The role social media play in generating political awareness, discussion and strategies for better elections

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Keywords

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Abstract

The use of social media in politics has continued to grow in recent times, It has shaped how people think, feel, act and how the society operates. It has contributed to the development of citizen's participation in politics, as it has the potentials to create public awareness, mobilisation and interactions between people in a simple form and different means. This study therefore, reviews the role social media play in generating political awareness, discussion and strategies for better election via effective virtual communities, online discussions, and collaborative initiatives. Drawn from the framework of Social Media Engagement Theory, the research combines qualitative analysis of relevant literatures collected through a mixed method approach in a bid to understand the mechanisms through which media influence generates political civilisation and awareness. It proposed that information about state political systems and political activities, political mobilisation is been brought to the citizen's hearing through social media platforms. The study concludes that social media provides an avenue for more citizens' participation in government activities and by extension, the emergence and applicability of such mediums in passing public information to citizens, communities, institutions, and governments worldwide. The work recommends that efforts should be made toward monitoring, moderating, or regulating the various social media platforms to minimise the observed weaknesses and maximise the intrinsic values of technology in the electoral process.

1. Introduction

Social media, with its strong presence in today's modern societies, serves as a platform for political awareness mobilisation, debate, and political advertising, thus guiding citizens in making informed choices among political candidates while disseminating information. Social media serves as a watchdog to the activities of government as for much government information is easily accessible and publicise for citizens consent and consensus (Ekoh & Elizabeth, 2021). The access to information from legislative plenary, executive seating's and court rulings from institutions of government and organisational policies, budget, recruitment and service have been made more publicly due to social media which in long run aids good governance through transparency and accountability (Hillaris, 2021). As a participation platform , it allows for user generated content and sharing content within one's virtual network, using social media as a news source allows users to engage with news in a variety of ways, including consuming news, discover news, share or repost the news.

The Nigeria media has witnessed a tremendous revolution from an ordinary organ for self-governance to a formidable social political force and take its rightful position in the struggle for self-survival, self-actualisation and independent egalitarian social institution (Adeyemi, 2023). Today the advent of mobile phones and the internet now within the reach of everyone and by extension social media, everyone today has been able to participate in serious discussions of things happening in and around the world (Pew Research Center, 2022; The World Bank, 2021; Social Media Examiner, 2023).

Over the years, there have been an increasing number of national and local governments and civil society organisations across the world that have embraced digital transformation (Shadrach, 2017). Supporting this view, Sunday (2019) posit that social media has come to stay as a tool for political activities. The emergence of social media is believed to have reduced the one-way (top-down) political communication system orchestrated by traditional mass media in Africa and Nigeria over several years (Shadrach, 2017; Onuoha, 2019; Adeyemi, 2023). This implies that social media such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are revolutionary communication tools that have opened up the communication landscape for citizens to take part. It has been argued that particularly social media can build new relationships between political actors and young

adults, enable social interaction about political topics, connect people, enhance political opinion expression, equalise engagement, and generally foster participation as well as boost voter turnout or contribute to social cohesion. Interestingly research has indicated that social media has turned into one of the fundamental platforms for political aspirants in Africa.

Through social media, they propagate diverse campaign messages to their constituents who have an interest in their political career and aspirations. Therefore, it has been indicated that African political leaders have found the outstanding effectiveness of social websites and use them for their political campaigns (Karikari, 2020; Mutsvairo, 2021; Anyidoho, 2022). In this regard, Okoro (2017), reported that with social networking sites political aspirants appeal to citizens, and contact supporters, and as such supporters contribute actively by commenting on various political aspirant agendas and anticipations. David Zhitomirsky-Geffet, Koppel and Uzan (2016) commented that most political parties and leaders maintain an account on Facebook and Twitter to lay out their schedules. For instance, the utilisation of social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Blogs was massively deployed in the 2015, 2019, and 2023 Nigerian general elections (Ogundiya, 2021; Owolabi, & Adeyemi-Adeniji, 2021). Due to its participatory and creative nature, it turned into an utter and exceptional platform for political campaigns organisers doing electioneering crusades and other ideological trumpeting exercises, as well as political contribution and mobilisation among others. According to Oseni (2016) starting from the point of the campaign, through voting to the collation of results and the subsequent proclamation of winners by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), social media was a formidable force in maintaining the masses informed. This suggests a strong relationship between political activities and social media.

In this regard, recent years have seen a growing body of knowledge demonstrating the connection between social media and electioneering campaigns and even political processes, suggesting that the prominence of social media, particularly in politics has the potential to positively influenced, political participation. Social media could be used as an agent of growth and development (Jega, 2019). Social media platforms are increasingly used for political news and information by citizens in Nigeria, especially when it comes to election time. Social media has allowed politicians to subvert typical media outlets by engaging with the general public directly (Owen, 2017; Graham, 2017). One singular characteristic of social media is interactivity where users can comment or

