



SOCIAL MEDIA AND YOUTHS PARTICIPATION IN 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigated the involvement of the Nigeria youths in the just concluded 2023 general elections in Nigeria as inspired through the use of the available social media platforms, which include: Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter, Youtube, among others. This study adopted an online survey research design, and used simple random sampling technique to gather data from 384 respondents. This study also used the democratic media participant theory. Finally, this study found out that upto 37,060,399 representing 39.65 or approximately 40 percent of the entire voters in Nigeriathat fall within the age range of 18 and 34years participated actively from the registration to the final voting, collation and declaration stages of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Italso found out that some of the political activities the Nigerian youths used the social media platforms to do during the election included: political advocacy, communication and discussions, campaigning, election and result monitoring, among others. Finally, the study concluded that the social media, indeed, encouraged youths participation in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, and therefore recommended that the use of social media should be supported by the Nigerian government through the reduction in data charges, etc, since it is now clear that the use of social media has helped in promoting digital skills, interactions, enlightenment, political awareness and participation among the Nigerian youths.

Keywords: *Social Media, Political Participation, Nigerian Youths, Democratic Participant and Election.*

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Introduction

The internet is critical in effective global communication and has created opportunities for increased and more diverse civic engagement and political participation (Ohme, 2019). Social media, which is internet-enabled, has become ubiquitous and familiar in Africa, especially in Nigeria, with the introduction of the mobile phone in 1999 (Morah et al., 2016). Bello and Kaufhold (2023) believe social media use is solid and steady in developing countries. The social media boom is overwhelmingly changing Africa's economic, educational, social and political landscapes (Morah et al., 2016). However, globally, the use of the internet has increased, with two-thirds of the world's 7.8 billion people already online thanks to social media and social networking sites (SNS), including Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp (Kemp, 2022; Pew Research Center, 2018) as cited in (Bello and Kaufhold, 2023). Social media use has enabled people to organise, interact with the outside world and participate in social and political activity, particularly in emerging and developing nations (Howard et al., 2011; Mano and Ndlela, 2020). The prevalence of social media use among young people in Africa is believed to have a connection with their rich history of failed governance that manifests in various forms of marginalisation (Obisesan, 2022).

Mano and Ndlela (2020) argue that African people increasingly use mobile and social media to partake in political debates, even in ways that challenge authority. The essence of social media as a political engagement tool was underscored in the above assertions. Politics in Africa is bedevilled by various factors, including voter apathy and ethnic, religious, tribal and economic influence. In recent times, tribalism is one factor in Nigerian politics that is assumed to dominate and affect leadership selection. In Africa, "the nature of colonial rule was abhorrent to broad participation of constituents in the direction and operation of political systems" Lechler and McNamee (2018) as cited in Bello and Kaufhold (2023). The outcomes of the Nigerian 2023 elections were particularly controversial following the alleged claims of irregularities that occurred during the elections despite the prominent heavy media coverage of the polls. With an approximate population of 202 million people (worldbank.org, 2020) and over 350 ethnic groups and languages, uniformity in ideas, objectives and aspirations is challenging due to political sentiments.

Moreover, violence, rigging and official exploitation in favour of the ruling party were especially prevalent during general elections (Morah and Chiaha, 2021). This explains why African leaders

are appointed based on tribal identity, political party or religious group. In support, Oboh (2016), listed countries like Burundi, Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Nigeria as some African countries that are yet to conduct successful elections without external supervision, often because of “the possibility of the government influencing the results of the elections in favour of the ruling parties.”

Nigeria’s political system, characterized by power zoning among Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba tribes, favours party consensus, leading to party politics where candidates are selected based on their zone. Nigeria’s multi-religious nature has led to irregularities in general elections, including rigging, voter disfranchisement, ballot box snatching and collusion between officials and politicians to alter results and subvert popular mandates (Aleyomi and Ajekaiye, 2014; Ibrahim and Ibeanu, 2009). Okunna and Morah (2023) criticize Nigeria’s state due to ethnic and religious crises, causing fear and distrust among the populace and highlighting growing political disillusionment due to anti-democratic electoral practices, exemplified by the 2023 general elections. New media technology has, however, revolutionised the transmission of messages and information, enabling ease of dissemination through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp. Scholars (Morah and Uzochukwu, 2020; Okunna and Omenugha, 2012) agree that social network sites allow users to present themselves, articulate their networks and establish connections with others. In other words, social media platforms share political manifestos and talk shows, which have enhanced self-awareness and active political e-participation. The emerging technology, which comes in the form of digitisation, has also improved the face of the Nigerian electoral process by reducing the incidence of electoral fraud and inaccuracy (The Vanguard, 2023).

