Youth Participation in Social Media and Political Attitudes in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between facebook users' political attitudes and online political participation among youth. Participants were 100 active facebook users comprising of 58 males and 42 females, with an age range of 16-32 years. The study employed a correlation design. The facebook intensity scale {FIS} (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007) was used to measure facebook usage and political participation. The results revealed a significantly positive relationship between face book usage and political participation among the youth in Nigeria. However, facebook use rate did not significantly influence political participation. It is therefore concluded that facebook usage affords persons of different perspectives the ability to unite and engage in political discourse.

Keywords: Facebook users' political attitudes, election

INTRODUCTION

As the 2011 general elections in Nigeria drew nearer, electorates were bombarded with all kinds of e-mails, online requests, Press, TV, radio, posters, and billboard advertisements, not forgetting also, methods driven largely by interpersonal communication and such other channels of voter engagement which political marketers utilized to drum up support for various candidates seeking electoral offices from councillorship to presidential, all carrying specific political messages or promoting a political party ideology. Services such as Facebook, Twitter, and Flicker introduced new questions about political participation, Barrack Obama's presidential election campaign in the US has changed the rules of political marketing and since then electoral campaigns have been more about social networking.

Facebook is an important point in the space of social media, having a large followership of young individuals, youth networks or groups as well as youth appeal for information gathering and dissemination. Young people's everyday political conversations, as expressions of political citizenship in social media, are minimally researched when approached from a non-formal understanding of politics and citizenship (Harris and Wyn, 2009). One of the emergent places for young people having a say, especially among peers, is the Internet, and in particular, social networking sites and youth oriented discussion forums. There is a lively debate within youth citizenship studies about the ways the Internet is changing young people's political outlooks and participatory behaviour, and a widespread

agreement that conventional politics has not sufficiently realised the potential of the net in attracting youth (Harris and Wyn, 2009). Nigeria with a population put at over 150 million with about 60 million active young voters, near 43 million Internet users and approaching 80 million mobile connections, political campaign managers are sure to test their abilities in finding new ways to get their political message out faster, easier, cheaper and stronger. The news media was useful not only for mobilizing voters but also in integrating all other facets of campaigns, including rally organizing and delivering campaign communications to potential voters on a consistent basis, at almost no cost to them.

New ways of communicating, using the social media, has a democratic potential that opens for new forms of political participation and conversations. Research that tries to make a connection between democracy, young citizens and Information and Communication Technology is limited but growing (Olsson and Dahlgren, 2010). Attitude is an important concept that is often used to understand and predict people's reaction to an object or change and how behaviour can be influenced (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). The attitude construct continues to be a key focus of theory and research in the social and behavioural sciences (Wood, 2000). Thurstone (1931) defines attitude as affect for or against a psychological object; early theorists used affect in the sense in which we now refer to as attitude (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2000).

Currently, Facebook is the most popular Social Networking Site in the world and it has also achieved phenomenal popularity in Nigeria. In recent years, news reports have frequently portrayed social media such as Facebook and Twitter as playing a key role in social upheavals and political protests in countries such as Iran and Egypt (Grossman, 2009 and Shane, 2011). In Iran use e-mail messages to increase political participation of youths have been found to be positive (Rahim, 2003), likewise in Kenya, use of e-mail was found to raise political participation among the youth. The catchphrase 'Think' was distributed through friendship networks on MySpace during the 2006 Belgian election to stimulate discussion and thought around voting preference and to encouraging votes to reconsider voting for a far right party (Quintelier and Vissers, 2008). In the USA, face book usage and political participation as sensitized by president Barrack Obama recorded a high success rate (Crow, 2008; Quintelier and Vissers, 2008; Walmsley, 2008) and in Kenya (Makinen and Kuira, 2008). Still, some commentators have criticized this new wave of techno-optimism, suggesting that social media are neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for transition to political democracy (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011). Given that, a more theoretically-driven approach is certainly needed, focusing on specific technological accordance of social media platforms and analyzing their socio-political implications. For example, social network sites like Facebook are characterized by low cost, high speed and precise targeting of recipients, which are all features that foster fast dissemination of political information and efficient mobilization of citizens. Furthermore, various other features of Facebook facilitate the provision of identifying reputable information which are all important for reducing uncertainty when engaging in online interactions, thereby fostering the development of norms of trust (Berger and Calabrese, 1975).

