students.

Theoretical Framework
Uses and Gratification Theory

This theory is associated with the works of Elihu Katz, Jay Blunter and Michael Gurevitch (1974). It belongs to the limited or indirect effect theory of mass communication. The Uses and Gratification Theory (a limited effect theory) is a popular approach to understanding mass communication. The theory places more focus on the consumer or audience, instead of actual message itself by asking "what people do with media" rather than "what media do for the people" (Katz, 1999:197 in Anaeto etal 2018). It assumes that members of the public are not passive but take an active rate in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives. The theory also holds audience responsible for choosing the media to meet its needs. The approach suggests that people use the media to fulfill specific gratifications.

Blumler and Kalz's take a non-prescriptive and non-predictive perspective on media effects. They postulate that individual mix and match uses goals, according to specific context, needs, social background and so on. Thus, they are seen as active participants in the media consumption process. Uses and Gratification theory suggests that media users play an active part in the communication process and are goals oriented in their media use. The theorists say that a media user seeks out a media source that best fulfills the need of the users. This theory would then imply that the media compete against other information sources for their viewer's gratification of being able to interact and express their opinions and views on issues.

The theory, according to Anaete, Onabanjo and Osifeso (2008) is concerned with what people do with media instead of what media do to people. The assumption is that people influence the effects media have on them. That is to say that Uses and Gratification theory take a more humanistic approach to media use and effects. It assumes members of the audience are not passive but play active roles in interpreting and integrating media to fulfill specific gratifications. Adeyanja and Haruna (2011) note that the main thrust of the theory is that audience members have certain needs which make them to be selectively exposed to, attend to, and retain media messages because of the perceived gratifications derivable from such messages.

Thus, this theory emphasizes the fact that people are important in the process of communication because they choose contents and make meanings out of the media (Akinwumi, 2011). Applying this Uses and Gratification theory to this study, users of social media are intentional seekers of such messages. They can select and use the technology in a way that suits their purpose. Thus, the audience is active and not passive. Similarly, political candidates are also able to select and use media campaigns and other electioneering activities.

The Technological Determinism Theory

Technological Determinism states that media technology shapes how we as individuals in the society think, feel, act and how they operate as we move from one technological age to another. This is to say that: we learn and feel and think the way we do because of the messages we receive through the current technology that is available. The radio, for instance, requires us to only listen and develop our sense of hearing. On the other hand, television engages both our hearing and visual senses. We then transfer those developed senses into our everyday lives, and we want to use them again. The medium is then our message.

Technological Determinism theory, on the other hand, was formulated by Marshal McLuhan in 1964. The basic premise of technological determinism theory is that the media are extensions of the human body; it holds that the media not only alter their environment, but the very message they convey. The media bring new perceptual habits while their technologies create new environments. The theory states that technology, especially the new media, decisively shape how individuals think, feel and act and how societies organize themselves and operate.

The relevance of the theory to the study cannot be overemphasized. Since the new media can be used to shape people's behavior; it goes to say that political parties in Nigeria can use the new media to influence the populace concerning their political activities. Thus, the internet, GSM, etc, can be used to carry out political campaigns and other political activities.

Methodology

The research design for this study is survey. According to Tejumaiye (2003), the descriptive survey method describes the population being studied. Survey method is aimed at collecting samples from population to examine the distribution incidence and interaction of the phenomenon in the study. The study used survey research method, because it provides equal chance for the people to participate in the study and give out their opinion on a given issue of public interest. The purpose is usually to describe systematically the facts, qualities or characteristics of a given population, events, or areas of interest concerning the problem under investigation.

Population of the study

The population of study consists of students both male, female, adult and the rationale for sampling this population is to represent a cross-section of the people who understand and make use of Facebook for political participation. This study focused of students of Imo State Polytechnic, Umuagwo (Orlu campus).

Our choice of the students as the focal population is because they are active users of the Facebook platform. According to the department of Exams and Records, the total population of students in Orlu campus of the Polytechnic is 275.

Sampling and sampling technique
To achieve the aim and objectives of the study, a sample size of 175 respondents was selected to participate in the study. Also, the study adopted the purposive sampling technique. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where the units or subjects that are investigated are based on judgment of the researcher. Therefore, the ND2 students of the polytechnic were purposively selected to represent a cross-selection of Facebook users in Nigeria. The main instrument for data collection for this study was the structured questionnaire.

