

Power to the People: Social Media as a Catalyst for Political Participation in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of social media in activating civic engagement and political participation among Nigerian citizens by age. It used a substantial secondary data set from the Afrobarometer Index (N=45,823 from 34 African countries; N=1,600 respondents across Nigeria) to examine the relationship between getting news via social media, and how it predicted civic engagement and political participation. Consuming news on social media significantly predicted civic engagement with family and neighbors and increased political participation from contacting a government official to joining a political party to voting. Young Nigerians were the most likely to get news via social media but the least likely to vote.

KEYWORDS

Africa, Civic Engagement, Journalism, Mobile Phones, News, Nigeria, Political Participation, Smartphones, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Internet use has become ubiquitous in global society and has created opportunities for more, and more diverse, civic engagement and political participation (Ohme, 2019). Use of the Internet and especially social media or social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp, has expanded on a global scale; two-thirds of the world's 7.8 billion people are now online (Kemp, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2018). SNS use in emerging and developing countries, especially, has empowered citizens to engage with the outside world, organize, and to engage in social and political activism (Howard, et al., 2011; Mano & Ndlela, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2018). SNS also allows tools for discreet commentary, like disarming memes, for users to challenge authoritarian rule (Moreno-Almeida, 2021). Social media has proven to be so effective as a tool of communication and organization that some authoritarian national leaders are nervous about it (Campbell & Quinn, 2021).

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The social media boom is changing the political landscape of Africa (orfonline.org, 2019). With an estimated population of 1.3 billion inhabitants, more than 200 million now use social media, and people in Africa are more likely per-capita to access the Internet and social media via mobile device than those in the West (Ovuorie, 2022; internetworldstats.com, 2020). Increasingly, they use mobile and social media to partake in political debates, even in ways which challenge authority (Mano & Ndlela, 2020; Ovuorie, 2022).

Social media use is strong and steady in developing countries. For example, the percentage annual increase in the number of people using social media in Ghana (22%), South Africa (20%), Kenya (15%) is higher than United States (5%); and percentage of time spent on social media in Egypt (3.09hrs), Nigeria (3.02hrs), and Ghana (2.56hrs) is higher than the United States (2.07hrs) (internetworldstats.com, 2020). Yet, it is noteworthy that much of the research efforts in this area are limited to Western democracies (Boulianne, 2015; Skoric, Zhu, Goh, & Pang, 2016). This study attempts to add to that body of knowledge by examining the relationship between social media, civic engagement, and political participation in Nigeria.

Nigeria (a country the size of Oklahoma and Texas states combined) accounts for about half of West Africa's population with approximately 202 million people, including one of the world's youngest populations (median age, 18.4 years) and the continent's largest economy (Worldbank.org, 2020). Nigeria adopted party politics in 1999 after four decades of military rule and held her seventh consecutive democratic elections in 2023. Nigerians have also expressed preference for democratic form of government (aceproject.org, 2020) – yet voter turnout has declined steadily through each election (Abang, 2019; IDEA, 2020; Reuters, 2019; Yusuf, 2023). An election observer said young voters reported that they didn't trust Nigeria's electoral system and that they felt their votes didn't count (Abang, 2019); in the latest iteration, turnout fell to 29% (Yusuf, 2023). Interviews before the prior election suggested apathy among young Nigerians, partly because the two leading presidential candidates were in their 70s and couldn't "offer any real hope" for change (Adigun, 2020, p. 21). Low turnout in the 2019 election helped inspired the creation of "We Are Restless," an advocacy organization led by and targeting young Nigerians (Olasupo, 2021), yet it failed to deliver youth vote in higher numbers in 2023, despite the presence of a relatively younger candidate (Peter Obi, age 61) on the ballot (Yusuf 2023).

