

Influence of Social Media on Political Participation Among Nigerian Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of social media on political participation among Nigerian undergraduate students, with a focus on Renaissance University Ugbawka, Enugu State. The study adopted survey research design, with questionnaire as instrument for data collection. The sample size of 199 was determined from the population of the study, using the Australian Calculator. It was found that all the respondents in the study used social media for political participation. The study also found that the use of social media for political participation has demerits, including spreading of unfounded rumours, fallacy, and lack of credibility. The study recommends that social media should be integrated into the media framework for political communication and participation in Nigeria and that relevant government ministries, agencies and the civil society should sensitize the Nigerian youth, especially undergraduate students, on the beneficial use of the social media for political communication and participation.

Keywords: *Influence, Social Media, Political Participation, Undergraduate Students*

Introduction

Social media are now ubiquitous and intrusive. Social media platforms like Facebook, whatsapp and Twitter are widely used across the world for interactive and participatory communication. The freedom of expression, interactivity and user-generation of contents in the social media are selling points that attract users to the social media. These unique features of the social media make exchange of information and ideas safer, cheaper and more pleasurable.

Social media have become a natural part of the everyday lives of people all over the world (Ajayi and Adesote, 2015). Politicians have swerved from the use of the old media such as the print (newspaper) and the electronic media (television and radio), to the use of the new media during electioneering to actualize their political goals. Due to their participatory, interactive, and effective in nature, they have become veritable instruments for carrying out election campaigns and other electioneering activities, political engagement, and mobilization among others (Ajayi and Adesote, 2015).

Political communication is an important aspect of politics and political participation. Political actors try to send messages to the electorate, vice versa, through various media of communication. The social media have emerged as popular channels of political communication and participation

in contemporary time. Studies have revealed that the youth are the most ardent users of the social media. This study centred on the use of social media for political participation by Nigerian undergraduate students, with a focus on Renaissance University Ugbawka, Enugu State.

Statement of Problem

Various channels have been adopted for political communication and participation. Social media are among the popular media that have found relevance in the conduct of human affairs. Most social media platforms are now utilized for political participation. The crises that have bedeviled politics in Nigeria make people seek safer avenues for political participation. Do the Nigerian undergraduate students use social media for political participation? This is what this study sought to ascertain.

Research Questions

The study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What extent do social media facilitate political participation among Renaissance University undergraduate students?
2. What is the level of political participation via the social media among Renaissance University undergraduate students?
3. What are the benefits of use of social media for political participation?
4. What are the demerits of the use of social media for political participation?

Literature Review

Okoro and Nwafor (2013) stated that social media are interactive, web-based media. They belong to the new genre of media that focus on social networking, allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends, share personal information, as well as publish their own views on the internet. Web 2.0 has three distinguishing features; it is easy to use, it facilitates sociality, and it provides users with free publishing and production platforms that allow them to upload content in any form, be it pictures, videos, or text (Fuchs 2014).

Akoja and Nwenezi (2020) studied youths' perceptions of social media credibility as a news source. The study revealed that youths frequently source for news on social media and the respondents described the social media as credible sources of news.

Adaja and Ayodele (2013, p.65) investigated Nigerian youth and social media: Harnessing the potentials for academic excellence found that 85 (67%) of the 127 respondents (undergraduates) who said they used Facebook did not use the platform for academic information exchange, while 42 (33%) responded that they used Facebook platform for academic information exchange.

Ngonso and Egielewa (2018) examined how social networking sites with alien values changed Nigerian youth's communication patterns (values). The study found that social media has a set of alien values which include the speech patterns, slang, gossips, rumours, nude pictures, sexual assault, sexually explicit materials, sexual violence, social interactions, behaviour, dressings, and general worldview.

Coyle and Vaughn (2008) conducted a survey study on how students on American college campuses engage in social networking. The study found that about a third of the people surveyed (37%) indicated they have one social networking account, 53% have two accounts, and 9% reported having three accounts. On average, the study shows that the people surveyed visited their accounts about three times per day. The study also found some reasons for which the students engaged in social media networks. Such reasons include: to keep in touch with friends (41%), it's fun; entertaining (17%), to post or look at photos (12%), when bored (12%), in response to someone contacting me on the site (10%), everyone is doing it (10%), when I don't have any contact info (7%), because you can send a message to multiple people (3%), and others (19%).

Folaranmi (2013, p.74) investigated Facebook addiction level among selected Nigerian university undergraduates and found that, out of the 994 students surveyed, 220 (22.1%) stated

“meeting people” as their reason for using Facebook. Other reasons the study found are: school work 149 (15%), dating 134 (13.5%), uploading 113 (11.4%), chatting 194 (19.5%), uploading pictures 69 (6.9%), messaging 82 (8.2%), and celebrity follow-up 33 (3.3%).