reply to the post of other users, irrespective of geographical location, and political and societal stratum. Consistent with this argument, Shadrach (2017) asserted that social media are gaining popularity among citizens because they pass information freely without the control of the government, powerful politicians, and advertisers as well as free of conventional professional bottlenecks like gate-keeping. The media's role in not only disseminating information but also facilitating discussions and debates is underscored by numerous case studies throughout history. For instance, during the 2008 US presidential election, media organisations played a significant role in providing voters with important information and a platform for engaging in public debate. Through various modes of media, such as televised debates, interviews, newspapers, radio, and online media, voters were able to access information that helped them make informed decisions on candidates and issues. Another relevant case study is the #MeToo movement, which gained momentum in 2017 and 2018 with the help of media coverage. The media brought stories of sexual harassment and assault to the forefront, providing a space for people to share their experiences and engage in conversations about these pervasive issues. Through discussions on social media and in the mainstream news, the movement exposed the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and misogyny in many industries, leading to important changes in policies and norms. Interestingly, social media is affordable and accessible as one can access Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media on small internet-enabled mobile devices with the cheap internet data bundle from mobile telecommunication companies like MTN, Airtel, and Glo among others. Consequently, even higher rates of poverty and economic hardship might not stop Nigerians from utilising social media in their everyday life, particularly in political discourses and information searching. To support this assertion, Digital Africa Research Labs in 2019 found that despite Nigeria's high rate of poverty, approximately 27.6 million Nigerians accessed Facebook at least once a month, and nearly 20 million of them accessed the platform every day. These numbers indicate that many Nigerians rely on social media as a primary source of information and communication. In addition, during the 2019 Nigerian presidential election, social media played a crucial role in political discourse and information sharing. According to a report by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) in 2018, social media provided a platform for Nigerian citizens, particularly younger generations, to engage in discussions and debates about politics and election issues. The report also found that social media was instrumental in increasing vo-

ter participation and voter education, particularly among young people. Furthermore, a study conducted by the International Centre for Journalists found that social media has become the primary source of news for many Nigerians, particularly those in urban areas. The study noted that social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are used to disseminate information quickly and widely, making it easier for Nigerians to access important news and information, regardless of their economic situation.. On the other hand, it could be deduced that social media is never taken for granted by most politicians in the country. Politicians in Nigeria have social media assistants whose job is to help in monitoring issues trending online. Citizens, on the other hand, use the media to participate actively in the political discourse of the country. The media also afford the citizens a friendlier avenue of assessing candidates for political offices as well as post questions to government and politicians to promote transparency in governance (Madueke, 2017). It is thus significant to note that substantial evidence exists to indicate that robust political discussion is obtainable online via platforms such as Facebook and, Twitter. For instance, Abubakar (2012) remarked that social media is the new "political capital" where people resort to and participate in political discourse. Although studies have shown that social media is essential social forces that lubricate the engine room of democracy in Africa, and are no doubt, revolutionising the process of political communication and expanding the frontiers of political participation (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020); Pew Research Centre in 2021; Freedom House, 2021). Yet, other research has shown that social media are sometimes used inappropriately by political aspirants and their supporters which affect the fairness in political campaigns and processes at large. Supporting this view, Suntai and Targema (2018) remarked that although social media provides a medium to facilitate democracy in Nigeria, yet; in the build-up to the 2015 and 2019 general elections, the platforms were deployed to perpetuate campaigns of calumny against candidates with opposing views, which almost divided the country into the extremes of the Muslim-North and Christian-South. This implies electoral crises and squabbles between contestants on new dimensions due to the influence of social media. This theory was ropounded by Dr. Philip Howard in his book "Pax Technica: How the Internet is Hyping Political Extremism", which was published in 2015. Howard argues that social media is creating a new form of "information warfare" that is polarising the electorate and making it more difficult to conduct fair and free elections. The availability of smart phones has made even the grassroots disseminate messages

during electioneering campaigns, in turn; creating a new implication for democracy. Therefore; social media are now used in both pre-election and post-election exercises. Whilst these may develop new chances for political campaigns, mobilisation, engagement, and participation, they could also create misinformation geared towards discrediting a political adversary. Put simply; while social media has the potential to promote free and fair elections by expanding access to information and enabling citizens to engage in political discourse, there are increasing concerns about the ways in which social media can be manipulated to influence the electoral process in Africa and Nigeria in particular. For instance; the 2019 Nigerian presidential election was marred by allegations of social media manipulation, with several candidates and political parties accused of using social media to spread fake news and disinformation in an attempt to sway public opinion. In response; the Nigerian government passed legislation aimed at regulating social media use in the country, which further raised concerns about free speech and digital rights.

Moreover, the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum in the UK highlighted the potential for social media to be used for propaganda and manipulation of the electoral process. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, which involved unauthorised access to millions of Facebook users' data, illustrated the extent to which social media can be used to microtarget individuals with tailored political messages and disinformation. These manipulations could affect the credibility of social media and politicians; as well as contribute to misinformation within society. This is not surprising as Oyebode (2019) indicated that in political campaigns, social networking sites can turn out to be an intense and deadly weapon in the hands of political candidates, in which various video releases, voice lines, feature reports, headlines, and broadcasts are made to tarnish other political candidates and individuals. The above views suggest that there have been an increasing number of considerable researches on the use of social media in political campaigns in Nigeria with mixed findings.Social media has become increasingly relevant in Nigerian politics, with researches indicating mixed findings. Some studies suggest that social media usage can make a significant difference in political campaigns, while others show the potential for manipulation and exploitation. In the 2015 presidential election, Muhammadu Buhari utilised various platforms to connect with voters and gain support. His opponent, Goodluck Jonathan, fell seriously behind in the social media race. This example shows that social media played a critical role in swaying the Nigerian electorate. The #EndSARS protest in 2020