Lastly, Internet penetration in Nigeria is 61.4% - higher than the global average (58.8%), and nearly double the average on the African continent (39.6%); SNS use is at 30.9% (Kemp, 2022). Social media use has been found to be adopted more quickly by younger users first – although, in the West, social media has been shown to be inferior as a news source than attention to news outlets (Kaufhold, 2014; Shehata & Ströback, 2018). Newspaper consumption is waning in Nigeria much as it is in the West, but two exacerbating factors contribute to the weakness of newspapers in Nigeria compared to broadcast and online sources: cost; and the lack of a single dominant national paper, like The Guardian in the UK (Nigeria Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Finally, eight in 10 Nigerians (83%) have smartphones which are, overwhelmingly, the primary way Nigerians access the Internet, accounting for more than nine out of 10 (92.4%) website visits (Akinpelu, 2020; Oyelola, 2021).

Social media has long served as a source for news and political information (Kwak, Lee, Park, & Moon, 2010; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Shearer & Mitchell, 2021). SNS are mostly used for personal reasons: networking with friends, presenting a public persona, and entertainment. But the capability is there for users to follow, and engage in, public debates over salient issues (Hilbert, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2020; Sveningsson, 2015). Of interest to this study is the relationship between Nigerians' rapid growth in social media use but declining political participation.

BACKGROUND

Until the 1990s, when a profound democratization process emerged on the scene, African nations largely lacked democratically elected political structures. Although there was enormous variety and

complexity of political systems in the pre-colonial era, Africa was devoid of democratic governance or the kinds of channels well-established in the West for citizens to influence public policies, like voting, participating in a campaign, or protesting (Ehret, 2002). There were grassroots ways to involve citizens in their societies, but the ideas and scope were different from Western concepts of participatory democracy. The nature of colonial rule was abhorrent to broad participation of constituents in the direction and operation of political systems (Lechler & McNamee, 2018).

Within a few years of attainment of independence from colonialism, African states, one after the other, fell into military dictatorship, and the countries fell into the throes of “departicipation, or the decline of popular involvement in politics” (Chazan, 1982, p. 170). Political opposition in many instances was outlawed and formal opposition parties disbanded. During this period, citizens were exposed to manufactured information that their governments wanted them to be exposed to, and in Nelson Kasfir’s (1974) generalization, “in most cases in post-independence Africa.... the elimination of participatory structures has been so thorough” (p.8). The consequence of this, as Amartya Sen (2004) noted, is frequent political upheaval and economic failures. Sen famously argued that no famine has ever taken place in a country which has multi-party politics and a free media. Free, independent media, and free flow of information and communication, are pre-requisites for good governance, sustainable economic growth and human development; even now, independent media is among the first targets of ambitious authoritarians in Hong Kong, Cambodia and elsewhere (Besley & Burgess, 2002; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). The presence of famine is considered a symptom of lower economic development but is also accompanies disengagement from the democratic process. Famine remains a recurring problem in African countries; the solution is an environment in which wider engagement, participation, and accountability in society is promoted (Ayalew, 2021 Beckett & Kyrke-Smith, 2007).

In the 1990s, in the wake of the 1989 collapse of the Berlin Wall and followed in quick succession by citizen revolts in Romania and Yugoslavia, many of the countries on the African continent embraced “the Third Wave democratization” process. With the end of the Cold War and the accompanying collapse of one-party states, a wave of democratic elections followed (Campell & Quinn, 2021). But this change involved a constellation of other events, including: (a) globalization and (b) the advent of new technologies. Globalization ushered in increasing pressures for countries to open their economic markets and the accompanying trend of freer access to information. At the same time, the spread of new communication technologies, including the Internet – and especially mobile Internet – rendered government control of media information (i.e., newspapers, radio and television outlets that were then largely in government strangleholds) more difficult, more expensive and less worthwhile. This led to an inexorable transformation of media in most countries (Campell & Quinn, 2021; Deane, 2005). In Africa, liberalization of radio broadcasting was the most important and radical change 20 years ago. It led to the emergence of privately owned broadcasting entities and the spread of community radio. Deane (2005) argued that “Liberalization of media went hand in hand with a broader liberalization of communications, based on an assumption that liberalization of ICTs (information and communication technologies) and media were essential for the effective functioning of increasingly liberalized and free market economies” (p.180). Nonetheless, it was the democratization process that ensured an advent of popular movements that sought greater freedom of expression, information, and association (Deane, 2005).

