

**Mobilizing Nigerian youths for active political engagements through social media:
Examining the veracity of Facebook and WhatsApp in the 2019 general elections**

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Abstract

Background

Ever since, social media platforms have emerged to be viable tools of political engagement around the world. Since, Nigeria is stepping up to the current wave and leading in the internet penetration metrics in Africa, it is therefore very important to study how social media platforms have affected the election process.

Objectives: This work examined the veracity of Facebook and WhatsApp as tools for mobilizing the youths for active political engagements in Nigeria.

Methodology: The survey method was applied and a sample of 385 was derived from official numbers of eligible voters in Lagos for the 2019 Election. The questionnaire was the primary instrument used to generate response from respondents.

Results: The results revealed that both Facebook and WhatsApp were frequently used during the 2019 general election, and the majority of the youths were exposed to the various messages during the election period, leading to 91% of the respondent agreeing that Facebook and WhatsApp were useful tools for youth mobilization. Also, the hypothesis testing, the Pearson Chi-square value of 0.000 (at $P \leq 0.05$ levels of significance), rejected the null hypothesis and affirmed that the use of social media to mobilize youths during elections is significant.

Conclusion: It has become an undeniable fact that the political future of Nigeria rests on the shoulders of the youths, it only when the young population participate in the political and election activities that Nigeria can truly experience true democracy.

Unique Contribution: This study has provided evidence that social media is useful and very effective for youth mobilization during elections.

Key recommendation: The study therefore recommended, among others, that all political actors and stakeholders should take advantage of the new technologies to improve and encourage youth participation.

Keywords: Mobilize, Political engagements, Social media, Youths, General election

Introduction

Political communication is an essential piece of political and democratic processes. In fact, the new Internet technologies offer various platforms that make political engagements and interaction for democratic and civic processes possible. Information can be hugely democratized other socio-political communication can be constructed and discussed on social media with little or no cost. These platforms have become prominent tools and powerful fora for voter enlightenment, political communication and electoral engagements (Ayeni, 2019). Social networks have become a necessary means where political education and mobilization of electorates during election activities can be achieved. It has been adjudged to be the fastest and cheapest way to mobilize people. In order to accomplish productive and extended interaction in time and space, social media can expand the scope of political engagement and youth participation, (Aindrila, et al, 2014). See also (Iyorza 2008; 2014; 2017; Iyorza, & Abu, 2020; Iyorza, & Ekwok, 2015).

Social networking sites now provide the bridge needed to reach youth population for election participation and engagements. This is consequent on the popularity and frequent usage of social media among youths and the inefficacy of the one-way communication approach that characterised the earlier forms of communication used by electoral umpires variously. The use of social networks, has been noted to increase popular support and higher turnout during elections, and a means to reduce voter apathy that is very common among youths (Adesote & Abimbola 2014; AU, 2016; Biswas, et al, 2014).

It is very clear that social media has become a revolutionary means of political communication in recent times. This has greatly enhanced targeted information and group communication which has also greatly impacted the ways people interact. It is currently the most ubiquitous means for political education/sensitization, public mobilization, political interaction and electioneering campaigns which are important elements that strengthen progressive democracy and politics (Adesote & Akinbi 2018; Okechukwu, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

For many decades, scholars have been concerned about youth apathy during various elections in many parts of civilized countries and even in third-world nations. Thus, some have considered this abnormal phenomenon as a potential risk to progressive democracy, especially, in Nigeria (Shamsu, et al, 2017). As a result, civil society organizations and political actors have constantly been tasked with responsibility of reducing political apathy, through the effective use of conventional and more interactive media to reach as many people as possible during electioneering campaigns.

However, with these enormous potentials of the social media, numerous studies have not been able to piece together the relevance of Internet use and politics, especially how it affects the youth population. Available literatures have only offer loose circumstantial conclusions about the effectiveness of online youth sensitization on social networks in general. Other studies find limited impact of obtaining campaign information online during

elections and the effect of online youth education for political actions (Constantin, 2014, p. 24; Abdu1, et al, 2017).