is another example of social media's influence in Nigeria. Youth-led protesters used social media to mobilise and spread awareness about their movement, which aimed to protest against police brutality. This mobilisation eventually caught the attention of the entire nation. The protest led to the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, and social media played a significant role in the protests' success. Social media has also been used to shape the outcome of recent governorship elections in Nigeria's Edo and Ondo states. In Edo; incumbent Governor Godwin Obaseki used social media to communicate with his constituents and mobilise support, leading to his re-election. In Ondo; social media influencers were reportedly paid to promote political candidates. This example illustrates the potential for social media in political campaigns, while exposing concerns about authenticity regarding social media campaigns. In summary; social media's importance in Nigerian politics cannot be overstated. However; it is crucial to note that its impact may be positive or negative, depending on how it is utilised. Politicians must be wary of the possibly nefarious uses of social media, but with proper regulation, social media can play a significant role in shaping political discourse and mobilising support. In this regard, scholars have widely appreciated and critiqued the impact of social media on political processes and campaigns in Nigeria.

2. Conceptual Clarification

Social Media

The concept of social media has been defined by various scholars based on their understanding and respective point of view. Abubakar, Ayodeji and Ismaila (2021) defined social media as a conglomeration of online-based applications that aid ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 and that foster the creation and exchange of user generated content. That is to say it is a mechanism that fosters the human relationship through technology and allowing for better, faster and more constant social interactions among its users

According to Holloman (2012), social media is all about what people do with the technology, the software, the tools and the channels: sharing pictures and videos, writing product reviews, collecting content, connec-

ting with old friends, sharing with new friends, collaborating in the workplace. They use highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques and include the various online technology tools that enable people to communicate easily via the internet to share information and resources (Greendhow, cited in Asemah, 2014, p. 57). Similarly, Kaplan & Haenlein cited in Asak & Ohiagu (2013) define social media as 'a group of internet -based applications that are built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allow the creation of user-generated content.' Describing social media, Nwammuo in Asemah and Edegoh (2013) opined that social media is a web and mobile-based technologies, which are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue among individuals, organisation, and communities. This informs why Dow in Asemah (2014) asserted that social media essentially refer to 'a category of online media where people are talking, participating, sharing, networking and bookmarking online.' Healthfield cited in Asemah and Edegoh (2013) observed that social media are the tools and platforms that people use to publish content and interact socially online. Nwammuo in Asemah and Edegoh (2013) stated that the concept of social media therefore, finds its meaning in the ability of users to generate, interpret, restructure and disseminate content. From the foregoing, social media is a highly interactive medium which provides users a great freedom in producing and reproducing the content and form of the information during the interaction. It enabled people from every corner of the world to represent themselves in a particular way and stay connected in cyberspace. Thus; a majority of people use social media to interact and seek for information.

  The benefits of social media on human society and the youths especially can never be over emphasised. For instance, social media has made the youth to be better informed by helping them keep abreast with the happenings around the globe. It has also made many unemployed youths to be aware of job opportunities around the world with many of them being gainfully employed. Additionally; social media has immensely assisted those in the academics. Complex research tasks can be easily accomplished through social media. For example; In 2018, a team of researchers at the University of California, Berkeley used Twitter to study the spread of misinformation about vaccines. They collected over 1 million tweets related to vaccines and used a variety of machine learning techniques to identify and analyse the most common types of misinformation. The researchers found that vaccine misinformation was more likely to be shared by bots and accounts that also spread other types of misinformation, such as political propaganda. They also found that vac-

cine misinformation was more likely to be shared during times of public health crises, such as the Zika outbreak. The researchers' findings were published in the journal Nature Communications, and their work has been used to inform public health campaigns aimed at combating vaccine misinformation.

Additionally, in 2020, a team of researchers at the University of Oxford used social media to study the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. They collected over 1 million tweets from people in over 100 countries and used a variety of machine learning techniques to identify and analyse the most common types of mental health problems that were being discussed. The researchers found that the most common mental health problems being discussed were anxiety, depression, and loneliness. They also found that people in countries with stricter lockdown measures were more likely to report mental health problems. The researchers' findings were published in the journal Nature Human Behaviour, and their work has been used to inform public policy responses to the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

These are just two examples of how social media can be used to accomplish complex research tasks. Social media can be a valuable tool for researchers who are studying a wide range of topics, including public health, mental health, and social behaviour. Social media encompasses various types of online platform and applications that allow users to create unique and dynamic social contents and uses Web 2.0 technologies, which contrast significantly with the more passive, top-down technologies that characterised Web 1.0 web pages. The different types of social media include weblogs**.**

X

X is among the most popular social media platforms utilised by large corporations, common users, and politicians alike all over the world. Even Heads-of-State actively use this platform for communicating their policy statements on various critical issues. X was launched in 2006 but flourished rapidly in the last decade. It was reported that in 2023, X had 353.9 million monthly active users, with a gender distribution of 71.2% male and 28.8% female. The majority of these users (59.2%) fell between the ages of 25 and 49. Geographically, the United States had the highest

number of X users, followed by Japan, India, Brazil, and Indonesia. Additionally, on average, a X user tweeted 1.3 times per day and spent 35 minutes daily on the platform. (X, 2012). In addition to that, X has witnessed remarkable growth since 2012, boasting over 353.9 million monthly active users as of September 2023, while also handling more than 500 million daily searches. It has solidified its position as a vital communication tool in today's digital landscape, with projections suggesting that its user base will continue to expand in the years ahead. According to Statista, X is anticipated to surpass 400 million monthly active users by 2026. In 2023; specific user statistics reveal a gender distribution of 71.2% male and 28.8% female, with the majority falling in the 25 to 49 age group. Geographically, the United States leads in Twitter users, followed by Japan, India, Brazil, and Indonesia, while on average, users tweet 1.3 times daily and spend 35 minutes on the platform each day.