During the 25th February presidential election exercise, Nigerians strongly demanded that the result be uploaded to the BVAS and IReV machines. The former is a technology that allows for voter identification and accreditation through fingerprints and facial recognition. At the same time, the latter helps with an online portal where polling unit results are uploaded directly from the polling unit, transmitted and available for public monitoring (The Vanguard, 2023). Moreover, due to the increase in social media use and escalations in smartphone ownership, more people seem interested in online activities, especially politics (Morah and Chiaha, 2021). They form family forums on social media platforms, where people rightly express their opinions and support, not minding the tribal or ethnic connotations.

Research also indicated that social media platforms enhance political participation (Morah and Uzochukwu, 2020; Anyanwu and Orji, 2020; Abraham and Tibebe, 2019). Morah et al. (2019) found that Facebook and WhatsApp were popularly used for political news and information. Sumera et al. (2020) concluded that social media creates awareness, builds political efficacy and increases youth participation. These studies were done in the past and need revalidation. However, most of these studies did not give a premium to tribal politics, e-participation and development, which is the essence of this study. Hence, the present study is apt and timely, focusing on social media and youth participation in 2023 general elections in Nigeria

Nigeria and 2023 General Elections

Election is a procedure typical for all democratic systems. It is the process that brings people into the positions of power in very democratic setting. Nigeria has had elections even during the colonial era, and it has continued till the fourth republic. The fourth republic Nigeria began in the year 1999, with an election that ushered in Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the first democratically elected president of the fourth republican Nigeria, and there have also been so many other elections in Nigeria between 1999 and 2023. Hence, the 2023 general elections in Nigeria becomes the seventh consecutive general elections that have been held in Nigeria since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999 (the fourth republic). The 2023 general elections in Nigeria undoubtedly mark 24 years of uninterrupted democracy with series of elections every fourth year and this has turned out to be the longest span in Nigeria's history. 2023 general elections in Nigeria was contested by at least 18 political parties, all duly registered by INEC. These parties fielded their respective candidates that went into the field and slugged it out on the 25th of February, 2023, in the bid to determine the next president of the country. But at the end of the entire context, INEC, as the electoral umpire declared Bola Ahmed Tinubu as the new president of the federal republic of Nigeria. According to (Mohamed et al, 2023), Tinubu garnered 37 percent of the entire votes cast by Nigerians.

Elections indeed are not new to Nigeria, but that of 2023 was one to reckon with, especially with the massive participation of the Nigerian youths who wholeheartedly engaged on the entire process from the time of voter registration to the voting proper, all encouraged by the information shared on different social media platforms.

Social media and Elections

Research has shown that social media influences different areas, even in elections and political communication. Elections, according to (Singh and Mishra (1991), as cited in Rasak et al. (2022), are critical to democracy's operation. Elections are the bedrock of a genuinely democratic system. It is commonly described as a "formal" act of aggregate choice that occurs in a chain of associated antecedents and subsequent actions. It entails individuals' participation in the election of their representatives as well as their participation in governance (Rasak et al., 2022). The 2019 study by Morah, Udeze and Ekwenchi examined Facebook user reactions to election results, finding high mobile Facebook usage for political information but no influence on voting decisions using technological determinism and the agenda-setting theory. Also, Sumera et al. (2020) study on social media's role in Pakistan's democratisation found social building political efficacy and increasing participation, with platforms like Facebook and Twitter providing crucial information. The 2020 research by Anyanwu and Orji confirms Sumera et al. (2020) findings on social media's effectiveness in promoting political engagement in Southeast Nigeria, finding that it positively impacts 70% of inhabitants' lives. Similarly, in their study "Social Media Use and