Research Questions

1. To what level were youths in Lagos metropolis exposed to election messages on Facebook and WhatsApp platforms during 2019 General elections?
2. What nature of influence did Facebook and WhatsApp voter electioneering messages have on the political behaviours of youths in Lagos metropolis during the 2019 General election?
3. How effective were voter mobilization messages transmitted on social networks (Facebook and WhatsApp) during the 2019 General election on youths in Lagos State?

Research Hypothesis

H₁: The use of social media during elections is not significant to youth mobilization and offline participation

Literature Review

Social media provide interactive platforms that makes users communicate with another to ensure social relations, interact and share knowledge common to them. These web-based communication platforms afford users with features that permits social engagements over the internet (Conroy, et al, 2012; Hooghe, et al, 2014)..

A recent report found out that social networks provide opportunities for youths to interact with the common goal of discussing political issues and other related matter online. It further reveals that youths can become engaged with politicians and government through their connections online. Hence, we can safely infer that socialmedia constitute and facilitates online socializations among its various users (Abdu1, et al, 2017).

For example, in 2014, it was established that Facebook has the highest number of social media globally (PEW, 2016). Therefore, it best represents the justification for its wide acceptance youths. Candidates vying for political positions during elections have seen the huge potentials embodied by these online platforms, so they use them to attract followership, gain popularity and seek support. These sentiments resonate with the works of Adesote and Abimbola, (2017); Ayeni, (2019) and Bandpo, (2016).

Facebook has become commonly used as an online platform to engage younger generation who are social media savvy for political participation, and has so gained worldwide acceptance. Studies have revealed that youths are more inclined to seek online information about any political issues or activity and also exchange political views (Towner, 2013). Again, Okoro and Tsegyu, (2017), which found out that Facebook is a useful tool to mobilize individuals who might have been marginalized or discouraged from participating in any political activity.

The work of Theocharis and Quintelier (2014), ascertained in their work that the popular Facebook has become an ideal platform that gives unrestricted access to people and allows them to exercise their civic duties, especial as it concerns elections. Comparatively, it has become evident that Facebook is more credible in this instance than the conventional media vehicles (Gromping and Sinpeng, 2018).

There are certain indicators for political involvements requisite modalities for youth engagement for active politics; which must have elements of appeals that will stir political

interests in younger population. Vissers, et al, 2012; Young and Quan-Haase, (2009), agreed that Facebook subscribers possess the necessary elements and qualities that may encourage passive or politically docile individuals to partake in active civic process. According to the research findings of Theocharis and Quintelier (2014), Facebook can significantly increase democratic and civil participation.

In 2011, for instance, the elections saw an enviable use of social media at every facet of the electioneering processes in Nigeria. Social media is being used as a strong force to galvanize many individuals for electoral involvement (Oyesomi, et al, 2014, p. 1).

Michael and Ajakaiye (2012) through their study, found out that INEC used the social media platforms to respond to more than 4000 queries in 2011 elections, and the active involvement and interactivity that ensued between politicians, political parties and other groups during the 2011 election. The study revealed that by December 2010, Goodluck Jonathan had already won more than 300,000 fans on his Facebook page.

Okeke, et al (2016) agreed established that social media has emerged to be known as a sublime tool for youth mobilization, has diminished the elite influence and manipulations in political processes. Social media use is extremely cheap, and because of its relatively free nature, it has opened up the chance for unwilling citizens to rekindle their civic interests. These words capture Okoro and Tseguy's study in 2017 which states that social media massively improves electoral processes and gives credibility to political process, among other benefits.

Indeed, social media is undeniably relevant in today's electioneering processes. Studies have lend support for the tremendous effects it has on the participation of individual in the day-to-day political process, encourage youth participation in electoral process and participatory democracy in Nigeria (Madueke, et al, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratification Theory

The theory emerged in the 1970s by Katz Elihu and his colleagues Blumler and Gurevitch expanded the idea. The theory views audience as active, and they seek out the best way to use the media to utilize and in the way that suits them (Rossi, 2002). It therefore necessitated the need to understand why people choose certain media forms that gratifies the social or psychological needs of the members of the society (Chandler, 1994).