YOUTUBE

YouTube is a social media platform for sharing video content, and it was launched at the beginning of 2005. It is regarded as the second most searched website after Google Search. It has been estimated that around 2.5 billion monthly users (Most Used Social Media 2021, 2022) on average watch videos for almost one billion hours every day (Goodrow, 2017). Another study estimated in 2019 pointed out that more than 500 video content/min is uploaded on YouTube (Hale, 2019; Neufeld, 2021). It is claimed to be at the heart of multiple cultural and social trends in today's society. In the field of political communication, YouTube has brought the politicians and common public much closer. A classic example of this is the collaboration of YouTube and CNN for US presidential debates where the common public was able to ask questions directly. Social experts touted that YouTube has altogether altered the political environment (YouTube News: A New Kind of Visual News,). As noted by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism in their report "YouTube News: A New Kind of Visual News," in 2012, YouTube has emerged as a significant player in the political landscape. This online platform serves as a space for both traditional media outlets and independent content creators to disseminate their perspectives. This diversity of voices has ushered in a more open and democratic political disco-

urse. However, it has also raised concerns about individuals retreating into their own political echo chambers, highlighting the dual nature of YouTube's influence.

In alignment with these observations, Sherry Turkle (2011), in her work "The Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture in the Internet Age," underscores how YouTube has provided individuals with a powerful platform to express their political beliefs and connect with like-minded individuals. This has fostered a more polarised political landscape, where differing views can clash. Simultaneously; it has made it easier for people to discover and engage with others who share their values, showcasing the nuanced impact of YouTube on contemporary political discourse.

A famous example of utilising social media for political communication in the past decade is the ongoing war in Ukraine. The ongoing war in Ukraine began in February 2022, and the Ukrainian government has been using social media extensively since then. The use of social media by the Ukrainian government has been particularly effective in raising awareness of the war and its impact on the Ukrainian people, and in mobilising international support. They have used platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to raise awareness of the war and its impact on the Ukrainian people, to mobilise international support, and to counter Russian propaganda.

One example of how the Ukrainian government has used social media effectively is the use of the hashtag #StandWithUkraine. The hashtag has been used over 30 million times on Twitter alone, and it has helped to spread the message of support for Ukraine to a global audience. Another example of how the Ukrainian government has used social media effectively is the use of live streaming. Ukrainian officials have used live streaming to show the world the devastation caused by the war and to share their stories with the world. This has helped to humanise the conflict and to build empathy for the Ukrainian people.

FACEBOOK

Facebook is one of the leading social media networks operated worldwide. According to Facebook's first quarter results announcement in 2022, there are nearly 2.8 billion active users on the platform each

month. (Facebook Reports First Quarter 2022 Results, 2022) in 2020 and was listed as the fourth most used global internet service. Also, it was touted as the most downloaded mobile app in the last decade. Facebook can be simultaneously accessed from multiple internet-connected devices. The first step for Facebook users is the registration of an account that can then be set up with some personal information. The personal profile page of every user stores the content shared by the user and is known as the "Timeline" since 2011 (Gayomali, 2011; Panzarino, 2011; Schulman, 2011; Knibbs, 2015). It allows users to post pictures, videos, and text to be shared either with people added as friends or publicly with people all over the world. Facebook users can interact privately as well through instant messaging and also have the option to join groups and follow pages according to their interests. It played a revolutionary role in interconnecting individuals all over the world and providing a platform to share personal views, opinions, and data with the audience of their choice (Carlisle, 2015). It was as early as 2008 that public figures including politicians started exploring this new avenue for information sharing and narrative building (Carlisle 2015). With time, political communication became a new normal globally as Facebook provided a state-of-the-art advertisement platform with a wide audience range (Bossetta, 2018).

WHATSAPP

WhatsApp, founded in 2009 by former Yahoo employees Brian Acton and Jan Koum, has emerged as a transformative communication tool with significant implications for shaping political mindsets. This free-to-download messenger application leverages the power of the internet to facilitate not only text messaging but also low-cost voice calls, image sharing, and video communication. WhatsApp's unique ability to enable smartphone users to seamlessly exchange multimedia content over the internet has revolutionised political discourse. Extensive research has highlighted WhatsApp's role in political engagement. For instance, a study published in the journal "Political Communication" (Zeller, 2018) demonstrates how WhatsApp has become a hub for political discussions and information dissemination, particularly among young adults and teenagers. Group chatting features on WhatsApp have facilitated the

formation of political communities, allowing users to share and discuss news, opinions, and campaign updates.

Moreover, the impact of WhatsApp on political mobilisation cannot be understated. A report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (Newman et al., 2019) emphasises how WhatsApp has played a pivotal role in political campaigns, enabling candidates to directly engage with voters and share their platforms at a fraction of the cost compared to traditional text messaging services. The ease of voice messaging and location sharing further enhances political outreach and activism. WhatsApp has transcended its initial role as a simple messenger app and now stands as a critical platform for shaping political mindsets, fostering political engagement, and facilitating political mobilisation among diverse user demographics.

