

The Role of Social Media in Political Participation and Activism in Edo State, Nigeria



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Abstract

This study examines the role of social media in political participation and activism in the September 2024 Governorship election in Edo State, Nigeria. It highlights the spectrum of political activities, from traditional engagement methods like attending political meetings to modern forms such as digital activism via social media platforms. Deploying a survey research design, the article investigates how platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have transformed political discourse, information dissemination, and citizen mobilization. To have a detailed understanding of the subject matter of discourse the researcher reviewed relevant literature in the area of the study and accordingly passed their robust comments on them. Furthermore, it utilized the social media political participation model as propounded by Johanness Knoll, Jorg Mathes, and Raffael in 2020, which serves as the framework of analysis. The theory opined that social media can only encourage participation when several subsequent requirements are satisfied, and the population of the study is the eligible voters in two selected local government areas in each of the senatorial districts that make up Edo State. Taro Yamani's scientific approach was used to obtain an optimal sample size of 400. The findings revealed that social media significantly shapes public opinion, influences political decision-making processes, and enhances the effectiveness of political news dissemination. However, it also identifies challenges such as the spread of misinformation and the formation of echo chambers. Through comprehensive analysis, this study provides insights into the dynamics of political engagement in the digital age, contributing to the broader discourse on the interplay between technology and democratic processes. Arising from the above, the study recommended the need for improved digital literacy, particularly in rural areas, to combat the spread of misinformation, which can undermine the democratic process, leveraging social media as tools for civic education.

Keywords: *Activism, Democracy, Political Participation, Politics, Social Media.*

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Introduction

Political participation encompasses a spectrum of activities through which individuals express their involvement in the political life of their community or nation. It goes beyond the act of voting and extends to various forms of engagement, such as attending political meetings, joining political parties, participating in protests or demonstrations, engaging in discussions, and staying informed about current events (Madueke, Nwosu, Ogbonnaya & Anumadu, 2017). In essence, political participation reflects the active contribution of citizens to the decision-making processes that govern their lives. The significance of political participation lies in its ability to foster a sense of civic responsibility, promote inclusivity, and strengthen the democratic fabric. When citizens actively participate, it enhances the legitimacy of political institutions, ensures the representation of diverse voices, and contributes to the overall well-functioning of democratic governance (Madueke *et al.*, 2017; Keith, 2023).

Further to the above, governance is one of the nuances of political participation, which is a vital tool of democracy. Governance refers to the system or structure of rules, practices, and institutions that help shape the decision-making and administration of an organization, country, or society. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), governance encompasses decision-making, accountability, transparency, rule of law. Furthermore, effective governance and political participation are essential for a healthy democracy, promoting citizen engagement, accountability, and responsiveness. At the heart of political participation is the new media or social media, which plays a significant role in promoting governance by enhancing transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement (Adesanmi, 2022; UNDP, 1997).

Activism, on the other hand, is a more targeted and often impassioned form of political engagement. Activists are individuals or groups who actively advocate for a particular cause, often challenging existing norms, policies, or power structures (Benneth & Segerberg, 2013). Activism can take various forms, including advocacy, protests, civil disobedience, and lobbying. It is fueled by a passion for social justice, human rights, environmental concerns, or other issues that activists perceive as demanding change (Keith, 2023). Activists play a crucial role in pushing for societal progress and holding those in power accountable. They serve as catalysts for change, bringing attention to issues that may be overlooked and challenging the status quo. Activism contributes to the evolution of social and political norms, prompting discussions that can lead to policy reforms and a more equitable distribution of power (Keith, 2023).

The above-mentioned phenomena hold significant roles in modern democracy, presupposing that citizens in a democratic system should have ample opportunities within a liberalized polity to express their desires and preferences in political decision-making. The heartbeat of a vibrant democracy lies in the active engagement of its citizenry, and the orchestrating force behind this vibrancy is the critical facet of citizen mobilization. This process stands as a linchpin for fostering a robust democratic system, particularly when the political arena is enlivened by the pulsating rhythms of elections and the multifaceted activities of governance (Bello & Kolawole-Ismail, 2017). It is within the context of citizen mobilization that the democratic ethos truly comes to life, as individuals are summoned to actively participate, shaping the trajectory of their political landscape. The advent of the Internet and the proliferation of social media have

introduced new avenues and platforms for mobilizing citizens. Scholars argue that leveraging this digital medium can enhance democratic processes (Madueke *et al.*, 2017).

