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SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR POLITICAL EXPRESSION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract
In every democratic society, citizens express their political opinions by speaking and writing on ideologies, casting votes during elections, and by dissenting and criticizing government's actions and policies when necessary. Living in an era of digital technology, where individual traits such as communication apprehensions and self-censorship has hindered outspokenness, many Nigerians now prefer participation on social media to speaking publicly. This study assumes importance to clarify social media as a tool for political expression in Nigeria. It brings together insights from the Agenda-Setting and the Uses and Gratification Theories to provide a comprehensive analysis. It deduced that political expression is essential for maintaining democracy in Nigeria, social media being broad in extent, organized in documentation, widely diffused, being synoptic and contiguous in storage is the tool that can add a new layer to the study of political beliefs and behavior, form new political engagements, build niche audience, and increased followership or internet clubs from support groups. Thus, it recommends statutory regulatory provisions to protect political expressions and social media users by law. While calling for further studies on this subject, now that there is proposal for internet voting which could lead to more people participating in elections.
Key words: Social media, Political expression

Introduction

As a country, the citizens of Nigeria have a right to agree among themselves so that they can live together. These agreements should be freely expressed so that the public can evaluate what is best for themselves and the society. This notion is located in the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2001). It is a political behavior.

As years go by, political expressions extended from traditional offline interpersonal mode of communication to media use which is broad in extent, widely diffused and synoptic in storage. Today, our expressions can be programmed, coded and written in ciphers. The amazing thing is that it is performed with the fingers.

With the proliferation of "data boys" or "social media influencers", online communities have been formed around common interest, encouraging co-operation and social support. Social groups have gradually transformed to interest clubs and advocacy organizations. Today, by this innovation, political beliefs and public dialogue are shared and geographical divides have been bridged by rapid information dissemination, improved communication and connection of people.

Currently, it seems political expressions have been made easier, faster, contiguous, diverse (dynamic), broadly diffused; and can be retrieved, programmed and transferred very quickly in one medium. The question now is this: Are individual expectations as a result of social media influence on political expressions met?

This study attempts to offer explanation on Hampton et al (2014) research on whether stronger participation on social media has uncovered opinion climate, opinion congruency, self-censorship and isolation. What new forms of political engagement and behavior can be formed or shaped? Can the citizens through this medium give legitimacy to the government? Can accountability of government be assured? All these forms the scope of this paper.

DESCRIPTION OF CONCEPTS

SOCIAL MEDIA

Wikipedia defines social media as interactive technologies that allows and facilitate the creation, sharing and aggregation of contents (texts and visuals) and information among virtual communities and networks. By this anyone can share their content to build audience on their networks. With the right strategy, social media helps to build trust, educate their target audience, and create ideological awareness. It is increasingly mobile and accessed through mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets and laptops. This connects people globally by bridging geographical divides.

Today, billions of people around the world use social media platforms launched each year. Hence, everyone (user) decides which site is right and would fit into the communication strategy for their organization. We, thus, agree with Leonardi (2013) who argues that social media have a set of properties and the individuals who use them have their own characters and needs this relationship shows that some social media platforms will meet individuals' expectations better than others (Hutchby, 2011).

There are different types of social media sites or platforms. The major ones at the moment are Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp, Tiktok, Twitter (x), LinkedIn, YouTube, Snapchat, Reddit and Pinterest.

POLITICAL EXPRESSION

Politics is about making agreements between people so that they can live together in groups such as tribes, cities or countries. Political expression, therefore is communication that express a specific opinion on political events or processes. Political expression is a function of communication competence and motives of use.

According to Canary and Spitzberg (1987), communication competence is the perceived effectiveness and appropriateness people believe they have as communicators, and it is related with a need to fulfil interpersonal objectives. In a paper, "Political Expression on Social Media", Alcides Yalesquez and Hernando Rojas (2017) listed political expressions to include speaking and writing freely on ideologies, protests, campaigns, dissenting and criticizing of government policies, and casting of votes when the time comes.