WEBLOGS

Weblogs, commonly referred to as blogs, have evolved into dynamic online platforms for information dissemination and global engagement. These digital journals are characterised by chronological organisation, frequent updates, and their intended audience of the general public. Additionally, blogs often include interactive features that allow users to comment on posts, fostering a sense of community and facilitating discourse (Pew Research Center, 2022).

In the contemporary digital landscape, a multitude of blogging platforms cater to diverse needs and preferences. Notable examples include Squarespace, Blogger, WordPress, and LiveJournal, each offering a user-friendly and customisable experience for creating and managing blogs (Grossman, 2021).

The influence of blogs on the internet and society continues to expand. They serve as powerful tools for individuals, businesses, and organisations to share insights, promote products, and engage in meaningful conversations with their audiences (Hendricks, 2019). According to recent data from Statista, as of 2023, there are over 600 million blogs globally, illustrating their enduring relevance and significance in the digital age (Statista, 2023). A 2012 study by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies found that blogs played a role in the Arab Spring uprisings. The study found that blogs were used to orga-

nise protests, spread information, and build solidarity among activists. Also, a 2018 study by the University of Oxford found that blogs were used to spread misinformation and disinformation during the 2016 US presidential election. The study found that Russian actors used blogs to create fake news articles and social media posts that were designed to influence voters.

In summary, blogs, or weblogs, have transformed into dynamic platforms for information sharing and public engagement. With a diverse array of blogging platforms available, they remain a vital component of online communication, shaping conversations, and providing individuals and entities a means to connect with their target audiences.

WIKI

Wikis have emerged as influential online platforms that facilitate extensive collaboration in shaping political mindsets through the use of hypertext on the internet. These digital spaces typically host content that represents a collective effort from diverse authours, enabling virtually anyone with internet access to actively participate by contributing, editing, deleting, or modifying political information and perspectives (Jemielniak, 2020). One noteworthy example of the impact of Wikis on political mindsets is Wikipedia. Wikipedia, founded in 2001, has become a prominent and widely used source of political information (Wikipedia, 2021). Its collaborative nature allows individuals worldwide to contribute to articles related to political figures, events, ideologies, and policies, making it a significant player in shaping public perceptions (Giles, 2015). Moreover; Wikipedia's articles on political topics often undergo extensive discussions and revisions, reflecting the dynamic nature of political discourse and the diverse viewpoints that contribute to shaping it (Reagle, 2017). Wikipedia's role in political discourse and the shaping of political mindsets continues to be a subject of academic interest and analysis (Jemielniak, 2020). However, it's essential to acknowledge that developments in the influence of Wikis on political mindsets may have occurred since that time.

PODCASTS

Podcasts have emerged as influential digital platforms for shaping political mindsets by providing users with downloadable audio or video content that can be accessed at their convenience. These content formats are frequently offered through subscription models and web syndication, allowing users to engage with political discourse directly on their personal computers or portable media players.

One prominent example of the role of podcasts in shaping political mindsets is the proliferation of political podcasts that cover a wide range of topics, from current events to policy analysis and political ideologies (Bounegru, 2019). These podcasts often feature expert guests and engaging discussions, making them a valuable resource for individuals seeking diverse political perspectives (Kern & Darr, 2016). Podcast continue to play a crucial role in political education and engagement, with an ever-growing audience seeking information and opinions from this medium (Pew Research Center, 2021). It's important to note that the influence of podcasts on political mindsets may have evolved further since that time.

3. Social media and politics

In today's interconnected world, information is essential for understanding and engaging with others in all aspects of life. Social media is a powerful tool for information sharing and interaction, providing a virtual meeting place for people to discuss and debate social issues, regardless of their physical location (Abubakar et al., 2021). With the click of a button, we can now access information, entertainment, and events from all over the world, and interact with others from different cultures. 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) that: as the media shrink the world, people will become increasingly involved in one another's lives, and people come to know more about others who were hitherto separated from them by distance, they will form new beneficial relationships. Okoro (2013) opined that Baran's perspective is pertinent

to this discourse as it directs our attention to the role of social media in shaping contemporary human communication, specifically in the context of fostering relationships and facilitating interactions among people.

In pursuing elected office, political candidates are likely to exploit any opportunity to facilitate making contact with voters to raise their profile, make known their position on key issues, and claim recognition for policy successes (Lassen & Brown 2011). The campaign is about making contact with voters, sharing information with them in an attempt to influence the way they vote, and getting them to vote. In Nigeria, political parties and individual politicians have very active social media accounts to disseminate information to social media users and voters (Michaelsen, 2011). Online activities related to politics are useful and encourage people to participate in political events (Vissers, 2008). Social networks are pathways that help people's decision-making and cooperation processes by flowing information among people. Hence; they connect disparate people who might have similar world views. Advances in computing power and new social technologies have only recently facilitated the development of forms of networked communication that are automating and accelerating the social, signals that pulse through the human network daily (Aral, 2012). Erick (2012) posits that the role of social media in democratising media participation heralds a new era of participatory democracy, with all users able to contribute news and comments. Its usage in politics and power struggles earned them the status of "the fourth or political news and information, and many adults in Nigeria especially when it comes to election time. Large and popular social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are used to target political communication campaigns (Kugelman, 2012).

