

INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH' IN DELTA STATE IN THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This research aimed to assess how social media impacts the political engagement of young people in Delta State during the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria. The study was initiated due to the belief that social media may have both positive and negative effects when used by young people, particularly during elections or protests. The research employed a survey design. The sample size was 384, and the sampling strategies used were cluster sampling and simple random sampling. The analysis revealed that 53.6% of respondents spent over seven hours on social media during the election, with Twitter (now X) being the most popular medium. The implication as found was that youth' participation in the 2023 general election in Nigeria was influenced positively by social media. Nevertheless, it was recommended, among others, that using social media for political participation in Nigeria should be done with decorum and restraint because of the nature of politics, especially, campaigns.

Keywords: Social media, political participation, youth, Delta State, 2023 election, Nigeria.

Introduction

The world has witnessed a decrease in the number of voter turnouts over the last one hundred years (Fountain, 2017). With the invention of digital technology such as social media, citizens, especially the youth, now have the tools to engage in participatory democracy. Social media have now become another factor that influences the political participation of the citizenry in the electioneering process. The social media, according to Dollarhide and Drury (2023), cited in Nnaane (2023), are a computer-mediated technology used in the exchange of ideas, messages, and information through online communities and networks. Lindgren

(2017), supports this by noting that the interactive and ubiquitous nature of social media is what has made them to be attractive for political activities. Globally, today, there are well over 4.7 billion users of the different social media platforms. According to Kemp (2023), the top ten social media platforms in terms of user-base are as follows: Messenger (931 million); YouTube (2.51 billion); WhatsApp (2 billion); Facebook (2.96 billion); Instagram (2 billion); Telegram (700 million); TikTok (1.05 billion); Douyin (715 million); WeChat (1.31 billion); and Snapchat (635 million).

Social media have permeated almost all the strata of the information society and

have enhanced the process of democratisation and political consciousness. Social media and their special features such as creation, connection, collaboration, and conversation have made citizens to take part in civic and political engagements; made the public sphere to be more democratised and livelier and have also broken the monopoly of information brokerage, especially breaking news in the world.

Further, Social media facilitates the generation, dissemination, and exchange of political material on platforms and networks that encourage engagement and collaboration. They have seen substantial change in the last two decades and have consistently expanded in novel, sometimes unexpected directions. Social media has a substantial influence on democratic governance and political habits. They have made substantial alterations to the functioning of organisations and the methods through which political leaders convey messages. Social media have transformed the political and mass-media system, reshaped the roles of professionals and people, transformed electoral processes, and changed how citizens engage in politics (Bello and Kolawole-Ismail, 2017; Madueke, Nwosu, Ogonnaya, Anumadu, and Okeke, 2017; and Matthes, 2022). Against the backdrop of the foregone, the 2023 presidential election will go down as the most keenly-contested in the country's electoral history. According to Nnaane (2023):

The 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria, held on February 25, 2023, is considered one of the most fiercely contested elections and has been viewed by both domestic and international observers as the worst in Nigeria's history since the reintroduction of democracy in 1999. Among the 18 political parties in the election, just three were considered

significant candidates, while one was considered less competitive. Here are the three top candidates, their political affiliations, and the outcomes: Ahmed Bola Tinubu from the All Progressives Congress (APC) received 8,794,726 votes, which accounts for 36.1% of the total votes. Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) secured 6,984,520 votes, representing 29.07%, while Peter Obi from the Labour Party (LP) obtained 6,101,533 votes, equivalent to 25.40%. Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso, the fourth candidate representing the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), received 1,496,687 votes, accounting for 6.23% of the total.

The focus of this study thus, is to evaluate the influence of social media on the political participation of the youth in Delta State in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Before the fourth Industrial Revolution, signposted by advances in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and especially the evolution of the social media, political participation in the electioneering process was done through the conventional media and through rallies. Political parties often carried out massive campaigns through rallies mainly to sell their manifestoes and their respective candidates to the electorate. So political mobilisation tactics and strategies, according to Mmugusuul (2015), involved campaign rallies, town-hall meetings, door-to-door campaign, and press briefings, among others. All these were done to engender inclusive participation, especially among the youth who constitute the bulk of the electorate. It is important to note that these strategies are still being used today. However, with the emergence of digital technologies, and their flexible nature,

have the social media become a game-changer in engendering political participation; to what extent do the youth use the social media in political participation, and what is the extent of influence of social media in the political participation of the youth in the electioneering process. The above posers constitute the problem of the study.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of this study is to evaluate the influence of social media on the political participation of the youth in Delta State in the 2023 presidential election, but specifically, it is to:

1. Determine the extent of use of the social media in political participation of the youth in Delta State in the 2023 Presidential election Nigeria.
2. Ascertain the social media platforms used most by the youth in Delta State in the 2023 Presidential election Nigeria.
3. Find out the extent of influence of social media in the political participation of the youth in Delta State in the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria.