This theory is also referred to as "utility theory." This explains the functions of certain kinds of media contents in a particular circumstance. Folarin (2005) argues that audience users consciously dictate which media content will influence them, since they exercise their full right to expose themselves to any media messages that matches their overall needs, purpose, objectives, beliefs and choice. Attention has now shifted from what the media can do with the audience, rather to what the audience can use the media for; which necessarily underscores media consumption. This means that media effect is now solely dependent on what people permit it to be.

Wimmer and Dominick (2000) mention that uses and gratification tries to understand what the audience members use the media, rather than what the media do to the audience members. This perspective is talking about why we use some contents and ignore others. Why is it that people choose not to expose themselves to all media messages?

Asemah et al. (2017), pointed out the mutual relationships that exist between the media and its various audience members. That is because the media is an important conduit

of the modern society and the society is intertwined with the purpose and existence of the media; that is the whole essence of uses and gratification theory.

These postulations explain the core focus of this work as it explains in practical details why youths make use of certain social networks in order to be exposed politically and make informed decisions that suit their choices.

Methodology

The survey design was adopted for this work, with questionnaire as its main instrument for data collection. The population of this study included eligible voters, who are also social media users in Lagos State. Using purposive sampling techniques, 300 respondents from early 20s to 40 years of age were selected, and the instrument was administered in Lagos Island and Lagos Mainland applying the simple random technique.

The population of this study was derived from the number of registered voters in Lagos state as published by INEC in 2019. The population was 6,570,291, out of which 385 sample size was derived using the Australian online calculator.

Results and Discussion

The total number of copies of questionnaire that returned and found usable for analysis was 334 representing 87%. The main error was answering the baseline questions in the negative, which tested respondent's ownership of Facebook and WhatsApp and to know if they used them during the election, respondents who ticked negative were asked not to proceed with the rest of the questionnaire items. The statistical package for social sciences (SPSS version 20) was used for running the descriptive analysis.

Analysis

Research question one data concerned the level of awareness youths were exposed to on Facebook and WhatsApp during the 2019 General election in Lagos. The results show that majority (93%) of the respondents rated the messages on the social networks to be very frequent and at the same time 83% adjudged the awareness level to be very high. Also, results indicated that Facebook featured more election messages than WhatsApp, at 62% and 38% respectively. The respondents indicated through a multiple choice options that messages targeted at election results, campaign updates, and other messages that focused on voter education interested them more during the election.

To answer the research question two on ways Facebook and WhatsApp influenced voters in the 2019 general election. The results show that 195(58%) indicated that the messages they were exposed to influenced them in certain ways. Also, the same number and percentage (198 or 58%) rated the influence very high. The multiple choice response in table 15 showed that respondents were moved follow voting results on social networks platforms, this influence rated highest among others.

The research question provides answer to the key variable of this study which bothers on the effectiveness of Facebook and WhatsApp platforms as tools of youth engagement during elections. The data analyzed revealed that the majority of respondents 91% agreed that Facebook and WhatsApp were useful during the 2019 general elections in Lagos, and the same number 91% said Facebook and WhatsApp can be effective in youth sensitization during electoral process. While in comparison, Facebook and WhatsApp have been adjudged by same number of respondents to be very effective as against other social network platforms.