A burgeoning population of tech-savvy citizens, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram serve as vibrant spaces for political discussions, information dissemination, and civic engagement. The immediacy and accessibility of these platforms have broken down traditional communication barriers, allowing individuals to actively participate in political conversations from the comfort of their own devices (Ofei, Agbukor, Okunorobo, & Eseoghene 2024). One of the primary functions of social media in the political landscape is information dissemination. Citizens now have real-time access to political news, candidate updates, and policy discussions. This accessibility has facilitated political mobilization, as online communities form around shared ideologies and causes (Loader, Vromen & Xenos 2014). Social media influencers and activists play a crucial role in rallying support for political movements, transcending geographical limitations and fostering a sense of collective participation (Ofei *et al.*, 2024).

In contemporary society, the lines between political participation and activism often blur, with many individuals engaging in both. Social media and digital platforms have further amplified the reach and impact of political participation and activism, allowing citizens to connect, organize, and mobilize on a global scale. It has emerged as a transformative force that has reshaped the landscape of political engagement and activism. The influence of social media platforms on the political landscape is undeniable. Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become integral components of political discourse, and their impact on information dissemination, citizen mobilization, and the formation of online communities in Edo State requires thorough examination. This study delves into the intricate interplay between social media platforms and the political discourse of our times, with a specific focus on analyzing the patterns of political participation and activism in the Edo State Governorship election that was held in September 2024.

Statement of the Problem

The dynamic nature of political participation and activism in modern democracies has become a factor of immeasurable enthusiasm in the minds of researchers (Madueke *et al.*, 2017). The multifaceted nature of political engagement, encompassing both traditional avenues and the burgeoning influence of social media, prompts an exploration of the challenges and opportunities posed by this paradigm shift. Despite the inherent significance of political participation and activism in fostering a vibrant democratic system, questions arise regarding the potential ramifications and complexities introduced by the intersection of these phenomena with the digital realm (Ofei *et al.*, 2024).

The pivotal role of citizen mobilization, traditionally viewed as the heartbeat of a robust democracy, now faces new challenges and opportunities in the age of social media (Ofei *et al.*, 2024). The advent of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram has redefined the landscape of political discourse, offering citizens unprecedented accessibility and immediacy. However, as these digital spaces become vital arenas for political discussions, information dissemination, and civic engagement, concerns emerge about the integrity of information, the potential for echo chambers, and the impact of digital activism.

There are some problems associated with using social media as a tool for political participation, including the spread of fake news, online harassment, and the dissemination of false information.

This study aims to unravel these complexities and provide insights into the patterns, challenges, and potentials arising from the symbiotic relationship between social media, political participation, and activism within the specific context of Edo State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

For this study to be vividly carried out, the specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. Examine the impact of social media engagement on citizen participation in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State.
- ii. Investigate the influence of social media platforms on governance outcomes in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State.
- iii. Evaluate the effect of social media usage on the dissemination of political issues among online communities in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State.

Research Questions

- i. What impact does social media engagement have on citizen participation in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State?
- ii. What influence do social media platforms have on governance outcomes in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State?
- iii. What effect does social media usage have on the dissemination of political issues among online communities in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State?

Literature Review

Conceptual Review

Social Media

Social Media refers to online platforms or tools that allow users to create, share, and interact with content, information, or other users in a virtual environment. (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010) The term "social media" encompasses a wide range of platforms, including social media networking sites such as (Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn), video sharing sites such as (YouTube, and Vimeo), photo sharing sites such as (Instagram, flick) blogs and microblogs such as (WordPress, tumblr), online forums and discussion boards among others. Social media has become an essential part of modern life, with billions of people around the world using these platforms to connect with others, share information, and consume content. (Pew Research Center, 2020).