Research Questions

These research questions will guide the study:

1. What was the extent of the use of social media in the political participation of the youth in Delta State in the 2023 Presidential election Nigeria?
2. What were the social media platforms used most in the political participation of the youth in Delta State in the 2023 Presidential election Nigeria?

3. What is the extent of influence of social media in the political participation of the youth in Delta State in the 2023 Presidential election Nigeria?

Literature Review

Conceptual Clarifications

The following concepts will be clarified: (1) Social Media (2) Political Participation

Social Media

Social media are online digital platforms that are gaining popularity due to their user-friendly features. Social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, X (previously Twitter), and others provide people with the opportunity to interact with one another regardless of geographical boundaries. Social media have made the entire globe easily accessible. Youth are among the primary consumers of social media. Dollarhide (2021) describes social media as computer-based technology that facilitates the interchange of ideas, views, and information via the creation of virtual networks and communities. Social media platforms are Internet-based systems that allow users to quickly communicate material electronically. The content include personal information, documents, movies, and images, among other items. Users can use social media using various devices such as computers, tablets, smartphones, and internet-based programmes or apps.

Social media enable individuals to rapidly and effectively distribute material in real-time. Although many individuals now use smartphones to access social media, these digital platforms originated on PCs. Prior to the development of mobile versions (Hudson, 2020). Hudson (2020) emphasises that social media's uniqueness lies in its vast reach and generally unrestricted nature. Although social media firms may restrict content showing violence or nudity, there are less

constraints on sharing content compared to traditional mass communication platforms such as newspapers, radio, and television. Everyone with Internet connection may create a social media account to share material with everyone who sees their page or profile.

Political Participation

Political participation encompasses many acts in which individuals articulate their views on governance and attempt to influence choices that impact their lives. Individuals have several avenues to engage in politics, such as voting, communicating with public officials, participating in campaigns, seeking and maintaining public office, demonstrating, and offering voluntary services. Voting is the primary method of engaging in political activities. Voter registration and turnout are affected by legal and structural issues, voter qualifications, the nature of the election, and voters' excitement for a certain campaign (Said and Bashir, 2019). Political participation is a significant political subject that reflects people's engagement in political matters within their community. This interest might manifest in several ways, including support, rejection, criticism, or demonstration. Youth political involvement, especially in developing nations, is crucial for instigating political transformation. The youth make up the majority of the population in these nations, yet their voter turnout in elections is low (Alelaimat, 2019; and Kaskazi and Kitzie, 2023)..

Empirical Reviews on the Social Media and Political Participation

A plethora of empirical studies have been done on the link between social media and political participation in Nigeria and also globally. Effing, Hillegersberg, and Huibers (2011), discovered that while social media did not influence political participation in the

local elections that took place in Netherlands between 2010, the same social media contributed significantly to more political participation in the general election in the same 2010. This they attributed to more aggressive social media engagements by the politicians. Alodat, Al-Quoran, and Hamoud (2023), in their study, discovered that social media had considerable influence on the political participation of the youth; it was also discovered that gender had a strong effect on social media and political participation in Jordan through its power of moderation.

Also, Stanley (2017), found out that during the 2016 presidential election in the United States of America, there was positive statistical significance between the use of social media and political participation and that it was also discovered that this also translated to political efficacy among the youth in East Carolina, the study area. Kamiloglu and Erdogan (2014), studies Facebook and political participation in Turkey and discovered that demographic factors led to different dimensions of influence. Further, Omotayo and Folorunsho (2020), studied the use of social media and political participation among the youth in Oyo State, Nigeria. They discovered that social media were widely-used by the youth in political participation, and the Facebook was the most-used social media platform, followed by WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter. Others who have studied the relationship between social media and political participation are: Bello and Kolawole-Ismail (2017); Madueke, Nwosu, Ogonnaya, Anumadu, and Okeke (2017); as well as Kashyap and Jonjua (2020).