Data presentation and analysis
Table 1: Which of the social media platforms do you mostly see information about politics?

Social media platforms where information about politics is mostly seen	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Facebook	92	92%
Twitter	2	2%
Instagram	1	1%
Other, Specify	5	5%
Total	100	100%

Table 2: Are you influenced to participate in political activities because of political information you get on Facebook?

Participation on political information you get on Facebook?	**Respondents**	**Percentage%**
Yes	73	73%
No	9	9%
May be	10	10%
I don't know	8	8%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Table 3: Do you think that the use of Facebook for political participation during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria was abused?

Respondents' opinion of the use of Facebook for political participation during the 2015 general elections	**Respondents**	**Percentage%**
Yes	43	43%
No	57	57%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Table 4: What challenge did you observe of Facebook during 2023 general elections?

Defect observed of Facebook during 2023 general elections	Respondents	Percentage%
Defamation	9	9%
Vulgar abuse	73	73%
Deception	10	10%
All of the above	7	7%
None of the above	1	1%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Table 5: What are the observable factors that influenced public use of Facebook for political participation?

Observed factors that influence public use of Facebook for political participation	Respondents	Percentage%
Ease of use	5	5%
Speed	4	4%
Reach	10	10%
All of the above	79	79%
I don't know	2	2%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Table 6: Where was Facebook's impact mostly felt in the 2015 general elections?

Where Facebook impact was mostly felt in the 2015 general elections	Respondent	Percentage%
Campaign	21	21%
Polling procedures	19	19%
Both	57	57%
I don't know	3	3%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Table 7: How effective do you think that public participation through Facebook contributed to the overall performance of the 2015 general elections?

Public participation through Facebook contributed to the overall performance of the 2015 general elections?	Respondents	Percentage%
Very effective	17	17%
Effective	53	53%
Not effective	7	7%
Partially effective	19	19%
Indifferent	4	4%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Table 8: Do you agree that coverage and reporting of election result during the 2015 general elections were more effective in Facebook than other media?

Opinion on the effectiveness of coverage and reporting of election results compared to other media	Respondents	Percentage%
Yes	27	27%
No	60	60%
May be	6	6%
I don't know	7	7%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Table 9: How do you think people perceive the use of Facebook in political participation during the 2015 general elections?

General perception of the public on the 2015 general elections	Respondents	Percentage%
Effective and satisfactory	10	10%
Effective but not satisfactory	65	65%
Not effective	2	2%
Not Satisfactory	18	18%
I don't know	5	5%
Total	**100**	**100%**

Discussion of findings

Findings showed that Facebook played a major role in mobilizing the support of the electorate. It was however found that mobilization of Facebook was limited to the people who had internet access or smart phones with internet applications.

Politicians/political parties used the social media to reach out to the voters and canvass for support. The electorates used Facebook to report their experiences and receive election related information, while the civil society organizations used the social media to mobilize and educate the electorate, as well as to cover and report their observation of the electoral process.

Findings from the study show that majority of the respondents frequently see information about politics on Facebook. Ease of use, speed and wide reach were the observable factors that influenced public use of Facebook for political participation in 2023. From the findings, campaign was where Facebook's impact was mostly felt in the 2023 general elections. The fact that Facebook was put to effective use by the political actors and their supporters cannot be over emphasized. However, findings from the study suggest that there were series of abuse of the platform. Participants' opinion is that while the 2023 elections were delivered, the outcome was not satisfactory.

Conclusion

Social media platforms, especially Facebook serve as tools for engaging and interacting with the public, organizing, and mobilizing supporters, gathering voter, campaign data, teaching the youth how to vote, the use of card readers and other electoral devices. While the use of new media in 2023 general elections clearly provided important advantages to candidates, citizens and the public sphere also benefited by having an easy method of acquiring diverse information on the election, a platform for organizing and gaining resources for meaningful participation in democracy and a means to engage in public dialogue and interact with candidates.

However, citizens should remain conscious of candidate's underlying motives for using Facebook to ultimately gain enough votes to win the elections. Facebook has impacted on political communication and has provided effective means for political mobilization.

Recommendations
From the findings of the study, it is recommended that:
1) There is need for periodic public enlightenment programmes on the use of Facebook and other social media platforms for political purposes, especially among youths.
2) There is the need for subtle regulation of the social media, with the view to checking abuse.
3) The National Assembly should consider amending relevant laws guiding media practice in Nigeria to strengthen them to effectively monitor the use of social media.

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