So democratic political activism, including citizen political participation, is relatively new to the continent. In a significant transformation empowered by the spread of mobile smartphones, official pronouncements of government are being complemented, or sometimes even replaced, by public discourse of issues by ordinary citizens. In Africa, this happened first on talk radio, and is now more prominent on social media (Mwesige, 2009; Pew, 2018; Pew, 2021). Mwesige (2009) writes: “In several African countries, opposition politicians and civil society activists now have an opportunity to compete with government leaders to get their message across” (p. 221-222). The Internet – especially the mobile internet – as a source for political news has dramatically increased the diversity and

openness of information. Citizens are no longer merely compliant receivers of official discourse but have become vocal, and there exists mass public opinion that demands political change (Cheeseman, et al., 2020). African countries in this era showed improved governance, peace and security, with stronger economic growth and the development of viable institutions and systems, although progress has slowed or reversed in some nations over the last decade (Beckett & Kyrke-Smith, 2007; Cheeseman, et al., 2020). Of interest to this study: will this trend lead Nigerian youths to new levels of political engagement and the building of a dynamic civil society? Could it help create opportunities for an enduring democratic governance with good returns for its citizens?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Use and Participation

For over half a century, the role played by media and communications in influencing political participation has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (Delli-Carpini, 2000; Halpern, Valenzuela & Katz, 2017, Moreno-Almeida, 2021; Phelps, 2004; Pirie & Worcester, 2000). New media has long been shown to influence the democratic process by changing individuals' political attitude and behavior – fastest among young web users (Campbell & Kwak, 2010; Gil de Zuniga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012; Halpern, Valenzuela & Katz, 2017; Shah, Rojas, & Cho, 2009). Digital media use has been especially influential in steering citizens to declare a preference for democracies over autocratic regimes (Nisbet et al., 2012; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). Analysis as far back as the 2005 World Values Survey found a robust relationship between mass media, Internet use and citizen demand for democracy across 42 countries (Norris 2011).

Social media use, especially, has demonstrated the ability to re-configure communicative power relations. Citizens are no longer passive consumers, but active users, freed from the necessities of professional media and journalist skills or the centralized control and distribution of industrial mass media organizations. Information quickly becomes discussion fodder, fueling an important increase in civic engagement – essentially talking politics with family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. This civic engagement – powered and guided by one's social network – has long been shown to increase participation in political activities, whether that's benign participation like voting or something much more insurgent, like organizing and leading a protest march. SNS have become central to the dynamics of protest and social movements (Ayalew, 2021; Ghannam, 2011; Ovuorie, 2022). Della-Porta and Mosca (2005) describe social media as offering the “resource poor” a means of mass communication that may have previously been absent to them by financial or societal constraints. The technology has increased visibility to social, ethical, environmental, and political problems and involved users in not only conversations but ameliorative action (Ghannam, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2012).

Civic Engagement

The first noticeable use of social media for political campaign was in 2008 when then U.S. presidential aspirant Barack Obama capitalized on the heavy presence of young Americans on social media (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) to recruit and mobilize volunteers, raise funds and disseminate information for his campaign (Smith & Rainie, 2008). In a clever use of social media at that time, Obama famously announced his vice presidential pick online. Similarly, social media gained notoriety for awakening free expression and the struggle for democracy in the Arab world in early 2011. Starting in Tunisia, uprisings quickly spread to Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain in what became known as the Arab Spring. These enormous, sustained protests gained global attention, as social media platforms were heavily used to conduct political conversations by key demographic groups during the uprisings. For instance, conversations about democracy on blogs and tweets often preceded mass protest (Ghannam, 2011).

Arguably, no other public figure has made a greater use of social media (for better or worse) in connecting with his political base than former U.S. President Donald Trump. Trump's outsized use of Twitter for his presidential campaign, and as a policy tool in office, let him avoid traditional media filters and spread his message until he was banned from the platform in January of 2021 (Twitter, 2021). Most recently, social media use fueled contrarian civic engagement which led directly to citizen participation – a bank run that shut down a tech friendly financial staple, Silicon Valley Bank (Hays, 2023).

