

SOCIAL MEDIA AS MODERN PLATFORM FOR POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN IMO STATE

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Abstract

The role of social media in virtually all areas of human endeavours especially in this digital age cannot be overemphasized. To this end, this study examined social media as modern platform for political discourse. Theory of public sphere was used as the theoretical framework. The survey research method was adopted. Owerri metropolis residents constituted the population of 555,500. Using the Taro Yamani formula, a sample size of 399 was derived. Questionnaire was used as the instrument of data collection. The multistage sampling technique was adopted. Findings revealed that 43% of respondents to a large extent used social media for politically related information. Findings also showed that 46% of respondents said social media have influenced public participation in the democratic process and political discourse among residents in Imo State to a large extent. It was recommended that, owing to the low percentage of users of social media in political discourse, efforts need to be put in place by political stakeholders in sensitizing the people on the need to fully utilize the social media for political discourse especially this period when almost everything is happening online.

Key words: *political, social media, political discourse, politics, Imo state.*

Introduction

New media has made it possible for global social media use within the realm of politics (Valenzuela, 2013). The social media more than any other channel of communication, have offered unprecedented opportunity to users to contribute their own quota in political discourse (Onyechi & Adeitan, 2019). To this end, Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison and Lamp (2011) averred that social media platforms are believed to be opening up new frontiers, especially for people to participate in politics. For instance, youths who are hitherto presumed to be politically inactive are now seems to be very active in online political activities especially on Facebook where they have access to their friends and other political active people. The new media indicate the transforming patterns of media production, distribution and use. The digital revolution has facilitated dramatic changes with significant results worldwide like increased public's access to information increased opportunities of civic engagement and social networking with expanded communities (Jamil, 2018). New media is generating the new ways for politics. It is not only serving for

socializing and networking, but it is also transforming the thinking patterns of individuals for politics. Within the age of technology, the word new media is not new for the Nigeria society. However, its impacts for the extent of public participation during the country's political discussion are very noticeable (Onyebuchi, Obayi & Amadi, 2019).

However, the emergence of social media, which is specified as “platforms for interaction and information exchange”, has introduced a new pathway for inducing political attitudes and participation and enhancing participatory communication, as well as faster dialoguing, and engagement (Himmelboim, Golan, Moon, Suto, 2014; Ross & Bürger, 2014). In view of this assertion, Khang, Ki and Ye (2012) maintained that the advent of social media has brought around a different type of political process and campaigns referred to as political digital campaigns which requires political candidates getting acquainted with social media strategy to connect with electorates so as to influence them and the society at large. Most political parties and leaders maintain social media accounts in order to lay out their schedule. For instance, the use of social media sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Blogs were massively deployed in the 2015 Nigerian General elections, due to its participatory and creative nature, it turned into an utter and exceptional platform for political campaign organizers doing electioneering crusades and other ideological trumpeting exercises, as well as political contribution and mobilization among others (David, Zhitomirsky-Geffet, Koppel, Uzan, 2016; Kreiss, 2016).

Indeed, the use of web-based social networking systems, such as, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in the electioneering campaign by political figures can never be overemphasized Ajayi and Adesote (2015). According to Alfred (2016), social media was the greatest assets of Donald Trump; he made extensive and adequate use of it to reach the masses which eventually made him the winner of the 2016 presidential election. In view of this, Sophia (2016) noted that during the United States campaign, Trump had outgunned all other prospects with his usage of the social media as a tool to speak straight to his voters, to portray his own personality in extreme detail and to wage Twitter wars against his political rivals. Similarly, Suntai and Targema (2017) observed that the social media was handy for political leaders in Nigerian 2015 general elections as most of them such as Goodluck Jonathan, Muhammadu Buhari among other political aspirants used social media platforms for campaigning for instance in Twitter hashtags were created such as #MeetGej, #Febuhari, #Marchoutjonathan, #WhyiwillvoteGEJ, #MarchforBuhari, #GMB15, #LagosForYou and #iHavedecided were promoted by politicians and their friends; while #NigeriaDecides, #Nigeria2015, #iPledgeToVote, #MyPVCnow, #GoVote were promoted by civil society groups to increase citizens' involvement.