Presentations

Figure 1: Presenting Data for the Summary of Research Question One

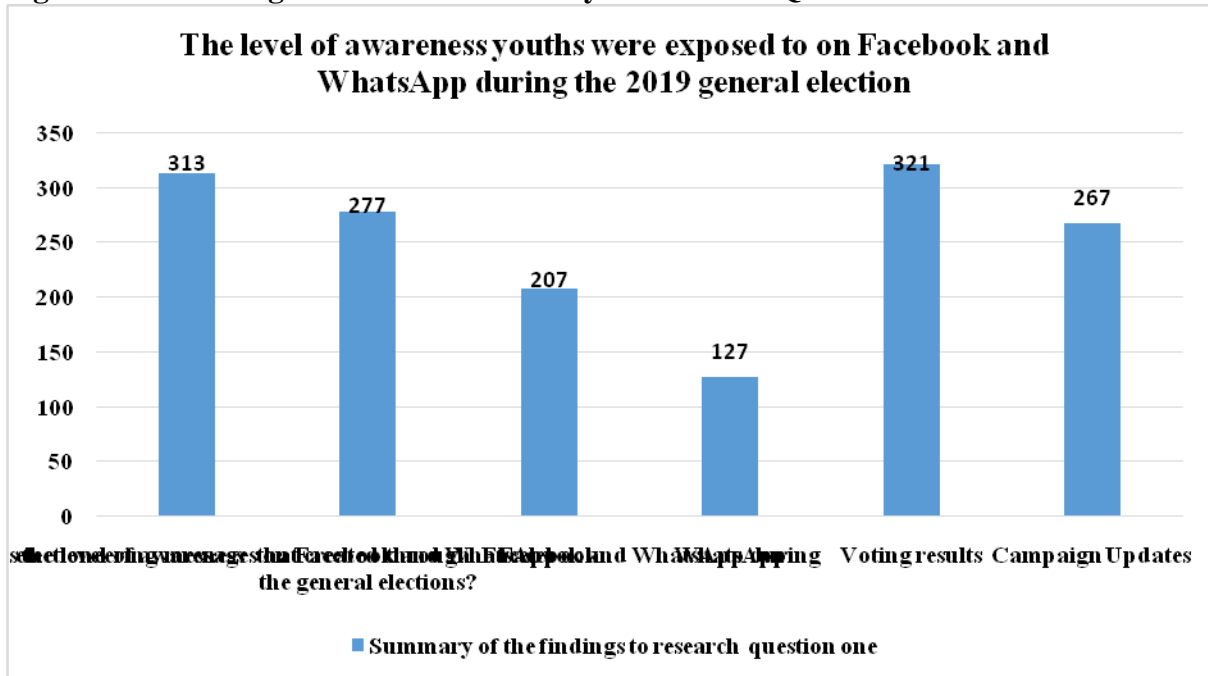


Figure 2: Presenting data for research question two

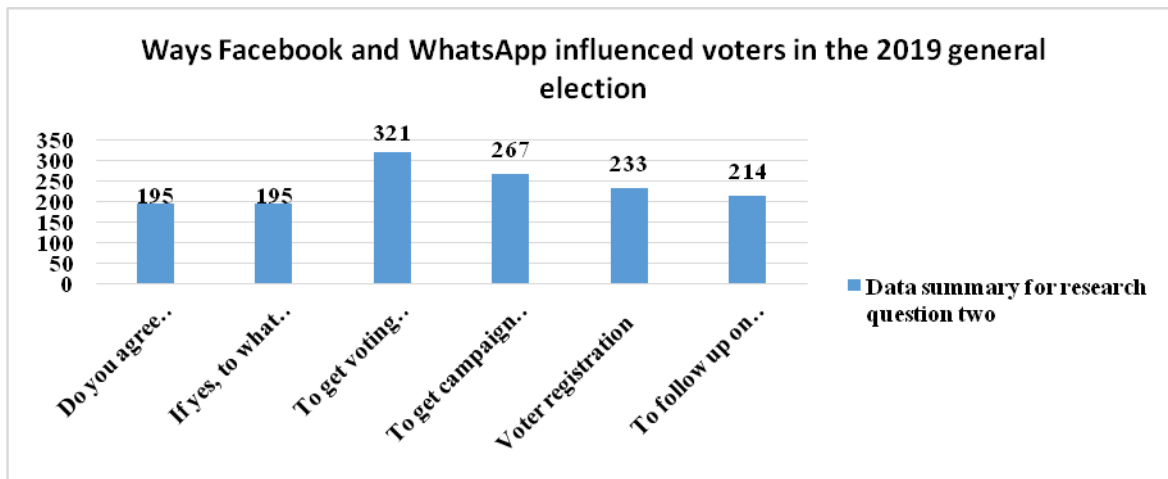
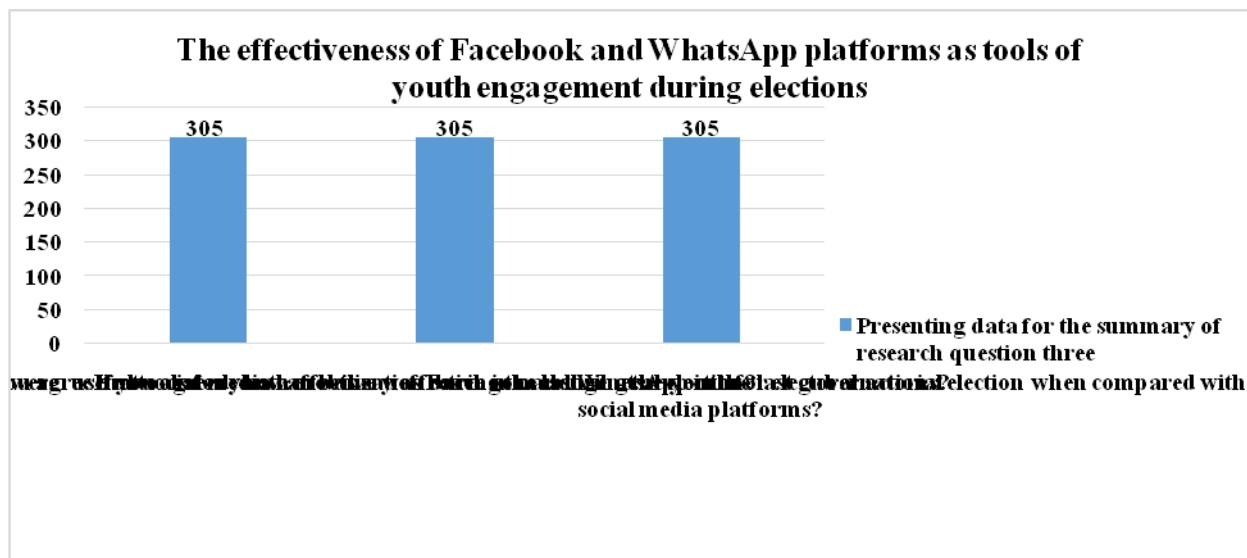


Figure Three: Presenting data for research question three



Hypothesis

Do you agree that the political messages you were exposed to influenced your decision during the gubernatorial election? * Do you agree that social media can be very effective in mobilizing the youth for electoral actions? Cross-tabulation

Count

		Do you agree that social media can be very effective in mobilizing the youth for electoral actions?				Total
		Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	
Do you agree that the political messages you were exposed to influenced your decision during the gubernatorial election?	Strongly agree	109	0	0	0	109
	Agree	77	9	0	0	86
	Neutral	0	98	0	0	98
	Strongly disagree	0	11	0	0	11
	Disagree	0	1	25	4	30
Total		186	119	25	4	334

Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	617.067 ^a	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	538.710	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	264.223	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	334		

a. 8 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.3.

Symmetric Measures

		Value	Asymptotic Standardized Error ^a	Approximate T ^b	Approximate Significance
Nominal by Nominal	Phi	1.359			.000
	Cramer's V	.785			.000
	Contingency Coefficient	.805			.000
Ordinal by Ordinal	Gamma	1.000	.000	33.093	.000 ^c
	Spearman Correlation	.900	.012	37.609	.000 ^c
Interval by Interval	Pearson's R	.891	.013	35.714	.000 ^c
Measure of Agreement	Kappa	.098	.027	3.147	.002
N of Valid Cases		334			

a. Not assuming the null hypothesis.

- b. Using the asymptotic standard error assuming the null hypothesis.
- c. Based on normal approximation.

From the result above, it is evident that, the political message the respondents were exposed to have influence on them and it is effective in mobilizing the youths towards participating in the electoral actions. This is affirmed by 98% of respondents. Hence, this informed the Pearson Chi-square value of 0.000 (at $P \leq 0.05$ levels of significance) which indicates that it is significant. Hence, the researchers accept the alternative which states that “there is significant relationship between the use of social networking sites during elections has the capabilities to mobilize youths.