Lane D.S et al publication, "Social Media Expressions and the Political Self" (Feb 1, 2019) writes, "Expression has the power to shape how we see ourselves". Political expression is a fundamental right. However, the right is subject to restrictions, and cannot extend to violence or any other activity that disrupts public order.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is carried out under the concept of Interpersonal Communication Theory and mass communication models. It is guided by the Agenda-Setting theory and the Uses and Gratification theory to provide valuable insight into the complex relationship between the media and media users as they are

essential for understanding the dynamics of political expression in Nigeria. By these, interpersonal and mass mediated type of communication merge in one medium enabling mass personal form of communication in a new dimension that was not possible before the digital age (Carr and Hayes, 2015).

This framework fits our theoretical explanation and prediction of social media political expressions in Nigeria. It explains and predicts our emerging type of political participation and governance. The Agenda-Setting Theory formally developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972 is essential in understanding the role of social media in political expression. This theory posits that the media does not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. In Nigeria, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become essential in highlighting political issues. For instance, during the EndSARS protests, social media played a crucial role in bringing attention to police brutality and mobilizing public opinion. By setting the agenda, social media can influence the topics that dominate public discourse and, consequently, political outcomes.

This theory is crucial because it explains how media influences the public agenda. In the context of social media, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram play a significant role in highlighting political issues and shaping public discourse. By setting the agenda, social media can bring attention to specific political topics, mobilize public opinion, and influence political outcomes. The Uses and Gratifications Theory by social scientist Elihu Katz, Jay Blumber, and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970s provides insight into why individuals use social media for political expression. This theory emphasizes the active role of users in selecting media to satisfy various needs. In Nigeria, social media users often seek out platforms to express their political views, connect with like-minded individuals, and participate in political discussions. For instance, during elections, many Nigerians use social media to share their opinions, engage in debates, and stay up-to-date about political developments. This theory helps explain the motivations behind using social media for political expression, such as seeking information, forming personal identity, and engaging in community building.

The Agenda-Setting Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, together give a comprehensive understanding of how social media serves as a powerful tool for political expression in Nigeria. Social media not only influences public opinion by setting the agenda but also empowers individuals to actively participate in political discourse. This dual role makes social media a unique and potent platform for political expression.

Agenda-Setting Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory together provide a robust framework for analyzing the impact of social media on political expression in Nigeria. They highlight both the influence of social media on public opinion and the active role of users in shaping political discourse. This combination offers a perspective on the dynamic interplay between social media and political expression in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is expected that every political expression aims to earn credibility, attraction and respect. Such expressions could be photos and related contents that can be shared for inspiration. These texts and visuals can be published to attract the publics who visit the blogging and publishing networks. They can also be saved for later use.

If citizens are able to freely express their views on economic, political and social issues, there will be an abundance of information from which the public can evaluate what is best for themselves and society.

Thus, the public can participate in a country's political development meaningfully as well as monitor the efficiency of state administration. Social media is a collective term for websites and applications that focus on communications such as this, including community-based input, interaction, content sharing and collaboration.

Previous and indeed several scholarly works done on this subject shows that the efficacy of social media on political expression is determined by communication competence, good expressive behaviours, and motive of users. According to Canary and Spitzberg (1987), communication competence is defined as the perceived effectiveness and appropriateness people believe they have as communicators and it is related with a need to fulfill interpersonal objectives.

It is as an individual's disposition for effective and appropriate interaction given a particular interpersonal context. It extends from interpersonal communication skill to media use and news consumption (Spitzberg, 1983). Communicative competence is positively related with activism (Shah, McLeod and Lee, 2009). This notion is located in the theoretical framework of self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Nevertheless, individual willingness to express their political positions openly is influenced by their general communication predispositions and the context under discussion.

In their deposition, Donsbach, Salmon and Tafati (2014) and Matthas et al (2012) uncovers opinion climate, opinion congruency and individual traits such as communication apprehensions and self-censorship as factors influencing individual's level of outspokenness. Research findings reveal that some people who tend to avoid speaking publicly and openly finds stronger participation on social media (Hampton et al, 2014).