Because of the ubiquity of political campaigns relying on social media to amplify civic engagement, and convergence with legacy media outlets on the platforms, social networks have become the most common pathways where many people – particularly young adults – get their political news. About one-in-five U.S. adults say they get their political news solely from social media, where they also then participate in discussions and debate on those topics (Pew Research Center, 2020). As we move into this new world where more and more people get their information from online news sources, it encourages new forms of participation. As Nigeria and other developing nations approach Western levels of diffusion of smartphones and social media use, it is important to examine adoption of social media and its societal impact.

Political Participation

Gil de Zúñiga, Veenstra, Vraga, and Shah (2010) point out that social media networks open a different pathway to participation comparable to traditional activities, “as some of the costs associated with online expressive participation may not be so high” (p. 39). The ease of participation may then encourage a different set of people to engage in online expression and open the political process to more diverse participants in the conversation and more diverse ways to participate. Essentially, social media has triggered a new optimism for democratic renewal based upon its open and collaborative networking characteristics. The new technology, argued Loader and Mercea (2011), would enhance participatory democracy through the open and equal deliberation between citizens, their representatives, and policy makers, including drawing new participants into political activism (Valenzuela, Arriagada, and Scherman, 2012). At the same time, some national leaders wary of sharing political influence are unnerved by the power of engagement and participation imparted to citizens through mobile media (Campbell & Quinn, 2021).

A well-established body of scholarship now shows that certain behaviors in the social media space – specifically consuming and sharing political news – increases political participation in two arenas: online (for example, through lobbying for a candidate or volunteering for a campaign); and offline (attending a rally, voting) (Gil de Zúñiga, et al., 2012; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, and Zheng, 2014). There's even evidence of an agenda-setting effect wherein people get exposed to political information on social media, then, later, express their views on that issue (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, and Zheng, 2014). This relationship, between information-oriented social media posts, civic engagement on a political issue, then political participation – both online and offline – has appeared in recent scholarship studying social media use and political participation in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019; Akinyetun, 2020; Asamoah, 2019; Mustapha & Omar, 2020) but has not looked closely at the rule of age – essential in very young Nigeria – or examined social media participation directly linked with an election. This study does both.

H1: Using social media for news will be positively related to civic engagement.

H2: Using social media for news will be positively related to political participation.

Studies have long found that news consumption and discussing politics with other individuals work in concert to encourage various forms of participation; in fact, interpersonal discussion is considered

as the soul of participatory behavior (Kim, Wyatt, & Katz, 1999; McLeod et al., 1999; Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001; Wyatt, Katz, & Kim, 2000) and knowledge (Eveland, 2004; Eveland & Thomson, 2006; Scheufele, Moy, & Friedland, 1999; Schudson, 1998). Eveland and Scheufele (2000) suggested that citizens' understanding of politics may depend on an interactive effect of mass and interpersonal communication. People who engage in interpersonal discussion with others about political news from mass media will have disproportionately higher levels of political knowledge – sometimes, to dramatic effect, like fueling the Arab Spring (Ghannam, 2011). Applying what is learned from news sources to interpersonal communicative contexts enables citizens to think about current events, relate personal experiences to politics, address uncertainty, learn different perspectives, reconsider issue stances, and foster political engagement (Kim & Kim, 2008; Scheufele, 2002). Scheufele (2002) used the differential gains model to explain why certain citizens are more actively engaged in politics than others. The model focused on how interpersonal political discussion enhances the effects of news media use on political behaviors, such that citizens who use media sources for news are more politically engaged if they also discuss politics with others frequently. If an online news source like social media replaces the legacy news source, the effect can be even stronger. Applying the differential gain model to the Internet, Hardy and Scheufele (2005) found a stronger relationship between Internet hard news use and offline political participation (volunteering, voting, running for office) for people who more frequently engaged in political chat online. In a society like Nigeria, where the overwhelming majority of citizens consume news through not only online but mobile media, turning news consumption into civic engagement by sharing on social media becomes standard practice (Nigeria Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Oyelola, 2021).