Ahmed, Lodhi and Shahzad (2011) noted that social media, allow users to post and read statements, thoughts, and links and this attributes have made it a user-friendly tool for political activities. According to Diana (2018), social media has transformed the political media system, and redefined the role of journalists as well as the way elections are contested, and the way citizens engage in politics. From the age of independence of Nigeria in 1960 under Nnamdi Azikiwe till date, Nigerians have always been considered politically minded people that participate actively within the political arena of the country through different forums and avenues made available by technological advancements with social media because the most liberal platforms during which individuals are given the space to freely express their views or opinions either objectively or subjectively (Onyebuchi, et al., 2019).

New media have the potential to supply unprecedented access to information, and may

reach even disinterested audience members through personalized, peer-to-peer channels, like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram among others (Hayes & Lawless, 2016). However, new media explicitly seek to directly engage the general public in political activities, like voting, contacting public officials, volunteering in their communities (Bandipo, 2016). On these bases, this study sought to look at how social media as modern platform are often utilized as a political forum for discourse in Nigeria.

Statement of the problem

For both politicians and therefore the public, adapting to the present new way of communicating and receiving information has not been without a learning curve. However, Brenek (2014, as cited in Grant, 2016) observe that, social media has opened a replacement channel of communication between the candidates and therefore the public. "People can follow what their beliefs are and be more in-tuned with the candidates. When there is news or controversy, it spreads faster," Facebook and Twitter which are a number of the foremost frequently visited and used social media sites have also allowed people to engage in conversations with one another that might not have otherwise taken place (Jamil, 2018).

Nevertheless, many of the qualities that make social media unique and accessible can sometimes be a double-edged sword. One among the opposite critiques on online political conversation is how quickly it dissolves into a chaotic verbal bloodbath. While social media is not without its share of problems, it is still a useful fixture of political discourse. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook share a fantastic ability to teach and convey communities together for a political cause. Therefore, this study sought to look at how social media as modern platform are often utilized as a political forum for discourse within the country.

Research Questions

These research questions were raised to guide this study

1. To what extent has the public used social media in Imo State as a forum for discourse with regards to politically related issues?
2. To what extent social media have influence public participation in the democratic process and political discourse among residents in Imo State?
3. What are the challenges in the use of social media platforms for political discourse?

Review of Related Literatures

Concept of Social/ Media and Political Participation

Just like any other concept in the social sciences, it is a herculean task to arrive at a single definition of the concept of social media. Suminas (2010) sees social media as interactive technologies and ways in which they can be used when individuals interact among themselves sharing the content generated. Similarly, Newson, Houghton and Patten (2008) assert that social media are tools and utilities that allow communication of information online and participation and collaboration. Social media include but are not limited to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. It is driven by the internet to bring together a community of heterogeneous people to form a close-knit who collaborate to share information on political

discourses. Thus, social media is a veritable tool in bringing people together and closer with the underlying denominator of communication and interaction among them.

New media has been conceptualized differently by media and communications scholars. For some, new media have emerged from the modern information and communication technologies. On the other hand, many scholars agree that new media indicate the transforming patterns of media production, distribution and use. Therefore, it combines three elements:

(i) Computing information technology (ii) Communications networks (i.e., mobile phones, internet, cable television and interactive television) (iii) Content on digitized media (Jamil, 2018).

The term political participation is a very broad concept. Cohen and Kahne (2015) avow participatory politics as interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern. In effect, political participation is every action of ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes distribution of social goods and norms (Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). Also, political participation is viewed as fundamental about citizens and their attempts to influence politic (Segesten & Bossetta, 2016). Political participation is fundamentally about citizens and their attempts to influence politics. Despite a growing body of evidence suggesting that social media stimulate political participation, few studies have focused on how citizens are using social networking sites to influence electoral outcomes (Gibson & McAllister, 2015; Jacobs & Spierings, 2016; Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Vergeer, Hermans, & Sams, 2013). Political participation is all about affecting the political system directly or indirectly by citizens or individuals. Political participation covers a broad spectrum of issues from convention participation, i.e. electoral processes to the unconventional involvement which include demonstrations, protest and movements. On the other hand, political mobilization encapsulates the sensitization of the citizenry, to cause increase and improvements in their political consciousness to effect change in a political process. It is the ability to emotionally organise people, which in the process breeds organic solidarity towards a course of action (Dungse, Mato, Makinde & Chidozie, 2018).