Theoretical Framework

The study is based on two theories: the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) and the Public Sphere Theory. TAM was created by Fred Davis and Richard Bagozzi in 1989 as an expansion of Ajzen and Fishbein's

Theory of Reasoned Action. The idea posits that several factors influence consumers' decisions about the adoption and utilisation of new technology. The factors are Perceived Usefulness (PU), referring to the conviction that using a specific technology could enhance job performances, and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), referring to the belief that using a new technology will be stress-free. The open, democratic, and flexible structure of social media has made it the preferred medium for young people, particularly for socio-political mobilisation. For the Public Sphere Theory, Jürgen Habermas, a German philosopher, initially invented the phrase Public Sphere Theory. He described the Public Sphere as a state consisting of private individuals coming together as a public entity to express the societal demands to the state. Habermas' 1989 work "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" Habermas presented his well-known thesis regarding the supposed decline of the public sphere, as it transitioned from critical discussion in the 19th century to primarily positive publicity in this century. The "public sphere" is commonly understood as the social arena where diverse perspectives are shared, issues of common interest are debated, and collaborative solutions are devised through communication. The public sphere is the primary space for societal communication. The public sphere notion has been utilised in both political and cultural communication within communication studies.

Habermas (1989) as referenced by Nnaane and Olise (2020) stated that the public realm needs certain methods to spread knowledge and impact its recipients. Habermas' concept of the public sphere is the primary and crucial factor in attempts to classify the development of public views and the validation of state and democracy in post-World War II Western societies. The work is

widely recognised as the standard but has substantial obstacles because of the changing nature of the public sphere concept. It follows therefore that the electorate, especially the youth use the social media for various dimensions of political participation such as political campaign, political advocacy, engagement with politicians, monitoring and reporting the electoral process, and blogging, amongst others.

Methodology

The study utilised a survey, a research design typically employed in mass communication (Ha, Fang, Henize, Park, Stana, and Zhang, 2015). The objective of a survey is to gather a substantial amount of data from a sample of respondents that may be applied to the entire population. The projected population of Delta State in 2022, is 5,636,100 (www.citypopulation.de). Following the above, the sample size was 384, based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, which states that for populations of 1,000,000 and above, a research should have a sample size of 384. Cluster sampling and simple random sampling approaches were used for sampling. For administrative convenience and wide-range of data distribution, Delta State was clustered based on its three Senatorial districts. These are Delta Central, with headquarters at Warri; Delta North, with headquarters at Asaba; and Delta South, with headquarters at Oleh. Thereafter, youth' living, working and schooling at the administrative headquarters of each of the Senatorial districts with background knowledge of the variable in this study were randomly selected. Also, while the questionnaire is the research instrument, the methods of analysing data were frequency tables, percentages, and charts.

Data Presentation and Analysis

384 questionnaires were distributed, and 374 retrieved, accounting for a 95% response rate, were returned. However, the gender,

age-range, and level of education of the respondents are presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Demographic Data of Respondents

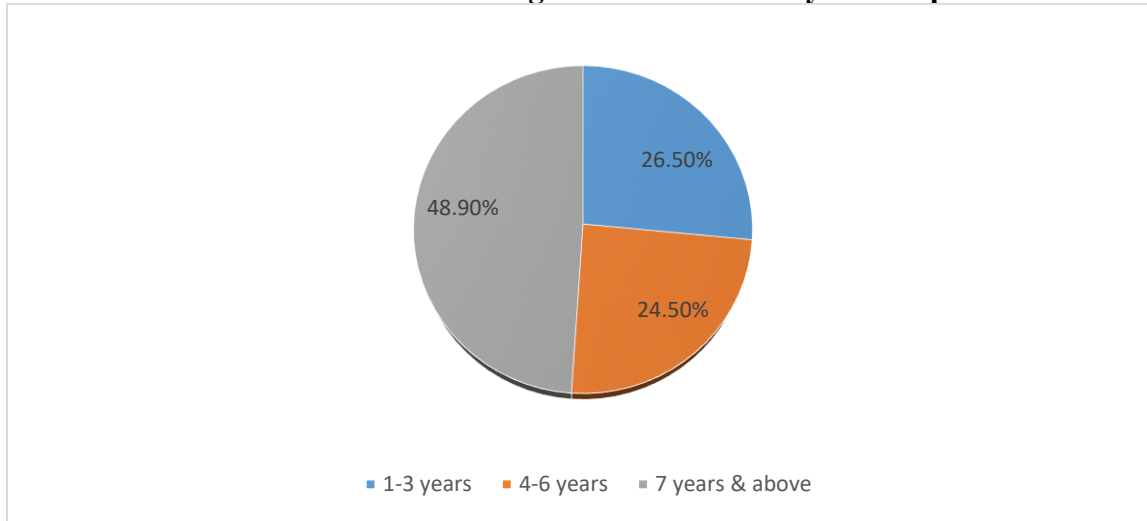
Variable	Respondents	Percentage
Gender		
Male	154	56.6%
Female	120	43.4%
Total	374	100%
Age-range		
18-22	103	37.9%
23-27	97	35.7%
28-32	70	25.7%
33 & above	4	0.7%
Total	374	100%
Education		
Undergraduate	147	54.04%
BA/B.Sc	101	37.13%
MA/M.Sc	22	8.09%
PhD	4	0.74%
Total	374	100%