In a more dynamic sense, social networking sites have emerged as a key venue for political debate and discussion and at times a place to engage in civic-related activities (Pew Research Center, 2018). For example, one important way many Americans say they stay informed about politics is through conversations with others. About seven-in-ten U.S. adults talk with others about politics at least a few times a month (Pew Research Center, 2018). Research also suggests that the kind of talk that occurs online, including patterns of information sharing (through online communities) does not differ from face-to-face discussions in its participatory influence and effectiveness (Castells, 2007; Cheeseman, et al., 2020; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005; Trammell & Kaid, 2005). Social media channels may differ – for example, in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent, the app of choice is WhatsApp, which allows for discreet discussion of provocative topics, like dissatisfaction with contemporary government (Cheeseman, et al., 2020). Regardless of the source, the social media newsfeeds, online communities, and individual posts provide both the knowledge and impetus for able participation. Political discussion on social media can also raise awareness about collective problems, increase tolerance, and highlight opportunities for involvement, all of which encourage engagement in civic and political life (Walsh, 2004). In Nigeria, social media are the communication tool of preference for young adults who are increasingly following Walsh's model of learning about political issues and information, discussing it with close contacts and connections online, then acting on that information through activism (Campbell & Quinn, 2021).

Young Adults

Civic competence – knowledge of the affairs of state and society – begins from discussion of politics with parents and peers (see: McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007). Research has found that adolescents who are trained in such ways tend to be more engaged in other forms of political participation such as voting in elections later in life (Levinsen & Yndigegn, 2015). In Nigeria, specifically, and elsewhere in West Africa, civic engagement in the form of political discussions is very high among youth, in conversations with friends and family and in social media, especially WhatsApp (Campbell & Quinn, 2021; Akinyetun, 2020). Whether that translates to higher rates of voting among this important cohort is of interest here.

Therefore, we hypothesize as follows:

- H3a:** Interpersonal discussion with family and friends will be positively related to civic engagement.
- H3b:** Interpersonal discussion with family and friends will be positively related to political participation.

METHODS

The Afrobarometer is a massive survey collected every 2 years of participants from 34 of the 54 countries across Africa. The pan-African, nonpartisan research network completed seven rounds of surveys between 1999 and 2018. In 2017, the survey collected 45,823 responses from residents across the continent; of those, 1,600 were in Nigeria. The Afrobarometer contains a number of items which capture civic engagement and political participation, from taking part in social meetings through a church to joining with neighbors to directly request action from the government. It also asks questions about sources for news, including radio, newspapers, television, internet use, and social media. Table 1 shows the means of news consumption from each of the five available sources. The range of responses was 0, Not at all; 1, Less than once a month; 2, A few times a month; 3 A few times a week; 4, Every day.

The survey, from 2011 to 2013, collected 51,587 responses including 2400 from Nigeria. That survey didn't yet ask about social media but did include questions about whether respondents consumed news from four sources: Radio, Television, Newspapers and the Internet. Social media first appeared in the 2016 survey, along with the other four sources for news; the 2016 iteration included 53,935 total cases with 2400 in Nigeria. The middle year of data, 2016, was collected not long after the last national election in March of 2015 and a challenging year (2016) in which the country entered a recession due to falling oil prices and increased domestic terrorism; inflation and unemployment both climbed dramatically in Nigeria in 2016, creating a high need for orientation and increased attention to news that year (Donnelly, 2016). The evolution in news source is captured in multi-year data from Afrobarometer, showing a decline since 2013 of news consumption by radio, television and newspapers and a steady increase in news consumption on the Internet and via social media (see Figure 1).

RESULTS

Principal component factor analysis identified a handful of items which scaled nicely to capture some of these: Four items captured Political Participation (Attended a campaign rally in the last national election; Contact a government councilor; Contact a member of parliament; Contact an official of a government agency; $\alpha=.741$). Two other items related to working directly with a Political Party (In the last national election in 2015, did you work for a candidate or party; have you contacted a political party official; $\alpha=.999$). And three items relate to collaborating with others for help, which became Civic Engagement (Join others to request government action; contact the media; contact an official to ask for help; $\alpha=.746$). A single item asked respondents whether they had voted in Nigeria's last national election, held in 2015. Of interest to this study was the role of news consumption through social media and its relationship to civic engagement and political participation. Correlations were

Table 1. Means of five news sources on a scale from 0 (Never) to 4 (Every Day)

Radio	Television	Social Media	Internet	Newspapers
2.58	1.97	1.10	1.08	0.82

conducted to measure the relationship between social media use and various indicators of civic engagement and political participation.