As stated by Pate in 2014, social media has evolved into a cost-effective and highly efficient means of engaging vast audiences for political objectives, thereby enhancing political processes and practices. Pate (2014) further emphasises that social media serves as a valuable tool for fostering political development. Additionally; the internet and social media platforms offer young populations opportunities for engaging in political discourse through numerous online groups, pages, and accounts.

The utilisation of social media for a political campaign is now a very common practice globally. All the major political parties maintain their active presence on social media platforms to effectively communicate their policies and opinions. Michaelsen (2020). One of the most important collective attentions in social media can be seen during electoral

campaigns which are a period when political parties and their supporters try to maximise the influence of their messages over voters. Researchers show that citizens are in a tendency to exposure to more political discussions on social media (Brundidge, 2010). Creating data for political parties and politicians in social media can be heuristically conceived as if people's attention to them. Notwithstanding, it cannot guarantee that all this attention can be interpreted as support for parties or politicians in elections. In this case, it is important to analyse the dynamics of collective attention toward political parties and politicians in social media. Also, it is shown that in some cases the signal of social attention is related to election results.

4. Media and political participation

The use of social media in elections initially became noticeable in the preparations for the 2011 Nigerian elections, and now receives more attention. The growth and utilisation of social media in the political activities in Nigeria have continued to attract a converging body of studies which serves as the foundation for this current investigation. For example, Okoro and Nwafor (2013) examined social media use for political participation in Nigeria during the 2011 general elections using survey research method. Findings showed that many use social media to make a vital input in the political discourse, while others used them to attack opponents, spread false rumours, hate and inciting messages, which were believed to have contributed to the violence and tensions witnessed before, during, and after the elections in many parts of the country (Abi-Mershed, 2016). Kperogi (2023) in his article further buttresses that social media emerged as a pivotal battleground to mold public opinion and set an agenda: however, the potency of social media to affect and determine voting behaviour may be limited but significant. The opposition All Progressives Congress (APC) in the 2015 presidential election used social media as a great deal to de-market the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Dakuku (2017) elucidates that advocates for or against a political actor, party, and politicians, easily contend to win over people to their site via colonial media.

President Buhari had the Buhari Media Centre, once described by Farooq Kperogi as a Mind Management Centre and interactive platform

set up to project the Buhari personae, as well as counters the vitriolic attacks of critics of the government he leads. Adum (2018), citing Okoro & Nwafor (2013), observed that before the 2011 election, subscription to and usage of social media platforms for political movements are not well pronounced in Nigeria. Despite that some popular social media existed before 2011, social media users were more concerned with their social and entertainment functions than political participation. In Nigeria, the subscription to social media follows the world pattern as Facebook made a giant stride in 2011. Adelakun (2018) further buttressed that Facebook was utilised for socialisation and other functions like political participation and monitoring. Twitter also added some weight to the number of users. Many Twitter accounts were opened and managed on behalf of politicians who were not familiar with the platform or too busy to explore it themselves for their political campaigns (Andersson, 2015). Other social media networks such as LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, Skype and Pinterest stimulated Nigerians' interest as access to the internet became more lubricated through the use more for social entertainment than politics. Before the 2015 general election, internet access had improved, and many Nigerians on social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, swelled. It solidified the foundation upon which the political terrain developed and the growth of political marketing via social media in Nigeria (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013).

The media's greatest strength is its ability to allow the mass audience to engage in interaction. However; the media is not without some serious challenges, which can serve as an impediment to its ability to serve as a platform where members of a nation can share ideas about government policies and by extension influence government agenda. In Nigeria; the social media landscape is often characterised by falsehood rumours, attacks, political and religious fanaticism, and hate speeches to malign, intimidate and discredit opponents, Arinze (2023). For example; some political analysts opined that Peter Obi (the presidential aspirant of the Labour party in the 2023 Nigerian general elections) was popular only on social media and should not be deceived by the massive followership he had on social media. Arinze (2023) elucidated that campaigning for a politician on social media is not a yardstick to winning an election because the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has no polling unit on social media. Therefore; political parties that have no definite structures would not make any good headway.

5. Social media and the nigerian political landscape

Broadly speaking, political participation is the involvement of citizens in the country's political system. According to Griffin and Coleman (2015), political participation is seen as a set of rights and duties that involves formerly organised civic and political activities. It is a civic responsibility to be carried out by the populace of a particular country. Through political participation, citizens can choose who would lead them and are therefore indirectly involved in the decision-making process of their country. They can vote for people and also put themselves out to be for. Invariably; political participation allows people to influence issues in their communities and country. Political participation is realised through the process of election. Through elections, ordinary citizens have the power to proffer continued decision-making to existing leadership of their community or out rightly reject them and elect new ones. Therefore; through elections, the electorates can consciously evaluate the performance of the existing leaders and pass either a vote of no confidence on them or endorse them for continuity. The process of casting votes during an election is known as voting (Zahida & Yinnus, 2014). They further clarified that citizens use voting as a means of expressing their approval or disapproval of current leadership, government decisions, policy and programs, and the qualities of the candidates. Jackson (2011) emphasised that the relationship between indications of online support for candidates and election outcomes needs to be studied as one part of a broader and complex range of determinants of election outcomes. We know that election outcomes are linked in important ways too, first, the activities of political parties in terms of 'policies, branding, activities, personalities and image and, second, cleavages within society' (Jackson, 2011). Campaigns and candidate activities to promote policies, develop a party brand, and make known the personalities involved are also recognised as making a difference. Ahmad, and Al-Qaraghuli (2013) studied social network systems as a tool for political change. Their findings clearly showed that social media was widely used as a communication network to engage candidates and voters.