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. There are two types of political participation, and these include traditional and non-traditional forms of political participation (Abdesalam, Lamis, & Muwafaq, 2023). Examples of traditional forms of political participation include: voting in elections, running for office, donating to political campaigns or causes, attending town hall meetings, and public hearings,

among others. On the other hand, non-traditional forms of political participation include petitioning for political change, protesting and demonstrating, engaging in civil disobedience, and volunteering for political campaigns, among others (Bello & Kolawole-Ismail, 2017). These forms of participation enable citizens to shape public policy, hold leaders accountable, and contribute to the democratic process

Political Activism

Political activism refers to the intentional actions taken by individuals or groups to influence public policy, challenge existing power structures, and bring about social change. Activists often seek to raise awareness about specific issues, mobilize public support, and pressure decision-makers to adopt their preferred policies or courses of action. The ultimate goal of political activism is to influence public policy, raise awareness, build a social movement, and hold leaders accountable, among others. Forms of political activism include protests and demonstrations, lobbying and petitioning, boycotts, civil disobedience, social media activism, and community organizing advocacy among others. Effective political activism often involves a combination of these forms and goals, adapted to the specific context and issue at hand (Fowler & Kam 2007).

Empirical Review

Howard and Parks (2012) asserted that communication researchers possess a unique vantage point for meticulously examining the intricate connections between social media and political change, delving into both causative factors and resulting outcomes. They provided a practical definition of social media, derived from the diverse and thoughtful interpretations contributed by various researchers.

Wihbey (2015) investigated the power redistributive potential of social media through a comprehensive analysis, including a case study, documentary analysis, statistical examination, and personal observation. He argued that social media, integrated into daily life and society at large, not only transform communication methods but also redistribute power by altering the dynamic between governments and citizens. Wihbey contended that citizens now have more opportunities to participate politically, disseminate democratic awareness, challenge unfair social events, and monitor government behaviour.

Calderaro (2018) concluded from his research that the advent of the Internet has sparked considerable interest in understanding the impact of digital platforms, including social media, on the political domain. He emphasized the need to consider diverse perspectives and methodologies in exploring the multifaceted relationships between social media and politics. Calderaro highlighted that as research progresses, a nuanced understanding of the intricate connections between social media and politics will emerge, contributing to the broader discourse on the digital transformation of political communication and engagement.

Hyuksoo and Doohwang (2020) explored the evolving relationship between social media use and political participation, focusing on political knowledge and bridging social capital. Utilizing Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT) and U.S. survey data, their study revealed that self-efficacy and outcome expectancy mediate the effects of political knowledge and bridging social capital on political participation. Their integration of theoretical perspectives sheds light on the intricate interplay between social media, cognitive processes, and participatory dynamics in the political sphere.

Matthes (2022) diverged from non-political, entertainment-oriented uses of social media, theorizing that social media use may dampen political engagement, especially among young adults. Drawing on data from the U.S., Germany, Switzerland, and Japan, Matthes compared voter turnout and social media use data for young adults, suggesting a "Social Media Political Participation paradox." Despite increased social media use, the voter turnout gap between young adults and older generations remained significant.

Keith (2023) examined the impact of social media usage on political activism, adopting a desktop methodology that relies on secondary data. The study identified a contextual and methodological gap in understanding the impact of social media on political activism. The instantaneous dissemination of information, real-time communication, and dynamic organization were found to be instrumental in enabling activists to organize protests, raise awareness, and mobilize support for critical issues.

Saaida (2023) investigated the rising utilization of social media by politicians, political parties, and governmental entities to engage with constituents and shape public opinion. While recognizing the benefits of enhanced political involvement and direct communication facilitated by social media, Saaida highlighted concerns about misinformation, hate speech, and propaganda. The essay concluded by proposing practical solutions, including the promotion of media literacy, support for fact-checking organizations, encouragement of diverse voices, and the imposition of accountability measures on social media companies. Collaboration between regulators and social media platforms was deemed essential to ensure a constructive role in shaping democratic processes.