The study reveals low level addiction (1.6%) particularly among university undergraduates in private universities, attributing the result to the low level of internet access generally in Nigeria.

Akpan, Akwaowo *and* Senam (2013, p.353) studied the uses and gratifications of social networking websites among youth in Uyo and found that the youth in Uyo registered in at least 46 social networking websites. The study also found that the youth in the area were active users of social networking websites and accessed the websites for various purposes and gratifications. A majority of the respondents, 90 (25.1%) stated they registered because of the need to connect with old/new friends; 25 (7%) said they registered to have fun and relaxation; 17 (4.7%) respondents said they used the websites to promote their businesses; 25 (7%) of them stated that the social networking websites made them socially balanced; 20 (5.6%) said they joined to gain information while 50 (13.9%) registered to develop a relationship. It, however, found that the youth in the area were not always fulfilled in their expectations of social networking sites, although they made use of the websites daily.

Social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modifies, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible (McCay-peat and Quan-haase 2017, p.17). Social media should not be seen primarily as the platforms upon which people post, but rather as the contents that are posted on these platforms (Miller and Horst, 2016, p.61).

Political participation is the involvement of the citizens in the political system. Eakin cited in Adelekan (2010) described political participation as the process through which the individual plays a role in the political life of his society and could take part in deciding what common goals of the society are and the best way of achieving these goals. Falade (2008) identified six types of political participants. These are:

- a) The inactive: these are the people that take no part in any political activity.
- b) Voting specialists: these are the people that get eagerly engaged only in voting. Besides voting, they are not concerned about other political activities.
- c) Parochial participants: these people participant in politics occasionally. They vote or get involved in any other political activity only when it affects their personal interest.
- d) The communalist: these are those who get engaged in voting regularly, they also get involved in community affairs, but they are not involved in political campaign activities.
- e) The campaigners: they are actively involved in political campaign but inactive in other community affairs.
- f) Complete activists: they are highly involved in all political activities. They actively participate in voting, political campaign, community activities and contact public officials. The use of social media in political participation is increasing over time. Political parties are using popular social media to influence their target audience. Social media as a tool for political participation refers to the use of popular online social media platform to actively participate or engage in political activities. There are various social media platform such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, snapchat etc.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Uses and Gratification Theory. Uses and gratification theory was propounded by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch in 1974. The theory explains that people use certain media based on the gratification they derived from it. The theory places power of media choice in the hands of the users. The theory assumes that the audience is active, and its media use is goal oriented; media users are active rather than passive in seeking out media that meet their needs (Diddi and LaRose, 2006). The uses and gratification theory is considered appropriate for this

study because it helps to explain how the electorate and politicians alike choose various social media, as active participants, for their various political goals and objectives.

Research design

Survey research design was adopted in this study. The choice of this design for the study was informed by the fact that the design creates ample opportunity for the researcher to get first-hand information from the respondents selected as the sample from the population of the study.

Questionnaire was utilized as instrument for data collection to elicit responses from the respondents. The population of this study comprises the 410 undergraduate students of Renaissance University Ugbawka, Enugu State. A sample size of 199 was determined from the population of the study with the help of the Australian calculator for sample size determination. The calculator has a confidence level of 95% and a confidence interval of 0.05. The quota sampling technique was adopted to select the sample from the population of the study, to ensure fair representation of the faculties and departments in the sample.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Out of the 199 copies of the questionnaire distributed, 182 copies were retrieved. The data presentation and analysis in the study are based on the 182 copies of the questionnaire retrieved.

Table 1: Respondents’ Sex Distribution

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	77	42.3	42.3	42.3
	Female	104	57.1	57.1	99.5
	22	1	.5	.5	100.0
	Total	182	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 above indicates that 77 (42.3%) of the respondents were male while 104 (57.1%) of them were female

Table2: Respondents’ Age Distribution

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	16-20	102	56.0	56.0	56.0
	21-25	70	38.5	38.5	94.5
	26-30	10	5.5	5.5	100.0
	Total	182	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows that 102 (56%) of the respondents were between the ages of 16 to 20 years; 70 (38.5%) of them were between 21 and 25 years, while 10 (5.5%) of them were between the age of

26 to 30 years old. None of the respondents were 31 years and above. This indicates that a majority of the respondents fall between the ages of 16 and 20 years.

Table 3: Have you been exposed to political communication on social media?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid No	0	0.00	0.00	0.00
Yes	182	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total	182	100.0	100.0	

From the data presented on table 3, none of the respondents (0%) stated that they had not been exposed to political communication on social media while all the respondents (100%) stated that they had been exposed to political communication on social media.