From Table 2, the male respondents are clearly more than the female; but this does not reflect the true picture of the gender distribution of Asaba residents. As of April 2023, the men had 43.35% of the population, while the women had 56.65% (www.bdeex.com). For the age-range, the youth between the age-range of 23-27 are more in number, justifying the findings of the Delta State Youth Policy (2020). Concerning level of education, this reflects in the fact that Delta is among the leading educationally-developed states in Nigeria. So a good of number of the youth' are either undergraduates or graduates, some holding postgraduate degrees.

Research Question 1: What was the extent of the use of social media in the political participation of the youth' in Delta State in the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria?

The first research question was based on the fact that the respondents were already social media-literate and so what was imperative was to measure their degree of usage in the Presidential election. It is important to note that all the respondents said they took keen interests in the election. However, the respondents were asked first, how long they have been using the social media. Below are their responses:

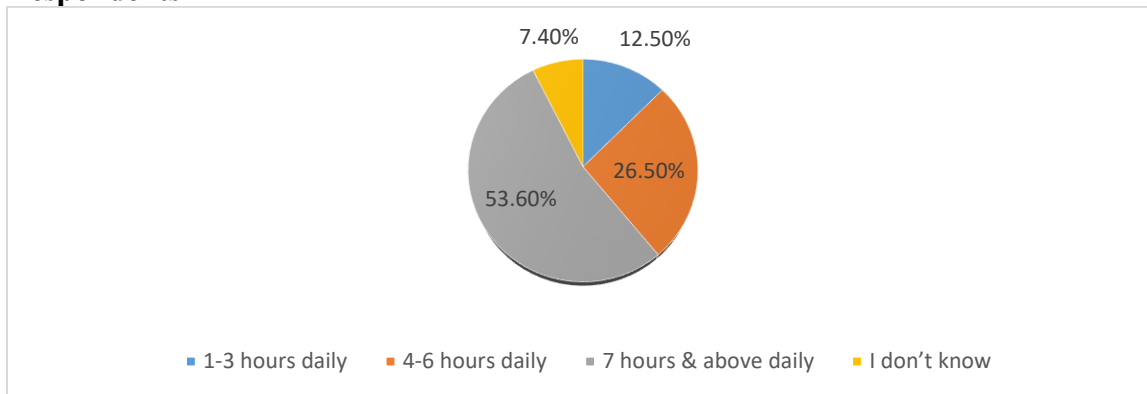
Chart 1: The Number of Years of Using the Social Media by the Respondents



From Chart 1, it is clear that a majority of the respondents have been using the social media for seven years and above. It will be correct

to state that some of them equally used the social media in the 2019 Presidential elections in Nigeria.

Chart 2: Frequency of Using the Social Media during the 2023 Presidential Election by the Respondents



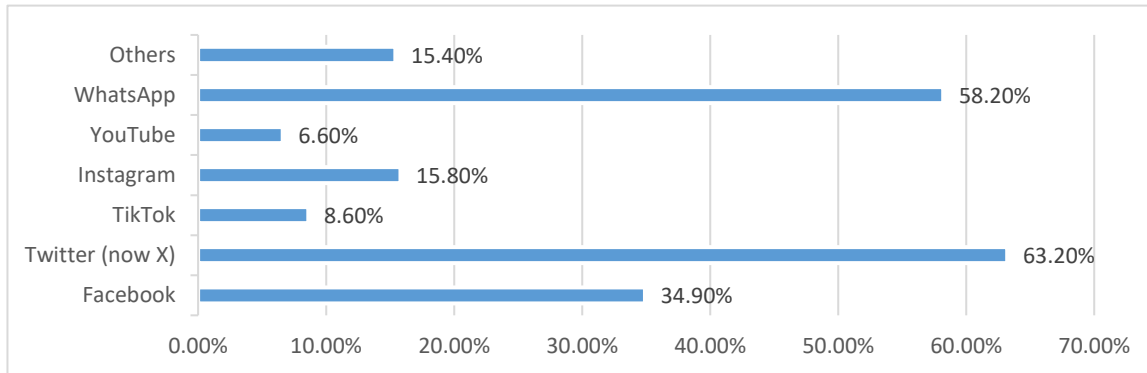
From Chart 2, a majority of the respondents spent an average of 7 hours and above daily on the social media during the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria. This could be attributed to the emergence of a formidable third force- the “Obidient Movement”, which dominated the social media space. The social media thus, became a highly-contested arena and a battleground in the election.