Leonardi (2013) argues that social media have a set of properties and the individuals who use them have their own characters and needs. In the views of Bekafigo and McBride (2013), it offers a political outlet for marginalized groups. This establishes the inference that online settings might be more politically diverse than face-to-face settings (Back Wojcicszak and Carpini, 2012, Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015). According to Rainie, Smith, Schlozman, Brady and Verba (2012), this mode of participation might be as exceptional as the traditional mode of participation. Therefore, social media has given rise to new forms of political engagement (Bekafigo and McBride, 2013).

We can thus adopt the view of De Zuniga, Bachmann Hsu and Brundidge (2013) that political expression on social media has been found to positively influence other political behaviours such as traditional types of political participation, including political mobilization (Rojas and Puiq-I-Abril, 2013), and electoral campaigning (Dimitrova Sheheta, Stromback and Nord, 2014). No controversy, therefore, to say in the view of Kwak, Williams, Wang and Lee (2005) that political expressions influence other forms of political behavior; and "cognitions" according to Eveland, Hayes and Kwok (2005)

LaRose et al (2001) explains that previous media experiences determine future media exposure because those experiences influence the perceptions of the likely outcomes of that future media use. Accordingly, individuals exercise forethoughts and imagine the prediction consequences of their behaviours. In the main, each social media application meets individuals' expectation in a different manner depending on its specific features. However, individual request depends on the social media used from a motivational theory perspective in terms of uses and gratifications (Palmgreen and Rayburn, 1982).

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL

Social media is embedded in a mobile electronic device for the purpose of accomplishing fast and easy communication. The parts of the tool are fixed and cannot be altered without replacement or physical

modification they are encoded with instructions that are modifiable and can be stored in some form of unalterable memory (ROM – Read Only Memory). They are also encoded with a computer memory chip that stored values which are non-volatile and are retained even when the device is unpowered. The tool is designed in such a way that all networks of social media are connected globally and can communicate with one another using Internet Protocol (IP) and Broader Gateway Protocol (BGP) to identify the best paths to route that information.

Carr and Hayes (2015) conceptualize social media as internet-based channels that allow users the opportunity to interact and selectively present self, either in real time or asynchronously with both broad and narrow audience who derive value from user generated content and the perception of interaction with others.

Internet Protocol is a communication protocol that enabled networking a large number of computers to the internet by providing the basis for all essential functions of the net such as packet switching, routing, addressing, etc.

MAJOR SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

In a "Career Development Guide" article, "What are the different types of social media? 10 key types" written by Indeed Editorial Team (August 16, 2014) broadly exposes social media influencers and marketers to social networks, image sharing networks, discussion forums, bookmarking networks, consumer review networks, interest-based networks, sharing economy networks, social shopping networks, and video hosting platforms. These networks encapsulate various social media platforms.

Editors of Tech target Site, Ben Lutkerich and Ivy Wigmore enumerated popular web based social media platforms to include the following:

Facebook: This is a free social networking website where registered users create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues.

LinkedIn: This is a social networking site designed for the business community. Registered members can create networks of people they know and trust professionally.

Pinterest: This is a social curation website for sharing and categorizing images found online. The main focus of Pinterest is visual, though it just calls for brief descriptions of images. Clicking on an image will take a user to the original source.

Reddit: This is a social media news website and forum where site members curate and promote stories. The site is composed of hundreds of sub-communities called subreddits. Each subreddits has a specific topic such as technology, politics or music the goal is to elevate well regarded stories to the top of the site's main thread page.

Twitter: This is a free microblogging service for registered members to broadcast short posts called tweets. Twitter members can broadcast tweets and follow other active users' tweets using several platforms and devices.

Wikipedia: This is a free, open content encyclopedia created through a collaborative community. Anyone registered on Wikipedia can create an article for publication.

Instagram: This is an online photo sharing platform originally designed to mimic old fashioned instant cameras.

WhatsApp: This is an instant messaging platform founded in 2009 and acquired by Facebook in 2014. It is significant in forming online communities, interest clubs, support groups, etc.

Snapchat: This is a mobile photo (image) messaging platform/application, introduced in 2011.
YouTube: This is an online small video that can be viewed by the user. It is a video sharing website.
TikTok: This is an online video sharing application (app). It is a key platform for youth political expression.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES OF POLITICAL EXPRESSION

Expression has the power to shape how we see ourselves. Political expression on social media influences not only political behavior but also citizens' more fundamental political self-concepts (Lane D.S. et al, 2019). Based on Expectancy Value Theory (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2008), specific political behaviours and values mediated via political expression can be anticipated especially when the expressions are clear, unbiased, efficacious, and knowledgeable.