Table 4: From which social media platform have you been exposed to political communication?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Facebook	42	23.1	23.1	23.1
	Instagram	26	14.3	14.3	37.4
	YouTube	11	6.0	6.0	43.4
	WhatsApp	22	12.1	12.1	55.5
	Twitter	76	41.8	41.8	97.3
	Others	5	2.7	2.7	100.0
	Total	182	100.0	100.0	

Table 4 above shows that 42 (23.1%) of the respondents said they were exposed to political communication on Facebook; 26 (14.3%) were exposed to political communication on Instagram; 11 (6%) of them were exposed to political communication on YouTube; 22 (12.1%) of them were exposed to political communication on WhatsApp; 76 (41.8%) of them were exposed to political communication on twitter, while 5 (2.7%) of the respondents said they were exposed to political communication through other platforms other platforms not indicated. The foregoing indicates that most of the respondents were exposed to political communication through Twitter and Facebook.

Table 5: How would you rate your exposure to social media political communication?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Very High	43	23.6	23.6	23.6
High	50	27.5	27.5	51.1
Undecided	22	12.1	12.1	63.2
Low	42	23.1	23.1	86.3
very Low	25	13.7	13.7	100.0
Total	182	100.0	100.0	

From the data presented on table 5 above, 43 (23.6%) of the respondents rated their exposure to political communication on social media “very high;” 50(27.5%) of them rated their exposure “high;” 22 (12.1%) of them were undecided; 42 (23.1%) of them rated their exposure “low” whereas 25 (13.7%) of them rated their exposure “very low.” The data indicate that the respondents were well exposed to political communication on social media.

Table 6: Social Media Facilitate Participation

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly Agree	50	27.5	27.5	27.5
Agree	100	54.9	54.9	82.4
Undecided	2	1.1	1.1	83.5
Disagree	17	9.3	9.3	92.9
Strongly Disagree	13	7.1	7.1	100.0
Total	182	100.0	100.0	

From the data presented on table 6 above, 50 (27.5%) of the respondents strongly agreed that social media facilitate political participation; 100 (54.9) of them agreed that social media facilitate participation, 2 (1.1%) of them were undecided; 17 (9.3%) of them disagreed, and 13 (7.1%) strongly disagreed to the view that social media facilitate political communication. This implies that a vast majority of the respondents expressed the view that social media facilitate political communication.

Table 7: Have you participated in politics through the social media?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	160	87.9	87.9	87.9
No	22	12.1	12.1	100.0
Total	182	100.0	100.0	

From the data presented on table 7 above, 160 (87.9%) of the respondents said they had participated in political activities through the social media, while 22 (12.1%) of them stated that they had not participated in political activities through the social media.

The data displayed on table 8 above show that 100 (54.9%) of the respondents said that social media campaigns make them like the aspirants; 20 (11%) of them said that the social media campaigns make them hate the aspirants; 50 (27.5%) of them said that the social media campaigns

Table 8: How do social media campaigns make you feel about politics?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	The campaign makes me like the aspirants	100	54.9	54.9	54.9
	The campaign makes me hate the aspirants	20	11.0	11.0	65.9
	The campaign makes me desire to participate in the activities	50	27.5	27.5	93.4
	The campaign makes me want to vote	12	6.6	6.6	100.0
	Total	182	100.0	100.0	

make them desire to participate in political activities, and 12 (6.6%) of them said social media campaigns make them want to vote during elections. This presentation indicates that campaigns aspirants

The data displayed on table 8 above show that 100 (54.9%) of the respondents said that social media campaigns make them like the aspirants; 20 (11%) of them said that the social media campaigns make them hate the aspirants; 50 (27.5%) of them said that the social media campaigns make them desire to participate in political activities, and 12 (6.6%) of them said social media campaigns make them want to vote during elections. This presentation indicates that campaigns have some effects on the decisions and attitudes of the respondents towards politics and political aspirants.

Table 9: In which ways have you participated in politics through social media

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Suggesting political solutions to political problems.	20	11.0	11.0	11.0
Political content creation	50	27.5	27.5	38.5
Criticizing wrong actions and inactions of political parties and politicians.	30	16.5	16.5	54.9
Supporting political candidates and politicians.	32	17.6	17.6	72.5
Any other, (please specify)	50	27.5	27.5	100.0
Total	182	100.0	100.0	

Table 9 above shows that 20 (11%) of the respondents said that they participated in politics through social media by suggesting political solutions to political problems; 50 (27.5%) of them said that they participated by creating political contents; 30 (16.5%) of them said that they participated by criticizing wrong actions and inactions of political parties and politicians; 32 (17.6%) of them said that they support political candidates as a means of participating in political activities, whereas 50 (27.5%) of the respondents stated that they participated in political activities via the social media through other ways. This means that all the respondents participated in politics through the social media in some ways.