Political Communication Challenges among Selected Entrepreneurs in Nigeria," Morah and Uzochukwu (2020) employed a survey to look into how 200 entrepreneurs use social media for governance-related activities. The study relied heavily on the theories of agenda-setting and technological determinism. Their results show that social media – particularly Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter – dramatically increases interest in, participation in, connection with and socialisation among traders and artisans. According to Olubunmi and Folorounso's (2020) report on "Use of Social Media for Political Participation by Youths, "Facebook was the most widely utilised social media platform among youth in the last elections." The specific goals here were to find information about the respondents' use of various social media platforms, their activity patterns and the variables influencing their use of social media for political engagement. The study, involving 322 respondents, found that Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter were the most popular platforms for youth political participation, aligning with previous Sumera, Zaeem and Aaima and Anyanwu and Orji research.

In their 2019 study, "The Role of Social Media in Citizens' Political Participation," Abraham and Tibebe employed a qualitative research design to investigate how citizens utilise social media to

engage in politics. Relevant research showed that social media has taken the role of traditional media because it boosts political engagement and strategic synergy, which can influence governmental political policy. Meanwhile, Akindutire and Oluwatosin's 2023 survey study found that 71% of Nigerian youth rely on Twitter for election updates, and 39% believe the platform effectively persuaded them to support a candidate during the election period. Additionally, 56% of respondents agreed that Twitter effectively supported and influenced their choice.

Although research has demonstrated the role of social media in politics, the relationship between social media and tribal politics and religion needs to be adequately investigated and underscored. Moreover, there is a dearth of literature on the relationship between tribal politics, religion and social media use in political communication in the 2023 elections in southeastern Nigeria. None of the studies looked into e-participation. This study sought to fill in this gap in the literature and make recommendations on the way forward in a multiethnic Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Democratic Media Participant Theory

Democratic participant theory is a theory that postulates equal freedom of access to the mass media and their contents by all, in a given society. This access to the mass media should come to all irrespective of their race, ethnicity groups, religious inclinations, gender, social status, etc. The democratic participant theory was propagated in 1989 by Dennis McQuail. The theory promotes equal right for all, both the mass media contents and the activities of the government of a given society. The democratic participant theory recommends the involvement of all and sundry in governance, their entire activities and unrestricted access to the mass media, so that the people could have equal chances to make their voices heard, and contribute their respective quotas to the issues of state that concern them. It also sees the mass media as an instrument that is intended to champion the course of democracy wherever they are. The applicability of this theory to this study comes with the agreement that all in a society should be given equal opportunity and access to the mass media and their contents, in terms of promoting their candidacy during electioneering campaign, and also given the same equal opportunity to vote and be voted for, as well as, to contribute and participate effectively in the decisions and policies of the government in power and its agencies, and all these are what the democratic participant theory represents.

Research Method

This study investigated the involvement of the Nigeria youths in the just concluded 2023 general elections in Nigeria as inspired through the use of the social media. The study adopted the survey research design, through the use of simple random sampling technique that randomly selected a sample size of 384 respondents, according to Mayer’s sampling technique. All surveys were done online and the outcome are shown in two tables and a bar chart below.

Table 1: The social media channels used by the youths and their frequency of use during the 2023 general election in Nigeria.

Social Media	Frequency of Use	Percentage
Whatsapp	89	23
Instagram	87	22
Twitter	75	19
Facebook	101	26
Others	32	10
Total	384	100%

Source: Study Field Work

Table 2: The number of youths that participated in 2023 general elections in Nigeria

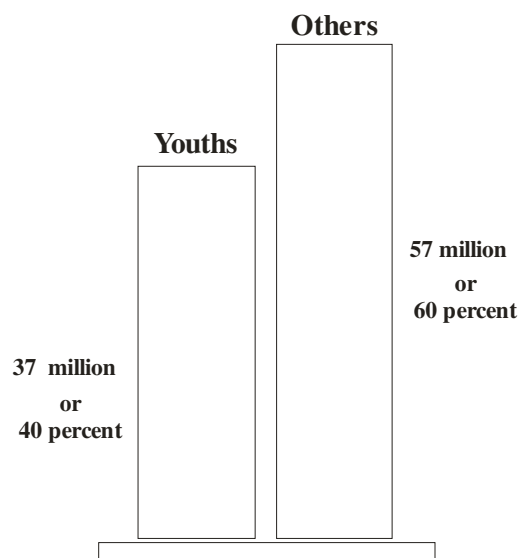


Table 3: The activities Nigerian youths did in the social media in other to participate in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Social Media	Frequency of Use	Percentage
Political Advocacy	107	28
Communication/Discussions, Campaigning	86	22
Result Monitoring	152	39
Others	22	6
	17	5
Total	384	100%