Empirical Review

Onyebuchi, Obayi and Amadi (2019) in a study on the use of social media in political activities x-rayed the extent to which social media have aided in the dissemination of politically related information with regards to the 2019 elections giving the people a neutral platform to air their opinion and add their inputs on who governs them and how such activities should be done. Finding revealed that social media to large extent aided in the dissemination of politically related information with regards to the 2019 elections.

In another study by Jamil in (2018), this study evaluates the public's use of new media technologies during Pakistan's 2018 election, and whether new media technologies have increased their level of participation in the democratic process and political discourse. It was revealed that in 2018 election, new media has enabled Karachiite's in Pakistan to express and reflect on political and the city's pressing issues and to participate in election process more actively. This study revealed that Twitter, Blogs, Facebook and internet have altogether facilitated the public's ability to gain political knowledge and to participate in political

debates.

In another work conducted by Bandipo (2016), the researcher examined the roles new media technologies play in the electioneering process of developing nations. The chosen case study was the Nigeria 2015 presidential elections. It was revealed that practically all stakeholders that participated in one way or the other relied on the new media to improve their operational capability and judgment. It was also revealed that the new media and its ability to disseminate information in geometric proportions is one of the critical factors responsible for the avoidance of post-election crisis in Nigeria. In a study on social media and students' participation by Onyechi (2018) it was revealed that there is a significant relationship between social media exposure patterns and students' participation during the 2015 political campaigns.

Similarly, Pap, Ham and Bilandzic in (2018) did a study on how social media usage influence youth's interest in politics. It was revealed that using Facebook, not Twitter for political discussions has a significant positive influence on young people's interest in politics. Keating and Melis (2017) carried out a study on social media and political engagement and it was revealed that some young people are far more engaged in using social media for political purpose than others. Kahne and Bowyer (2018) in their own study on social media and politics it was found that the size of young people's social networks interacts with both friendship-driven and interest-driven online activity to promote political activity.

In another study on social media and youth online participation in politics by Abdulraul, Hamid, and Ishak (2015) it was revealed that Facebook and Twitter provide new avenue for political engagement which also give them good political information to enhance their participation in political activities. Onyechi and Adeitan (2019) carried out a study on social media credibility and online political participation. It was revealed that interactivity, accessibility from medium dimension and accuracy, objectivity from message dimension are the main determinant of social media credibility. Further finding revealed that there is a significant relationship between perceived credibility of social media and online participation among young adults.

Vonderschmitt (2012) carried a study on the growing use of social media in political campaigns and it was revealed that social media is highly effective in carrying out political campaign it was also revealed that social media platforms have created a more opportunity for citizens to participate, and learn more about each candidate and have easier access to the candidates themselves. Dunu (2018) carried out a study on social media and gubernatorial election in Nigeria and findings revealed that social media platforms have not only become tools for information dissemination but have been used to spread hate speech, disseminate misinformation and/or fake news

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the theory of public sphere. This theory was developed in 1962 by Jurgen Habermas. The social media is seen as a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed. The theory holds that public sphere is mainly open to all citizens to converge and form public opinion especially on political related issues. Habermas (1991) noted that citizens hardly act in their private interest but act as one who is dealing with matters of general interest in order to form a public sphere. There is no intimidating force behind the public sphere but its citizens assemble and unite freely especially through the social media to

express their opinions. According to [Wessler](#) and [Freudenthaler](#) (2018), the public sphere is generally conceived as the social space in which different opinions are expressed, problems of general concern are discussed, and collective solutions are developed on the platform of public discourse.

The term of a political public sphere is introduced for public discussions about topics connected to the state and political practice. Therefore, public opinion has to control the state and its authority in everyday discussions, as well as through formal elections. A public sphere is the basic requirement to mediate between state and society and in an ideal situation permits democratic control of state activities (Habermas, 1991). This theory is relevant to the study due to the fact that, it helps us to see how the social media as a public sphere is useful to people in expressing their opinions and participate on political related issues.