The following actions are expected:

1. Shaping of political ideologies or philosophies of individual participants through internet based networks.
2. Advocacy and assurance of the accountability of the government.
3. Advocating and guarantee of credibility and respect for ideologies and policies of government.
4. Creation of inspiration and attraction of philosophies (new experiences, new ideas and new information) through sharing networks especially Instagram (Bandura, 1986).
5. Advocacy and guarantee of political development and efficiency of administration of the country.
6. Assurance of public trust education and building of the audience or the public through the creation of ideological awareness.
7. Building of healthy democracy.

IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL EXPRESSION IN NIGERIA

The most prevalent social media platforms frequently used in political expression includes Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (x), YouTube, Tiktok and Whatsapp. Indeed, Editorial Team, updated August 15, 2024 confers Facebook as the largest social media platform with nearly three (3) billion people across the world using it monthly. As a social network site, Facebook offers users the possibility of building profile within a system, of connecting with other users in this system, and of viewing and going over the connections and the information about other users with whom a user has connected (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

In Nigeria, Whatsapp is the most popular social media platform. It was mentioned by over 95% of internet users in the country aged 16-64 years (Doris Dokua Sasu, 2024). The table below shows the percentage use of social media in Nigeria as of the 3rd quarter of 2023.

S/N	SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM	PERCENTAGE (SHARE OF INTERNET USERS)
1.	Whatsapp	95.1%
2.	Facebook	75.5%
3.	Instagram	59.1%
4.	TikTok	54.7%
5.	Fb (messanger)	48.5%
6.	Twitter (x)	40.5%
7.	Snaphat	37.6%
8.	Telegram	33.4%

9.	LinkedIn	18.1%
10.	Pinterest	13.9%

In absolute terms, the number of people using Whatsapp was estimated at approximately 8.8 million for the full year 2023 (Doris Dokua Sasu, 2024)

Whether Whatsapp, Facebook or Twitter, social media generally have built ideological awareness. It has amplified the voices of social movement, and niched audience due to its wide and global connectivity (Chen, 2011).

1. Social media has increased attraction and followership through streaming videos of political agenda and other events quickly and easily video hosting platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat.
2. Social media facilitates the creating, sharing and aggregation of expressions among virtual communities and networks.
3. Social media assures storage of expressions for later use through bookmarking networks (Pew Research Center, 2015).
4. Social media forms online communities around common interest and encourage cooperation and social support in what transforms support groups to interest clubs (Ugander, Karren, Backstorm, and Marlow, 2011).
5. Social media ensures increase in political participation and political expression which confers citizens with the right to give legitimacy to government.
6. Social media connects both broad and narrow audience. It has reduced face-to-face violence and breakdown of public order.
7. By ensuring a broad and free participation of users, social media has ensured the abundance of information from which the public evaluates what is best for themselves and the society.

CHALLENGES OF THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Following Leonardi (2013) argument that social media have a set of properties and the individuals who use them have their own characters and needs, some social media platforms will meet individuals' expectations better than others (Hutchby, 2011). Therefore, with social media best practices, people's post does not expose the political groups to legal problems or public embarrassment.

In addition, social media can extend to violence or any other activity that can disrupt political order when poorly handled, especially in cases of misinformation, blackmail, and abuse or assassination of characters, fake news dissemination, conspiracy theories, cyberbullying and so on.

DISCUSSION

Generally speaking, social media has the ability to redistribute power by transforming the relationship between governments and citizens, giving the citizens more opportunity to participate in politics and spread democracy awareness. Nigeria adopted party politics in 1999 after four decades of military rule and held her seventh consecutive democratic election in 2023.