Quantitative examinations of the relationship between online social media activity and election results are just beginning to be carried out. Analyses of the relationship between the use of social media and election results have led some to the conclusion that such activity mi-

ght have been able to inform accurate electoral predictions (Bollen, et al, ,2011). For instance; by providing information about politics, social media invites participation and mobilisation and plays a vital role in political education as well as the mobilisation of the public in politics (Doris, 2014). According to the latest statistics; as of January 2022, Nigeria had 32.9 million active social media users. WhatsApp is the most popular platform used in the country, with over 90 million users. Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram followed as the most used social media platforms in Nigeria.

According to a report by Freedom House, the Nigerian government has enforced strict control over online activity by using tactics such as "intimidation, the arrest of critics of the regime, and the filtering of online information" (Freedom House, 2021, p. 6). Similarly; a research article by Obijiofor and Nwankwo corroborates this claim, stating that the Nigerian government has been known to "use legal and extralegal means to suppress dissenting voices and prevent them from expressing themselves online" (2019, p. 16). These are obstacles that limit the capacity of Social Media to create a democratic space for debate. However; networked forms of communication, such as those which happen through Social Media, may enable people to bypass the control system, overcoming authoritarian regime censorship (Benkler, 2015). However Social Media did allow a more open political discussion that would otherwise not have been possible under the conditions of a restrictive media environment (Goldstein2008) Since the new epoch, the internet and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have become new opportunities to energise political participation and civic engagement in democracy and modern politics Ukwoma (2012) found out that the advent of affordable mobile phones and data services enables many Nigerians to utilise social media networks to enhance virtual interaction. Opeibi (2019), in his analysis, expatiated that political actors and organisations; on the other hand, have found social networking platforms to be one of the fastest and effective ways to mobilise support and canvass for votes during political campaigns and even during elections. Omenugha, Ukwueze and Malizu (2011), in their study; found out that the 2011 general elections in Nigeria marked a significant milestone in the use of social media for political communication in Nigeria. They averred that; political aspirants disposed of all means to gear up their support base. Goodluck Jonathan, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, Pastor Chris Okotie and some other aspirants made use of social media like Facebook, Twitter, NaijaPals, Nairaland among others; to engage the youths in discussing their political policies

and programs, following the realisation that campaiging in modern-day 21st Century politics requires more than just handshakes and physical persuasion.

Moreso, 2015, 2019 and 2023 witnessed a massive use of social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Blogs during the general elections in Nigeria. In their survey; Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) opined that, due to their participatory, interactive and cost-effective nature, the mentioned social media became more user friendly during the 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections because they were heavily relied on by political stakeholders for political campaign and marketing. Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) further asserted that social media became a veritable and powerful instrument for political campaign and marketing, political engagement, mobilisation and other electioneering activities. Accordingly; the place of social media in rallying political support is no longer in doubt. As buttressed by Opeibi (2019), among the over forty registered political parties in Nigeria during the 2015 and 2019 general elections, two major political parties, the ruling party; The People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the main opposition party; The All-Progressives Congress (APC) dominated Nigerian political Muhammadonline. It was recorded that some political actors and stakeholders during the 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigerians used social media platforms for negative political purpose at some point, which incited violence and questioned the authenticity of election results. Also, some of the utterances made by political actors during political marketing before the 2011 general elections in Nigeria fueled the post-elections violence of 2011 in Nigeria, aided by the rapid spread of political campaign messages on social media. Future studies can look into these areas as they may threaten the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria.

Also, critics averred that President Muhammad Buhari of the APC created personal Twitter and Facebook accounts to promote his presidential ambition and it was more pronounced during the 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria. He used the platforms to mobilise support, persuade, influence and educate voters during the electioneering period, while former president Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of the PDP utilised cyberspace as a platform to report achievements and solicit further support (Opeibi, 2019). As Herring (2013) observed, their tweet feature on Twitter has become a significant component of social media. Twitter as an interactive micro blogging platform can be utilised in political marketing due to its peculiar features such as retweets, hashtags and text limited to 140 characters. The Nigerian political terrain witnessed the

deployment of retweets' nature, which stimulated voters and became a useful political advertising device.

Gambarov, Zenelaj & Belba (2015) in their analysis of how political parties use social networks for the political discussion of their respective party in Nigeria, found that this election explicitly practiced in the United States for many years since 2008, when Barrack Obama; the then-presidential candidate of the Democratic Party started using social media platforms for political marketing. Their findings showed that Albania Socialist Party in 2013 relied on or made use of social media to woo candidate electorates during the general election in the country through effective political marketing strategies. The researchers concurred that the All Progressives Congress Party's campaign was a total success and the All Progressive Congress came to power after sixteen years through a big victory made possible by essential political marketing through social media. Nigerian politician sat the state level uses online channels to reconstruct and rebrand their personality profiles to crowd source followership (Gambarov, Zenelaj & Belba, 2015). For instance; doing the 2015 governorship election in Kaduna state, the candidates of the two leading political parties, the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) and the opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP) deployed Twitter to complement their traditional media campaigns. The use of these strategies by the political parties showed the increased awareness of the potential of using social media among the ruling political elites in Nigeria. Mr. Akinwunmi Ambode; the then-candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC) used his Twitter account extensively to project his image and flaunt his credentials as the best political candidate to solicit votes (Opeibi, 2019).