Theoretical framework

The social media political participation model, developed by Johannes Knoll, Jorg Matthes, and Raffael Heiss (2020), serves as the theoretical foundation for this study. According to the model, social media can only encourage participation when several subsequent requirements are satisfied. (Matthes, 2022). According to this theory, young people must see political content on social media as pertinent to other content that is present, and there must be a discrepancy between the intended and actual states for them to be exposed to it, whether intentionally or unintentionally. They must think that in a desired future state, a participation objective is achievable. In a real-world behavioural scenario, when there may be other behavioural goals, this goal must be paramount. According to Knoll *et al*, social media may not boost offline political participation if one of the requirements is not fulfilled; hence, young adults' attempts to get involved are usually short-lived. During protests, they can rise sharply, but during national elections, they remain low.

Methodology

In this paper, the researchers used the survey research design while leveraging on questionnaire as the instrument of data collection. Secondary data were also used to corroborate the data obtained from the primary source to ensure a quality research outcome. According to the Bureau of Statistics website, the population from the selected six local government areas of Edo State that make up the study is 1748460. Using the Taro Yamanis sample size formula, the sample size of this paper is 400. The researcher distributed the questionnaire equally across the various wards in the six local government councils in line with the sample size. A simple random technique, which

gives every member of a study population an equal chance of being selected, was utilized. The questionnaire issued to the respondents was in 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 was assessed using percentages and displayed using tables.

The sample was obtained from six (6) LGAs in the state (two in each senatorial district) as shown in the table below:

For this study, the researcher initially utilized Taro Yamane's scientific approach to derive an optimal sample size as explained below.

Conventionally, the Taro Yamani is:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where n= sample size, N= population, e=conventional significant level of 5%

By substituting the relevant values into the above formula, we have;

$$1748460 / 1 + 1748460 (0.05)^2$$

$$n = 1748460 / [1 + 4371.15]$$

$$n = 1748460 / 4372.15$$

$$n = 399.9 = 400$$

Table 1: Selected Local Governments in Edo State

S/N	LGAs	Population	Sample Size
1	Oredo	374,671	67
2	Ikpoba-Okha	473,376	67
3	Esan North East	167,721	66
4	Esan West	188,940	66
5	Etsako West	281,642	67
6	Akoko Edo	262,110	67
	TOTAL	1748460	400

Source: National Population Commission of Nigeria (Web); National Bureau of Statistics (web) & Researcher's Fieldwork 2024

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The tables below present these data.

Table 2: You actively participate in political meetings or gatherings during the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Agreed	220	55.0
Undecided	80	20.0
Disagreed	100	25

Total	400	100.0
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Researcher's Fieldwork (2024)

Table 3: How often do you engage in digital activism through social media platforms to support political causes in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State?

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Agreed	180	45.0
Undecided	120	30.0
Disagreed	100	25
Total	400	100.0

Researcher's Fieldwork (2024)

Table 4: Social media platforms have played a significant role in shaping public opinion on political issues in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Agreed	260	65.0
Undecided	80	20.0
Disagreed	60	15
Total	400	100.0

Researcher's Fieldwork (2024)

Table 5: Social media platforms are effective in influencing political decision-making processes in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Agreed	220	55.0
Undecided	100	25.0
Disagreed	80	20
Total	400	100.0

Researcher's Fieldwork (2024)

Table 6: Social media platforms are effective in disseminating political news and information in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Agreed	260	65.0
Undecided	180	20.0
Disagreed	60	15
Total	400	100.0

Researcher's Fieldwork (2024)

Table 7: You actively participate in political discussions or debates on social media platforms regarding politics in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State.

Response	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Yes	180	45.0
Not Sure	120	30.0
No	100	25
Total	400	100.0

Researcher's Fieldwork (2024)

Discussion of findings

The analysis from Table 2 demonstrates that a significant portion of respondents actively participated in political meetings or gatherings during the build-to-2024 Governorship election in Edo State, with 55% agreeing, 20% undecided and 25% disagreeing. This high level of traditional political engagement underscores the importance of face-to-face interactions in political processes. Recent studies highlight similar trends globally, where community-based political participation remains crucial for fostering civic engagement and democratic governance (Norris, 2021).