Source: Study Field Work

Discussion on Findings

Table one above shows the social media channels that were used by the Nigerian youths during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, and their frequencies and the outcome shows that out of 384 respondents, 89 or 23 percent participated in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria via Whatsapp, 87 or 22 percent did so via Instagram, 75 or 19 percent were on Twitter, 101 of them, representing

26 percent participated in the elections through Facebook, while 32 respondents or 10 percent participated in the 2023 general election through othersocial media channels that where not listed by the researcher.

Table two(a bar chart) shows the total number of youths that participated in 2023 general elections in Nigeria, and from data gathered in this study through online newspaper contents survey, it becomes evident that a total number of 37 million Nigerians, representing 40 percent of the entire eligible voters in Nigeria where youths, while others, none-youths, which is made up of adult males and females made up a total number of 57 million or 60 percent of the entire eligible voters during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

The last table on this study shows the kinds of activities which the Nigerian youths did on the social media in other to participate in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. And the finding shows that a total of 107 respondents, representing 28 percent of the sample inferred that what they did on the social media during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria was basically political advocacy, 86 or 22 percent insisted they did political communication or discussions, 153 or 39 percent used the social media platforms enumerated above to do political campaigning for either the party of their choice or their preferred candidates, 22 or 6 percent used the social media to monitor election results, while the rest, 17 respondents, representing 5 percent of the total sample used the social media to do other activities that were not specified in the questionnaire by the researcher as they participated in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria via various social media platforms.

Conclusion

From data available via this research work it becomes obvious that the Nigerian youths actually participated en masse, before, during and after the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, in the following ways: Before the 2023 voting proper, the Nigerian youths used the social media platforms available to do political advocacy, campaigning and awareness creation, in this case they used the social media platform to educate other youths, telling them the need to go out and register for the permanent voters card as a criteria that would enable them to participate in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

During the 2s023 voting proper, the Nigerian youths used the available social media platforms forcommunication, propaganda and to keep abreast of what was happening in other places across

Nigeria as the voting was still going on. In other words, they used the social media platforms to monitor the progress of voting and other activities that thrived on the voting grounds across the country during the voting proper. After voting, the Nigerian youths also used the social media to monitor election results. They used it to show others what a party had scored in one area or polling unit to be able to predict the final outcome of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Finally, some of these activities the Nigeria youth did that enabled them to participate actively during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria where done basically on the following social media platforms: Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and others social media platforms. A total number of 37,060,399 Nigerian youth, which approximated to 40percent of the total eligible voters in Nigeria who fell within the age range of 18 and 34 participated effectively from the registration stage to the final voting, collation and declaration stages. According to Nwokoma (2023) “The youth also used the social media platforms to create virtual town halls through social media during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.”“The Nigerian youths, during the pre-election period, mobilized other youths to register during the Continuous Voter Registration (CRV). They organized musical concerts, seminars, town halls, radio jingles, television and newspaper advertisements including embarking on social media campaigns to mobilize youths to register and collect their PVCs (Jide, 2022). Undoubtedly, the Nigerian youths were encouraged to participate massively in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria through their social media handles, and these social media platforms have helped the Nigerian youths to acquire digital skills, interactions, enlightenment, political awareness and participation.

Recommendations

This study recommends the following:

- a. That more youths should be encouraged to make use of the social media more often to be able to monitor goings on in the country and to participate fully in them,
- b. The Nigerian government should liaise with service providers in Nigeria to make the internet usage cheaper and more affordable to encourage more youth participation during important national policies and activities in Nigeria, and

- c. The Nigeria government should also monitor the social media to avoid being wrongly used by overzealous youths to propagate falsehood, hate speech and to fan the embers of hatred, religion and ethnic conflict among others.

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