Methodology

The researchers in the course of this study adopted the survey research design using the tool of questionnaire to gather relevant data which are vital to the study. According to National Bureau of Statistics (2017), Owerri Metropolis has a population of 555,500. Using the Taro Yamani formula, the researcher arrived at the sample size of 399 for this study. Copies of questionnaire were distributed to residents of Owerri Metropolis in Imo State using the multistage sampling technique. In the first stage, Owerri which is in cluster is already divided into three namely, Owerri North, Owerri West and Owerri Municipal. In the second stage two communities from each local government area were purposively selected due to some reasons such as high level of literacy, high use of smart phones to access social media; they are, Orji, Uratta, [Umuguma](#), Ihiagwa, Umuoyima, and Umuororonjo respectively. In stage three, having six communities the researcher distributed the questionnaire proportionately to the communities that is $399/6 = 67$. Therefore, the researcher gave 67 copies of the questionnaire to respondents purposively.

Data Presentation and Analysis

This section deals with data presentation and analysis. The researchers distributed a total of 399 copies of the questionnaire, out of which 375 (94%) was returned and 24 (6%) void, Therefore 375 copies of questionnaire were used for the analysis.

Table 1: Respondents response on level of participation in political related discussions in these platforms

| Response | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------|-----------|------------|
| Large extent | 163 | 43% |
| Low extent | 131 | 35% |
| Can't say | 81 | 22% |
| Total | 375 | 100 |

(Source: Field survey, 2019)

Analysis from this table 1 revealed that majority of respondents 43% confirmed that the public used social media in Imo State as a forum for discourse with regards to politically related issues to a large extent. This means that respondents on their regularly visit to these platforms engage in one form of political discussions or debates which is directly related to



political issues in the country.

Table 2: Respondents response on the extent social media has influence public participation in democratic process and political discourse among

| Response | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Large extent | 174 | 46% |
| Low extent | 145 | 39% |
| Can't say | 56 | 15% |
| Total | 375 | 100 |

(Source: Field survey, 2019)

Analysis of table 2 revealed that majority of respondents 46% said social media has influence public participation in democratic process and political discourse among residents in Imo State to a large extent. This implies that social media has influence public participation in democratic process and political discourse among residents in Imo State.

Table 3: Respondents response on which of the following is a challenge in the use of social media for political discourse

Table 3: Respondents response on which of the following is a challenge in the use of social media for political discourse

| Response | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| Emotional sentiment | 25 | 7% |
| Ideological differences | 15 | 4% |
| Misinterpretation of ideas | 40 | 11% |
| Promotion of unfounded facts | 48 | 13% |
| Political propaganda | 64 | 17% |
| Cyber bullying | 35 | 9% |
| Lack of regulation | 28 | 7% |
| All of the above | 120 | 32% |
| No idea | - | - |
| Total | 375 | 100 |

Source: Field survey, 2019

Analysis of data from table 3 above showed that 32% of respondents were of the view that emotional sentiment, ideological differences, misinterpretation of ideas, promotion of unfounded fact, political propaganda, cyber bullying, and lack of regulation are the challenges inherent in the use of social media for political discourse. By implication, these challenges highlighted are the problems facing social media especially in the use for political

discourse.

Discussion of Findings

The extent public used Social media technologies in Imo State as a forum for discourse with regards to politically related issues