In recent years, civic activists in Nigeria have started actively harnessing the Internet, including social media like Facebook, to promote various causes ranging from Environmental awareness to Human Rights advocacy. Arguably, the above examples of cause-oriented political actions are as important to democracy today as traditional participation such as voting during the elections (Norris, 2007). In Nigeria, online activism can be viewed as a form of proto-activism and its importance thus cannot be underestimated; for a number of young people, online participation is a gateway to meaningful engagement in political life. The demographic for the Internet has widened and social networking is no longer just for young people (Walmsley, 2008). In 2006 over 50% of American YouTube and MySpace users were 35 years or older, and the proportion of 12 to 17 years old were declining (Gueorguieva, 2008). Social networking sites do not just represent a young demographic.

Politically engaged people and political participation are increasing throughout the community through the use of social networking sites. There is little or no social network literature in Africa and particularly in Nigeria; most of the literature reviewed were from Western countries. Also, the degree of addiction and frequency of usage of Facebook as a social networking site was not captured in most of the literature. More so, the particular type of political discourse and participation were lacking in the literature, hence the need for expanded research in this particular area especially in the African and Nigerian setting. A comprehensive research question was formulated to guide this study. Thus, does Youth Participation in Social Media influence Current Political Attitudes in Nigeria. To proffer answer to the tentative question, a null research hypothesis is formulated. Hence, Youth Participation in Social Media does not influence Current Political Attitudes in Nigeria.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The population researched in this study were 100 participants that were conveniently selected in Jos metropolis, consisting of 58 males and 42 female; with age range of 16-32 years, all the participants were secondary and tertiary school graduates, and were resident in Jos metropolis at the time of the study. The Facebook intensity scale (FIS) is an 8-item measure with a 5-point Likert response option where 1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree; developed by Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) in order to obtain a better measure of Facebook usage than frequency or duration indices. This measure includes two self-reported assessments of Facebook behaviour, designed to measure the extent to which the participant was actively engaged in Facebook activities: the number of Facebook "friends" and the amount of time spent on Facebook on a typical day. This measure also includes a series of Likert-scale attitudinal questions designed to tap the extent to which the participant was emotionally connected to Facebook and the extent to which Facebook was integrated into her daily activities. Ten items measuring political participation were answered in section C of Facebook intensity scale. Items were measured on five-point Likert scale where 1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Moderately Agree, 3 = neither Agree nor Disagree, 4 = Moderately Disagree and 5 = Strongly Disagree. The Facebook Intensity score is computed by calculating the mean of all of the items in the scale, the scale has a reliability Cronbach's alpha = .83

The researchers visited several cyber cafés in Jos metropolis where people who had Facebook account and were active Internet users in cyber cafes within Jos metropolis were recruited to participate in the study. The participants were given questionnaires containing the Facebook intensity scale and the political participation scale to complete; it took an average of 10 minutes to complete each questionnaire. One hundred questionnaires were administered. After completion questionnaires were collected, coded and analysed. The choice of statistics, level of significance chosen, and presentation of descriptive and inferential results are presented. Measures of dispersion which include the variance and standard deviation, percentage and cross-tabulation were obtained from the valid number sum of 100 participants. For the inferential statistics, a correlation and Chi-square test statistical tests were employed to compute the final results for hypotheses testing in this research work. The level of significance (alpha level) used in the study was $p < 0.05$, that is a confidence interval of 95% (5% chance error). Different data are used to describe the participants in this study.