In each case (Civic Engagement; Political Party; Political Participation; Voting in 2015) there were significant relationships between consuming news on social media and civic engagement and political participation (see Table 2). H1 was supported – there is clearly a relationship between using social media as a source for news and civic engagement in society. Social media news consumption also significantly related with political participation, including two scaled measures and voting in the last national election – H2 was also supported.

Age is a confounding factor in political participation. Far more young Nigerians – those under age 35 – report that they often get news via social media, yet that age cohort was also the least likely to vote. In both cases, the differences were significant (see Table 3). In fact, there is a positive correlation between ascending age and voting ($r = .176, p = <.001$) but a negative correlation between ascending age and social media use ($r = -.283, p = <.001$). Older Nigerians were less likely than young Nigerians to get news via social media but were more likely to vote. There was a modest relationship between Getting News Via Social Media and Discussing Politics with Family Members ($r = .058, p = <.05$).

Hypotheses 3A (Civic Engagement) and 3B (Political Participation) predicted that discussing politics with members of one’s family would increase political civic engagement and political participation outside the home and there was significant support for both. For this variable, respondents were asked the single item, “When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters frequently, occasionally, or never?” with a 3-point response scale ranging from “frequently” to “never.” Talking politics at home frequently significantly relates to civic engagement and political participation in a variety of ways, including likelihood to vote (see Table 4).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of social media on civic engagement and political participation in a democratic transition state like Nigeria. Using secondary data collected

Figure 1. Nigeria News Sources by Year, 2011-2020, Mean (Scale of 0, None to 4 Every Day)

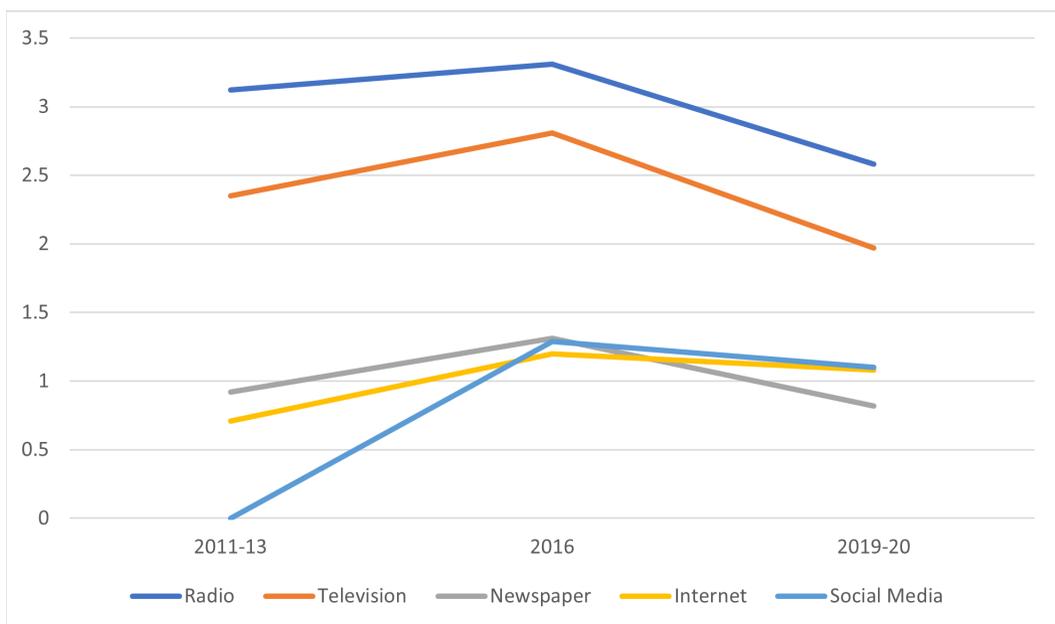


Table 2. Correlations, News on Social Media and Indicators of Civic Engagement and Political Participation