Table 10: How would you rate your participation in politics through the social media?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Very High	60	33.0	33.0	33.0
High	12	6.6	6.6	39.6
Undecided	30	16.5	16.5	56.0
Low	70	38.5	38.5	94.5
Very Low	10	5.5	5.5	100.0
Total	182	100.0	100.0	

Table 10 above indicates that 60 (33%) of the respondents rated their political participation through the social media “very high;” 12 (6.6%) of them rated their political participation through the social media “high;” 30 (16.5%) of them were undecided; 70 (38.5%) of them rated their political participation through the social media “low;” and 10 (5.5%) of them rated their political participation through the social media “very low.” This means that the respondents’ levels of participation in politics through the social media vary.

Table 11: What are the demerits of use of social media for political participation?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Fallacy	34	18.6	18.6	18.6
Corruption	10	5.4	5.4	24.0
Rumors	62	34.0	34.0	58.0
Lack of credibility	66	36.2	36.2	94.2
Any other (please specify)	10	5.4	5.4	99.6
Total	182	100.0	100.0	

Table 11 indicates that 34 (18.6%) of the respondents identified fallacy as a demerit of political participation via the social media; 10 (5.4%) of them identified corruption as a demerit; 62 (34%) of them identified rumors as the demerit; 66 (36.2%) identified lack of credibility as the demerit, while 10 (5.4%) of the respondents noted that political participation through social media have other demerits.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of the study are discussed in this section, in line with the research questions posed to give the study a direction.

Research question 1: To what extent do social media facilitate political participation among Renaissance University undergraduate students?

The data presented on table 6 indicated that 50 (27.5%) of the respondents strongly agreed that social media facilitate political participation; and 100 (54.9) of them agreed that social media facilitate participation. This analysis implies that over 80% of the respondents expressed the view that social media facilitate political participation. This finding is in consonance with the claim that, due to their participatory, interactive, and effective in nature, social media have become veritable instruments for carrying out election campaigns and other electioneering activities, political engagement, and mobilization among others (Ajayi & Adesote, 2015).

Research question 2: What is the level of political participation via the social media among Renaissance University students?

The data presented on table 7 indicated 160 (87.9%) of the respondents had participated in political activities through the social media. Then, the data displayed on table 10 showed that 60 (33%) of the respondents rated their political participation through the social media “very high;” and 12 (6.6%) of the rated the participation “high,” while 70 (38.5%) of them and 10 (5.5%) of the rated their political participation through the social media “low,” and “very low,” respectively. This implication of this analysis is that while all the respondents used social media for political participation, the levels of participation varied.

Research question 3: What are the benefits of use of social media for political participation?

The respondents identified the benefits of political participation through the social media to include: level playing ground, freedom of expression, easy access to political information, interactivity, immediacy of response, low cost of participation, safety of participation, convenience, and anonymity

Research question 4: what are the demerits of the use of social media for political participation?

The data on table 11 indicate that the respondents identified fallacy, corruption, rumors and lack of credibility as some of the demerits of use of social media for political participation. It is instructive to note that 62 (34%) of the respondents identified rumors, whereas 66 (36.2%) of them identified lack of credibility as the demerits of use of social media as means of political participation. This means that social media as channels of political participation have low believability due to the spreading of falsehood and unfounded rumours.

Summary

The study adopted the survey research design to investigate the use of social media as channels of political participation by the undergraduate students of Renaissance University Ugbawka, Enugu State. Questionnaire was adopted as the instrument for data collection in the study.

The study revealed a high level of political participation through the social media among the study population. All the respondents indicated that they participated in politics in various forms through the use of various social media platforms. The study also revealed that the respondents considered the social media as convenient, safer and cheaper means of political participation.

It is, however, necessary to mention that the study found that use of social media as channels of political participation has demerits which include fallacy, corruption, rumours and lack of credibility.

Conclusion

From the findings for this study, it is clear that most Renaissance University undergraduate students participate in politics through the social media. Social media are now popular media for political participation. The convenience, anonymity, safety, low cost and freedom of expression provided by the social media platforms make the good tools for political participation.

However, the demerits of use of social media for political participation including fallacy, unfounded rumours and lack of credibility are critical issues to be carefully considered.

Recommendations

1. Social media should be integrated into the media framework for political communication in Nigeria
2. Ministries of Information in states and federal level as well as relevant civil society should sensitize Nigerians on the correct use of social media for political participation.

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