Discussion

In determining the level of exposures of youth to election messages during the 2019 General elections in Lagos, the result from the survey revealed that 93% of the sample agreed that they frequently saw messages targeted at voter education during the 2019 gubernatorial election in Enugu, 83% rated the frequency of voter education messages on Facebook and WhatsApp very high, meanwhile, majority adjudged Facebook to be prevalently used during the election period to carry messages that appealed to the youth population.

These findings correspond with the research work Dunu and Uzochukw, (2015) who found out that the use of social network has become necessary in elections because of its low cost and the speed of messages. Also, Ayeni (2019) discovered that social networking platforms were extensively used in the 2019 election and that youths mostly engaged in online political interactions through the use and their exposure to messages on social media. Likewise, the data in the work of Okechukwu, (2018) concludes that social networking platforms have significantly enhanced electioneering and political processes in Nigeria. They have truly become means or sources of political engagements and viable means to reach the bulk of the voters and influence them for active participation; these facts were also discovered in the research findings of Ayeni, (2019).

In the results that answered research question two, the findings revealed that 58% of the entire sample agreed that voter education messages on Facebook and WhatsApp influence them. The multiple choice option provided the respondents to indicate the nature of influence, which ranges from election updates, shunning election violence, voter registration, campaign updates, getting voting news/results, online party registration.

The findings of this work is in tandem with other scholarly research previously conducted by Okoro and Tsegysu (2017) which discovered that social media offer participatory democracy, promotes transparency and greater accuracy in the political process and facilitate speedy release of election results. Vissers, et al, (2012) learnt that social network has the power and can wield strong influence in terms of mobilizing youths in active politics.

Young and Quan-Haase, (2009), revealed that opportunities for political participation are more likely to occur if the interests of youths are stirred and encouraged. This revelation is in agreement with a similar work conducted by Theocharis and Quintelier, (2014).

The data analyzed to answer research question three the following results; that the majority of respondents 91% agreed that Facebook and WhatsApp were useful during the 2019 General elections in Lagos, and the same number said Facebook and WhatsApp were effective for youth engagement during electoral process. While in comparison, Facebook and

WhatsApp have been adjudged by same number of respondents to be very effective as against other social network platforms.

These realities have been found to be true by many researchers. For example, the work of Madueke, et al (2017) shows that the use of social media tremendously affected the participation of individuals in the day to day political process, encourage youth participation in electoral process and participatory democracy in Nigeria.

On the contrary, Norris (2011) in Wasswa (2013, p. 30) drew a conclusion that social media may not be successful to activate or engage citizens for two reasons. First, access to the internet requires technological resources which are unevenly distributed in different countries due to socioeconomic reasons. Second and most important, it has been argued that online politics only attracts citizens who have been active and engaged in offline politics. All these affect the use of the internet for political mobilization.

In total shift of this narrative, Okeke, et al (2016) agreed with the fact that social networking sites can be very effective in youth mobilization. This supports the findings of Oyesomi, et al (2014) which showed that high as 98% of the respondents indicated that Facebook influenced youth awareness during the 2011 general elections. In the same vein, Vissers, et al (2012) found social media to be very effective in political sensitization of youth and non-participatory public during elections.

Overall, Nwabuzor and Gever, (2015) in their work *social media as instrument of global mobilization*, found social networks have the potency to mobilize millions.

Conclusion

It has become an irrefutable fact that the political future of Nigeria rests on the shoulders of the youths, and as such having the young population fully involved in the political and election processes is a way to promote participatory democracy, vibrant political processes and an egalitarian society

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

1. Electoral umpires and the government should consider online tools to fully involve youths for broader civic engagement and political involvement
2. Access to information about politics, election and opportunities for participation should be made available through online engagement and initiatives to encourage youth sensitization.
3. Political parties must undertake serious and structured social media strategy. It will not only be counter-productive to rely only on offline approaches for political dialogue and engagement but it will continue to raise many questions on election integrity in Nigeria.
4. The Nigerian government should realize that there is a dire need to invest in political literacy for citizens, especially the young population. A politically literate voter will trigger a change in political culture in which the business-as-usual approach will no longer be tolerated.

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