	Social Media		Voted in 2015	Civic Engagement			Political Party	Political Participation	
Social Media News	1								
Voted in 2015	-.137 **		1						
Civic Engagement	.088**		.055*	1					
Political Party	.066**		.166**	.367**			1		
Political Participation	.022		.145**	.389**			.593**	1	
	Voted 2015	Radio News	News Paper	TV News	Web News	Social News	Pol Party	Civic Engage	Politic Partic
Voted 2015	1								
Radio News	.104**	1							
News Paper	-.020**	.221**	1						
TV News	-.072**	.225**	.386**	1					
Web News	-.131**	.097**	.440**	.449**	1				
Social News	-.138**	.090**	.410**	.435**	.877**	1			
Pol Party	.163**	.117**	.053**	.011*	.009*	.009	1		
Civic Engage	.091**	.129**	.120**	.018**	.064**	.062**		1	
Politic Partic	.197**	.131**	.088**	-.020**	-.009	-.007	.549**	.344**	1

** p = < .01; * p = < .05

Table 3. Crosstabs with χ^2 News on Social Media by Age Categories

Age	18-34	35-49	50+
Social Media for News Often	44.7%***	25.7%	8.4%
Voted in 2015 National Election	58.0%***	76.6%	77.4%

*** p = < .001

Table 4. Correlations, Discuss Politics with Family and Indicators of Civic Engagement and Political Participation

	Voted in 2015	Discuss Politics	Civic Engagement	Political Party	Political Participation
Voted in 2015	1				
Discuss Politics	.131 **	1			
Civic Engagement	.161**	.055*	1		
Political Party	.173**	.166**	.367**	1	
Political Participation	.162**	.145**	.389**	.593**	1

** p = < .01; * p = < .05

by Afrobarometer, we predicted that there would be a positive relationship between using social media for news and civic engagement, and political participation. We also predicted that online issue discussion with other individuals would be positively related to civic engagement and political participation. Our results provide consistent evidence that these positive associations exist. Multiple variables in this study confirmed that consuming news on social media plays a role in both civic engagement and political participation.

There is clearly a significant and growing relationship between people getting news via social media and becoming civically and politically engaged in Nigeria. Getting news via social media predicts social engagement, including talking politics with family and friends. Although the AfroBarometer lacks the specificity to isolate this, likely many of those conversations occurred on mobile devices in WhatsApp, including robust doses of validation for young activists who were concerned about the advanced age of both candidates running in the 2019 election. Using social media to follow news about politics, and for talking politics, both predict significant increases in political participation in a variety of ways in Nigerian society, including becoming involved with neighbors to lobby the government, reaching out to government officials, becoming involved in party politics and, most importantly, voting in national elections. Civic engagement at home – literally talking politics with friends and family – also significantly predicts political participation in a variety of ways, including lobbying a government official for help with a neighborhood problem, attending political events and voting. This is promising support for the premise that getting news via social media and talking politics with family and friends do support further civic engagement and political participation. However, in Nigeria among young people, they do not appear to be a strong enough motivator of participation to overcome apathy around national politics among the enormous cohort of young Nigerian adults. Voting rates among these young Nigerians was not affected – did not increase – as much as other methods of participation.

Age, as it does in so many other countries, plays a role in this virtuous relationship in Nigeria. Young adults were significantly more likely to report getting news from social media than their older peers, yet older Nigerians were more likely to be civically engaged and to vote. Activist efforts, including the We Are Restless campaign, are aimed at closing the participation gap predicted by age and young Nigerians interviewed after the previous national election in 2019 reported that they weren't apathetic or uninformed but were, rather, frustrated with their perceived limits of the electoral choices available to them, especially age. The two main party candidates in 2019 – incumbent Muhammadu Buhari, of the All Progressives Congress Party, and Atiku Abubakar representing the People's Democratic Party – were both over age 70 at the time of the election. Remember that Nigeria has one of the youngest average population ages of any country, 18.4 years. In the 2023 election, much excitement was expressed among young Nigerians for a relatively younger candidate – Peter Obi, of the Labour Party, who was 61 at the time of the election.