Table 3 highlights the engagement in digital activism through social media platforms in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State, revealing that 45% of respondents agreed, 30% disagreed and 25% undecided about their participation. Research indicates that digital platforms provide powerful tools for mobilization and advocacy, (Tufekci, 2017).

As shown in Table 4, 65% of respondents agreed, 20% were undecided and 15% disagreed and agreed that social media platforms significantly shape public opinion on political issues during the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State. This substantial majority underscores the influential role of social media in political discourse. Recent literature supports this view, suggesting that social media can amplify political messages and influence public perceptions, though it also raises concerns about echo chambers and polarization (Sunstein, 2018).

Table 5 presents varied opinions on the effectiveness of social media in influencing political decision-making processes during the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State. While 55% agreed, 25% undecided and 20% disagreed. This division indicates that while many recognize the potential of social media to impact political decisions, significant uncertainty remains. Scholars argue that while social media can increase transparency and public engagement, its influence on actual policy-making is complex and often indirect (Howard & Hussain, 2013).

Table 6 indicates a strong belief in the effectiveness of social media for disseminating political news and information in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State, with 65% agreed, 20% undecided and 15% disagreed. This majority view supports the notion that digital platforms are vital channels for political communication. However, concerns about misinformation and the quality of online information persist, as highlighted by recent research (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Table 7 examines active participation in political discussions or debates on social media in the 2024 Governorship election in Edo State, with 45% of respondents agreeing, 30% undecided and 25% disagreeing. This significant ambivalence may stem from

concerns about the nature of online discourse or potential repercussions. However, 25% agree and 20% strongly agree that they actively participate, indicating a committed segment of the population uses social media for political dialogue. Studies suggest that while social media facilitates broader participation, it also exposes users to potential conflicts and cyberbullying (Kerrigan & Hart, 2016).

Conclusion

The findings paint a complex picture of political engagement in Edo State, where traditional and digital forms of participation coexist and influence each other. There is strong engagement in political meetings and widespread recognition of social media's role in shaping public opinion. However, a significant level of ambivalence and scepticism remains about the effectiveness of digital activism and online political discussions. These insights underscore the evolving nature of civic participation in the digital age, highlighting the importance of addressing both the opportunities and challenges that social media presents within political processes. As Edo State continues to navigate the intersection of traditional and digital engagement, it becomes increasingly crucial to understand and adapt to these dynamics to foster more effective and inclusive political participation.

Recommendations

On the strength of the study, the following recommendations were advanced.

- i. Firstly, there is a need to improve digital literacy among citizens, particularly in rural areas, to ensure they can effectively utilize social media platforms for political participation. Educational programs should be developed to teach users how to critically evaluate online information, identify misinformation, and engage constructively in digital discussions. The government, in collaboration with civil society organizations, should work to create a more inclusive digital space. This can be achieved by promoting policies that ensure equitable access to the Internet and social media platforms, especially for marginalized groups, thus enhancing their ability to participate in the political process.
- ii. Secondly, to combat the spread of misinformation, which can undermine democratic processes, there should be stricter regulations and enforcement mechanisms on social media platforms. This could include partnerships with technology companies to develop algorithms that detect and limit the spread of false information. It is essential to promote the ethical use of social media in political discourse. Campaigns and initiatives should be launched to encourage political actors and citizens to use social media responsibly, focusing on constructive dialogue rather than hate speech or divisive rhetoric.
- iii. Thirdly, social media platforms should be leveraged as tools for civic education, providing citizens with reliable information about political processes, candidates, and issues. This will not only enhance political participation but also ensure that citizens make informed decisions. Given the significant role of youth in social media use, targeted initiatives should be developed to encourage their political engagement. This could include youth-focused campaigns, digital town halls, and online forums where people can discuss and influence political issues.

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