Research Question 2: What were the social media platforms used most in the political

participation of the youth in Delta State in the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria?

This research question was aimed at making the respondents to mention in the order of frequent usage, the social media platforms used the most during the Presidential election. It follows therefore that they were given the freedom to pick more than one option, if applicable. Below are their responses:

Chart 3: The Social Media Platforms Used the Most during the 2023 Presidential Election by the Respondents



Although, the number of WhatsApp users in Nigeria is by far higher than those who use Twitter (now X), more respondents used the latter the most than the former during the Presidential election. One major reason could be that WhatsApp is restricted to contacts of the user as well as the groups he/she belong to; but Twitter (now X) is more open. Even non-followers of a Twitter account can still get political messages. It is also the most popular platform for breaking news even by the media. Moreover, WhatsApp, though, generally considered and categorised as social media, is not but an Instant messenger.

Research Question 3: What is the extent of influence of the social media in the political participation of the youth in Delta State in the 2023 Presidential elections in Nigeria?

This research question sought to determine if social media platforms had influence in the political participation of the youth in Delta State during the Presidential election, and the extent of such. Their responses are presented below:

Table 2: Respondents’ views on if Social Media were effective in Political Participation during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

Items	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	147	54%
No	98	36%
I don’t know	29	10%
	374	100%

From Table 2, it is clear that the influence of the social media in inducing political participation, cannot be glossed over. In Nigeria for instance, the “Obidient Movement” were initially dismissed as a bunch of social media mobs and trolls who did not know that polling units were not on the social media. But the outcome of the

election proved that online mobilisation and participation can translate to a positive offline gain. For the sake of clarity and measurement, their responses are interpreted as follows: (a) A large extent refers to active social media campaign for one’s candidate and political party including voting; (b) Some extent refers to moderate social media

campaign including voting; while (c) Little extent means expressing sympathy and

support on the social media without voting. Their responses are presented below:

Table 3: Respondents’ views on the extent of Social Media Influence in Political Participation and 2023 Presidential Elections

Items	Frequency	Percentage
A large extent	83	56.5%
Some extent	55	37.4%
Little extent	09	6.1%
	374	100%

From the views of respondents in Table 3, the use of the social media in political participation has considerable influence.

Discussion of Findings

This study aimed to assess how social media impacts the political participation of youth in Delta State during the 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria. In the area of politics, social media have reshaped the strategies of political engagements, making candidates and political parties to maintain presence on various social media platforms. As a result, findings from the research show that a majority of the respondents spent seven hours and above daily on the social media during the respective Presidential election, and that a majority of them were below 30 years, justifying the work of Kashyap and Jonjua (2020), who found similar connection in their research in New Delhi, India. The fact that the respondents are either graduates or postgraduates supports the Technology Acceptance Model, in the sense that their level of education makes them to be exposed to new forms of media, making them to find it convenient and easier to use for political education, information, participation, and mobilisation.

Concerning the number of years spent as a social media user, while a majority of the respondents have spent seven years and

above. Further findings on this point from the respondents indicate that Twitter was used more for political participation during the 2023 Presidential election, followed by WhatsApp. This is in spite of the fact over 90 million Nigerians use WhatsApp, while over 4.95 million Nigerians use Twitter (www.clickatell.com; and Kemp, 2023).

Concerning if social media have influence on political participation in the 2023 Presidential election as well as the extent of influence, the findings from the respondents, corroborate the views of Bello and Kolawole-Ismail (2017); Madueke, Nwosu, Ogonnaya, Anumadu, and Okeke (2017); as well as Alodat, Al-Quoran, and Hamoud (2023), who found considerable empirical evidence that social media have influence on political participation in elections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubting the fact that the acceptability, wide-usage, and popularity of social media globally have found even more expression in politics. The electorate, who are mostly the youth, because of how savvy they are with social media now use these digital tools in engaging political participation and also mobilisation. As technologies continue to advance, social media will continue to have more influence either negatively or positively in elections in Nigeria and

globally. The following are the recommended in view of the results of the study.

1. Using social media for political participation in Nigeria should be done with decorum and restraint because of the toxic nature of politics, especially, campaigns.
2. Technology giants who provide the social media platforms must bring out

the rules of engagements during election in Africa in order to curb fake news and hate speech.

3. Professional pollsters should conduct scientific research into how the use of social media in political participation can deepen electoral democracy in Nigeria.

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