The age and apathy of voters might have suggested a window of opportunity that is less present in some Western democracies, with a large population of untapped youth waiting to be drawn into political participation through the right candidate, issue or message. Yet Nigeria's enormous population of young adults weren't engaged enough to stem the trend of dwindling total voter turnout (35% in 2019; 29% in 2023). Social media engagement was high among young Nigerians but that – again – failed to translate to political participation.

Limitations

Since 1999 when Nigeria returned to party politics (after more than 36 years of military rule), two of the five elected presidents have been former Army generals. Retired military served as president in 16 of the 28 years of the country's return to democratic rule. Former military officers have also been elected into the local and national legislative houses (i.e., the Senate and House of Representatives).

To that extent, it has been difficult for Nigeria to shed the toga of military dictatorship, and for the civil society to adjust to democratic system. But Nigerian youth, many of whom never experienced military administration, are pushing back vigorously through social media platforms and robust civic engagement – conversations, even organizing, around political ideas. Using social media tools, especially WhatsApp, they are resisting the country’s geo-political history of corruption, inequality, social injustice and dictatorship. Social media channels are serving as alternatives for connecting with fellow Nigerians both at home and in the diaspora. In spite of stringent government regulation of social media, Nigerian youths are taking risks to be heard.

Overall, our results provide a snapshot into the role that SNSs can play in an emergent society. Given these findings, Nigerian youth cannot be described as engaged in idle talks on social media. As a matter of fact, the availability of social media has awoken their consciousness. They’ve become engaged in what is going on in the country if, in no other way, to vocally express their reasons for less participation in a system they view as literally too old to represent their interests. In a sense, they can no longer be taken for granted. Several hundred are engaged in a wide variety of communicative activities that are common among young adults, including blogs, video streaming sites, as well as growing mobile applications. For example, conservatively, there are about 500 Nigerians providing daily news analysis commentaries in English and other Nigeria languages on YouTube, with callers and feedback from across the globe. These are platforms they are using to debunk or challenge official pronouncements. Recently, the country was rocked by a wave of demonstrations as a result of wild allegations of abuse of power that included rape and extra-judicial killings, protests focused against a special police unit known as Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The allegations led to the #EndSARS movement. Twitter was used to spread and coordinate information about the mass protests. In October 2020, #EndSARS was the top trending hashtag in the world with over 2 million tweets, and it continuously trended in other countries including the United States and the United Kingdom (Obia, 2020; Tompkins, 2021).

Given that new technologies have facilitated alternative forms of opinion expression and information consumption, we can conclude that democracy in Nigeria could be strengthened when citizens have the means to exercise their rights to information. When the public is denied their right to information, democracy dies.

Finally, some limitations to this study should be noted. First, we recognize that by relying on secondary data, there are limits to what relationships can be compared, as opposed to original data specific to our hypotheses. For example, we would like to have addressed the effects of each unique platform (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc.) on political participation instead of having to deal with a single variable (social media). Also, a more balanced and interval-level Likert-type measurement scale would have been preferable to the extant measures of “Only once; a few times; often.” Nonetheless, the datasets are appropriate to the research questions being studied, and the enormous dataset was robust and sufficient for our analysis.

Most importantly, it’s vital to shine the light of inquiry on this modern democracy which represents one of the continent’s largest populations, economies and role as an energy producer – especially with its enormous population of increasingly activist youth. The future of Africa and the world is, in some sense, in the hands of Nigerians under the age of 30. It is essential to better understand this cohort, especially since social media now allows the robust inclusion of a global diaspora. As Vice President Yemi Osinbajo (age 65) has said, “Nigeria’s unity is one for which enough blood has been spilled and many hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost. Many have paid for the unity of this country with their lives, and it will be wrong of us, as men and women of goodwill in this generation, to toy with those sacrifices that have been made (Vanguard, 2017).”

The 60% of the population born since the end of military rule seem every bit as serious about this opportunity.

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The authors have no relationships with the data source or anyone else involved with this study or publication. There are no conflicts to report.

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