RESULTS AND   DISCUSSION

The table 1 indicates that 50% of the participants were between the ages 22-26 years. Fifty-eight percent were males and 42% were females; 56% were low on Facebook use, while 44% were high Facebook users. Forty-seven percent of the participants had a low rate of political participation and 43% were high political participators. Table 2 above indicates that 27% of males were high Facebook users compared to 17% of females, while 29% of males were frequent political participators compared to 24% of females.

The result shows that there was a significant positive relationship between Facebook use and political participation (table 3). This implies that the use of social media like Facebook, the likelihood of participation in political discussion by participants. Results from table 4 indicate that the more people that participate of Facebook the more frequent the political participation was not statistically significant. The outcome of hypothesis indicates that there was a significant relationship between Facebook use and political participation. This agrees with previous research into the political utility of social network sites (Gueorguieva, 2008) by demonstrating that Facebook is a legitimate location for discussion of political issues.

Also, the findings provide some support for Brundidge's (2006) conclusion that individuals use the control the Internet affords to seek out like-minded partners for political discussion but to comparably avoid non-like-minded partners when they are inadvertently exposed to them. The result of the present study could be argued based on the fact that more and more people have access to the Internet and social networking sites and as such have platform to air their political views mostly from the comfort of their homes or privacy. Furthermore, the average Nigerian has become more politically conscious and uses any medium available to participate and express political view. The finding from hypothesis two was not significant. This contradicts the findings of Shah, Kwak and Holbert (2001) which demonstrated that high number of information exchange over the Internet fosters

civic engagement and life contentment in younger generations, while social recreation on the Internet is negatively correlated with trust and life contentment. The outcome of hypothesis two could be argued on the fact that the study did not encompass a larger number of participants; also, a large number of social networking sites like Facebook surf the site equally for networking in other social issues other than for political reasons, as the site also encourage business and relationship networking.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentage of participants' demography

	Frequency	Percentage
Age range (years)		
16-21	32	32
22-26	50	50
27-32	18	18
Gender		
Male	58	58
Female	42	42
Religion		
Christianity	68	68
Islam	32	32
Facebook use		
Low	56	56
High	44	44
Political participation		
Low	47	47
High	53	43

Source: Survey, 2012

Table 2: Social media use and political participation across gender

Gender	Facebook use %		Political participation %	
	Low	High	Low	High
Male	31	27	29	29
Female	25	17	18	24

Source: Survey, 2012

Table 3: Correlation matrix

		Political Participation
Facebook use	Pearson Correlation	0.177
	Sig. (1-tailed)	0.039
	N	100

Table 4: Chi-square Statistic

		Political participation		Total
		Low	High	
Facebook use	Low	25	31	56
	High	22	22	44
	Total	47	53	100

CONCLUSION

The study examined social media and youth political participation. Using Facebook as a window to analyse the discourse trends of Facebook usage and discussions, findings of the study indicated that there was a significant relationship between Facebook use and political participation; and the number of frequent Facebook use did not significant increase the number of political participation by participants. The results of this study are significant in that they demonstrate the capability of social networks to afford persons of different perspectives the ability to unite and engage in political debate or discuss. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that people are seeking beyond recreational use of these social media and are harnessing the capabilities of these technologies to engage in political discussion and express their views about issues they care about. Although online political discussion was around well before the advent of social network sites, the richness and popularity of these technologies, along with the decreasing cost of Internet access, may be bringing larger populations and new participants into the foray of online political discussion.

Future study should seek to expand upon the results suggested in this study that the unique structure of social network sites may serve to help bring together individuals of diverse and opposing opinions into a common online discussion space. The alternative possibility, that Facebook may serve to perpetuate isolation, must also be explored. Interviews should be conducted with political discussion participants to examine the courses travelled by discussion participants that led them to enter a particular Facebook group discussion so as to explore what motivates and facilitates exposure to disagreeing parties in online discussion spaces. The presence of identifying attributes within Facebook online political discourse is an issue that is in need of further investigation. Future studies should explore in-depth the role of social network site identity within online political discussion, and online discussion broadly. Future research could also survey or interview Facebook users who utilize group discussion to see how access to profile information may, or may not, influence participation in political group discourse or participation.

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