The researchers with the aid of the data collected during the period of the research try to establish a fundamental truth about the relevance of social media platforms in the political drama in Imo State, Nigeria. From data collected and analyzed by the researchers, it was revealed that majority of respondents 43% use one social media app or the other, and as they surf the internet, interact, chat and so on, they come across one or two politically related information. During the course of the study, it was revealed that majority of respondents over a period time come across politically related stories on social media most of the times and this was based on the fact that election is on going in the country. Also, majority of respondents are actively engaged in political discussion on these platforms voicing their views about political issues in the country. This is in line with Onyebuchi, et al. (2019), findings which revealed that the new media platforms are veritable tool used to pass information across to the audience especially politically related information that can influence the way people view an understand political issues. In view of this, Keating and Melis (2017) findings revealed that people in recent times use social media for political engagement, though they noted according to their findings that some young people are far more engaged in using social media for political purpose than others. Supporting this assertion Onyechi (2018) in her findings showed that, due to the level of exposure to social media there was a significant participation by young people during the 2015 political campaigns. By implication of this finding people of Imo State through the social media are engage in political related issues. This finding resonates well with the public sphere theory which holds that the social media (as a public sphere) is seen as a domain of social life where citizens converge to form public opinion especially on political related issues.

The extent social media has influence public participation in the democratic process and political discourse among residents in Imo State

From the data analyzed by the researchers, it was revealed that about 46% of respondents said social media has influenced public participation in the democratic process and political discourse among residents in Imo State to a large extent. This could be seen from the angle of an improved political culture among the people hence given rise to great political awareness and discussion within the state during the period of 2019 election. No wonder, the number of political participation from the people during the election period was massive. This corroborates the findings of Bandipo (2016) which revealed that the new media and its ability to disseminate information in geometric proportions is one of the critical factors responsible for active participation in politics and helping in avoiding post election crisis in Nigeria. Supporting this finding Pap, Ham and Bilandzic (2018) in their study revealed that social media handle such as Facebook has a significant positive influence on young people's interest in political discussions; though according to them, Facebook has significant influence more than Twitter. In consonance with this finding also, Vonderschmitt (2012) noted that social media is highly effective in carrying out political campaigns and that social media platforms have created more opportunity for citizens to participate, and learn more

about each candidate and have easier access to the candidates themselves. By implication of this finding it is obvious that social media has significant influence on public participation in democratic process and political discourse among residents in Imo State. This finding is in tandem with the public sphere theory because public sphere is generally conceived as the social space in which different opinions are expressed, problems of general concern are discussed, and collective solutions are developed on the platform of public discourse. The public sphere is the basic requirement to mediate between state and society and in an ideal situation permits democratic control of state activities.

The challenges in the use of social media platforms for political discourse

Communicating findings it was revealed that emotional sentiment, ideological differences, misinterpretation of ideas, promotion of unfounded facts, political propaganda, cyber bullying, and lack of regulation are the challenges inherent in the use of social media for political discourse as 32% of respondents confirmed. In as much as social media in recent times have proven to be very useful in political related matters, it is not devoid of some challenges. It is as a result of some of these identified bottlenecks that some people question the use of social media for political related issues. This explains why Onyechi and Adeitan (2019) study revealed that there is a significant relationship between perceived credibility of social media and online participation among young adults in political discourse. Furthermore, in as much as these platforms have been criticized about the lack of credibility, this study revealed that these platforms to a large extent are being used for political propaganda and sometimes circulation of unfounded facts. This finding is in tandem with Dunu (2018) findings which revealed that social media platforms have not only become tools for information dissemination but have been used to spread hate speeches, disseminate misinformation and/or fake news. From the theoretical perspective this study was underpinned, these identified challenges certainly go contrary to the postulation of the public sphere theory.

Conclusion

During the course of this study, it was revealed that the social media have provided the platforms for citizenry discussion on political issues. It can be said that the misconception of social media as just a tool for fun and meeting people is long overdue and different political issues can be explored, debated on and the views of the masses across the global been put into consideration in order to explore the potential of social media in political occurrences in the country and globally

Recommendations

1. Given that just 43 % of respondents which is below average that used social media platforms in Imo State for political discourse, efforts need to be put in place by political stakeholders in sensitizing the people on the need to fully utilize the social media for political related matters especially now when almost everything is happening online.
2. Having seen that the social media to a large extent has influenced public participation in democratic process and political discourse among residents in Imo

State, efforts need to be made by political actors to encourage and sustain the use of social media platforms on political issues by the people.

3. Users of social media platforms for political discourse are encouraged to use the platforms to promote positive political development instead of using it to propagate unhealthy political propaganda. Users should also respect the opinions of others on the same platform as regards to political issues.

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