Citing Abang (2019), IDEA (2020), Renters (2019), and Yusuf (2023), Adeniyi W.K. Bellow and Kelly Kaifhold (2023) narrates that voter turnout declined steadily through each election as Nigeria's electoral system

was not trusted. Adeniyi et al (2023) recounted that the participation of voters increased in 2023 due to the engagement of social media, yet votes of the people did not count despite the use of BVAS machine. Using a substantial secondary data set from the Afrobarometer index, Adeniyi W.K. Bellow and Kelly Kaifhold (2023) infers that young Nigerians were the most likely to get news via social media but the least likely to vote. Citing Campbell and Quinn (2021), Adeniyi et al infers that social media has proven to be so effective that some authoritarian national leaders are nervous about it. Recall that President Mohammadu Buhari in 2021 suspended the use of twitter (x) in Nigeria which lasted for seven months. The administration of President Mohammadu Buhari claimed that twitter (x) was working against Nigeria's interest and that the unscrupulous were using the platform to spread misinformation and criminal activities.

In the mid-2017, Nigeria was the most populous nation in the continent of Africa. Fikayo Akeredolu (2023) discovered that there were approximately 33 million users in 2022, up from 18 million in 2017. According to him, social media users' platform like Facebook, Twitter (x) and WhatsApp have proved effective ways to participate in politics. On Election Day, it was clear that social media commentary translated into real world action. Law and electoral administration failings hinders the efficiency of social media even when stored records can prove electoral robbery.

Social media platforms have allowed Nigerian citizens to participate in politics discussions and engage with policymakers actively. By becoming a more comfortable platform for campaigns, social media has bridged geographical divide and narrowed our broad population to an online community (Fikayo Akeredolu, 2023). Asma'u Yusuf (2023) enumerated the following ten roles of social media in shaping public opinion and political discourse in Nigeria:

1. Mobilizing grassroots movement.
2. Increasing political engagement.
3. Encouraging citizen journalism.
4. Amplifying voices of marginalized groups.
5. Fostering accountability.
6. Providing a platform for civic education.
7. Facilitating political campaigns.
8. Encouraging social activism.
9. Creating a platform for public feedback.
10. Promoting transparency.

According to Francis Onyemechi (2023), social media changed the face of politics in Nigeria. It changed the way politics and elections used to be, bringing everyone together to participate and share their opinion freely. People were more enlightened. Even people that do not vote and have not been voting got motivated through speculations from social media. It gave room for sensitization on PVC and opened a public space for election monitoring and sharing of information while opening a voter view for users' opinion both those in Nigeria and those in diaspora. From one location, online meetings are possible thereby giving opportunities for people's opinion and involvement in politics.

As a matter of fact, social media platforms gave room for Nigerians to know and read more about political elites, past public assertion, criminal cases, involvement and political achievement and records (Francis Onyemechi, 2023). Alice Eze (2019) affirms that social media has rapidly grown in importance as a form for political activism. According to her, it has allowed politicians in Nigeria communicate faster and reach

citizens in a more targeted manner and vice versa. Social media has made things so simplified that there is now proposal for internet voting which could lead to more people participating in elections. In the main, social media contributed to increased election literacy, improved voter turnout and valued invalid ballots. As social media penetration continues, it will continue to be a tool for analyzing and discussing politics in Nigeria. While it should be closely monitored, the opportunity and ability to translate online community into sustained long term change will depend on the systems and administration practices in place.

CONCLUSION

As a tool of political expression in Nigeria, social media has made politics and governance simplified by enabling the people and government to freely and quickly express their opinions, and give account of their stewardship respectively. By this, social media has changed the face of politics and governance in Nigeria this makes it more influential as its use is increasing every day and its effect is making politics and governance to be in constant evolution.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the challenges faced by the wrong use of social media and its increasing use in Nigeria, the following recommendations are suggested to enjoy the full benefit of the use of social media:

1. The government and political organizations in Nigeria should make efforts to keep social media from becoming a catalyst for conflict and division by enacting, executing and obeying laws bordering on the wrong use of social media in Nigeria as well as train the social media influencers on how to use social media for positive transformation.
2. Political organizations should Social media companies should possibly develop algorithms that can identify and flag false information and cyberbullying by collaborating with fact checking organizations to verify the accuracy of information before they are shared on other platforms.
3. We also recommend further scholarly study/research on this subject to ensure peace as the world has become a global village.

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