6. Theoretical Framework

Social Media Engagement Theory

To explore the role of social media in political awareness, discussion and strategies for better elections, the study adopts an all-encompassing approach based on the Social Media Engagement Theory (SMET) (Liu & Wu, 2020). SMET explains how individuals engage with content on social media platforms through active participation and interaction. The theory identifies various forms of engagement, including likes, comments

and shares, that facilitate the expression of opinions and reactions to the content (Koo, 2020).

A key component of SMET was the sense of social presence that users experience, which refers to their level of connectedness to both the content and other users on the platform. This enables users to feel a sense of community and trust in the shared information (Koo, 2020). The role of social influence is another vital aspect of SMET. People tend to engage with content that is popular or shared by people they trust, leading to the dissemination of information and ideas through connected user networks. However; this can lead to the formation of echo chambers and confirmation bias, where users only interact with ideas that confirm their existing beliefs and perspectives (Bessi & Ferrara, 2016).

SMET also highlights various factors influencing an individual's level of engagement on social media, such as the platform, type of content and user characteristics (Lichtenstein & Williamson, 2017). Gamification, which uses game-like mechanics such as badges, points and leaderboards to encourage user engagement was an effective tool on social media platforms (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). An understanding of SMET is essential for optimising social media's positive impacts while minimising the negatives; such as psychological harm from excessive use (Alhabash & Ma, 2017). Implementing SMET principles can enhance user engagement and social media's role in political awareness, discourse and election strategies. One example of how SMET has been used to generate political awareness is the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement was founded by Tarana Burke in 2006, but it gained widespread attention in 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano encouraged followers to use the hashtag to share their stories of sexual harassment and assault on social media. The movement used social media to raise awareness of sexual harassment and assault and to empower victims to speak out about their experiences. The #MeToo movement has had a significant impact on public discourse and has led to changes in policy and practice.

Another example of how SMET has been used to promote political discussion is the use of social media during election campaigns. Political candidates and campaigns use social media to connect with voters, share information about their policies, and mobilise support. Social media has also been used to organise protests and rallies, and to coordinate voter turnout efforts.

Therefore; understanding and applying SMET is crucial for maximising benefits and minimising risks of social media engagement.

7. Conclusion

Social media has emerged as a powerful force that transcends economic, political, and social boundaries, uniting people from diverse backgrounds. Its significance lies in its capacity to reshape the governance process, providing a platform for increased citizen participation by fostering awareness of government activities. In essence, the proliferation and utilisation of social media platforms have had a profound impact on communities, institutions, and governments worldwide.

One of the notable contributions of social media is its role in disseminating information about state political systems, political activities, and political mobilisation. It serves as a conduit for citizens to access real-time updates on government affairs, bridging the gap between governance and the governed. Social media tools possess the potential to bolster societal roles and elevate citizen engagement in democratic processes. Information, a vital component of governance, plays a pivotal role in enhancing good governance by promoting accountability, transparency, openness, and responsiveness. Government actions and decisions are now subject to public influence and monitoring through the lens of social media.

However; it is evident that while many have harnessed technology wisely to campaign for candidates, engage in one-on-one interactions with candidates and constituents, report on local events during elections and share personal perspectives while gauging public opinions, there exists a dual nature to the impact of social media. On one hand, it has facilitated relationship-building, idea sharing, problem-solving and the adoption of best practices, benefiting society in several ways. On the other hand; its misuse has the potential to sow chaos and division, threatening national unity and stability.

Nigeria; with its unique diversity, has historically aimed to preserve and enhance unity in diversity. Recent threats to these objectives have emerged due to the misuse of social media. It is imperative to redirect the use of social media, not only for political participation but also for economic and religious engagement, creating awareness across all spheres of society. By harnessing the reach and potential of social media, we can work toward strengthening unity in diversity, promoting a harmonious and inclusive society. Now is the time to refocus social media's influence to guide people towards broader participation, foster awareness, and ultimately enhance unity in the midst of diversity.

8. Recommendations

To prevent the misuse of social media and avoid chaos and national disunity, the following recommendations are necessary:

- It is essential to review the media laws to address the technicalities involved in new media technologies. This will ensure that the technology is more beneficial to society and is adequately used in the electoral process. Laws and regulations regarding the dissemination of false information must be strictly adhered to, and defaulters must be made to face the appropriate consequences.
- The government must make an effort to monitor, moderate, or regulate social media platforms to minimise weaknesses and maximise the technology's intrinsic values in the electoral process. Additionally; politicians, political parties and their supporters should be cautioned against using social media to post or tweet dysfunctional messages. The establishment of laws and penalties for such acts is also recommended.
- Public enlightenment on the use of social media platforms for political purposes, especially among youths, must be conducted periodically. The government should spearhead this campaign, utilising instruments such as the Ministries of Information at both state and federal levels, the National Orientation Agency, the mass media, among others.
- Political candidates should improve their strategies to engage citizens through social media by understanding the public's perception of political parties and how shared content on social media platforms influences their intentions to vote.
- Finally, the government should consider passing the Cyber Crimes Act of 2015 bill into law to prevent the misuse of social media platforms and protect citizens from online fraud and cyberbullying.

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