

Social Media and Political Participation among Select University Students during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: The advent of social media has added impetus to political participation in recent years. Young people have continued leverage on the opportunity created by these online platforms to contribute to the electoral process.

Objective: This study investigated influence of social media campaigns on select students' voting behaviour during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

Materials and Method: Using descriptive survey, 387 final-year students of Nasarawa State University, Keffi and Lead City University, Ibadan were selected purposively. The data were gathered through online survey and analysed using SPSS.

Results: There was high level of social media use for discussions about the 2023 presidential election among the respondents. Despite the political enthusiasm demonstrated on social media, 42.4% of the students did not have PVC; and 60.5% did not vote during the 2023 presidential election.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the students were highly engaged in online political discussion, but this did not translate into voting on election day. The study recommends more political education to encourage translation of online political enthusiasm into offline participation in the electoral process.

Keywords: Political Communication, Political Participation, Presidential Election, Social Media, University Students

Introduction

Political participation is a prerequisite to good governance; it includes citizens' involvement in the decision-making process and their contribution to public debate on national issues. Political participation is an essential component of liberal democracy, which is a consensus-based form of governance. It may manifest as a desire to vote people into positions of power and contest for political office (direct participation) or actively engage in political discourse aimed at enhancing governance (indirect participation). The political system is strengthened when citizens at all levels and capacities are encouraged to contribute to the development of a country, either as electorates or voters.

However, providing a platform for the exchange of political opinions, interests, and sentiments can have both positive and negative effects, such as discouraging uninformed voters from reacting negatively and forming that voter's perception of politics, on the one hand, and promoting political participation, on the other (Okafor, Akwaji, & Oga, 2018). For example, during the 2019 general election in Nigeria, youth participated in the political debates unfolding within the polity through social media platforms. These social media platforms became appropriate sites for youth's engagement and voice aggregation in support or rejection of politicians' ideas and policies. Consequently, youth, through their political participation, wielded a new form of power that impacts states' ability to control citizens' expression and other anti-democratic tenets (Obisesan, 2022). According to Olsson (2014), participation in politics is dependent on the prevalent political culture within a certain group or country. While many countries and societies have developed political cultures, the majority of developing countries and nations continue to struggle with

bleak political cultures that are in-between the traditional political cultures and the foreign political cultures, which inevitably leads to these countries' inconsistent political and democratic development (Olsson, 2014).

Political participation in Nigeria, for example, has observed to be racial, class-based, and religious, both at the individual and group levels (Adeleke, 2016). However, the growing problems between politics and other phenomena among young people, such as traditional and social media, remain a mystery, particularly in Nigeria, one of the world's developing countries and a young democracy where political participation has been low and demotivating among the electorates. Different social media campaigns surged during the 2023 general elections, such as #NigeriaDecides2023, #TakeBackNaija, #ReadyToRun, and #NigerianStudentsMustVote, among others. These campaigns, particularly, provided an avenue towards the democratisation of information, which helped the university students make informed decisions about those vying for political posts (especially the presidential aspirants). Social media became significant because it allows students to avoid the traditional media, which frequently functions as an arm of the ruling class. More so, social media gave young people a platform to voice their opinions about cultural norms that they felt protected the status quo.

The Nigerian youths have frequently demonstrated an interest in solving problems that keep the country behind. They struggle with socio-economic issues like unemployment and poverty, to name a few. Importantly, social media now also serve as sources of news gathering and dissemination for traditional media. As such, this study examines the influence of social media politics on youths' participation during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

New media technologies have evolved into a crucial tool for political communication on a global scale. According to Okoro and Santas (2017), social media is progressively becoming a reliable tool for influencing and shaping public opinion and behaviour. Igyuve and Obagwu (2020) remarked that as more people switch to using smartphones to access new media and social platforms, there has been a significant shift in how people consume media. The impediments to communication caused by time and space up until now have been eliminated by evolution. Therefore, Nigerian politicians have embraced social media for political campaigns during the 2023 presidential elections after realising the enormous benefits it provides for political communication.

One significant value that social media added to the course of youth political participation and politicking in Nigeria's 2023 presidential election is access to online information that has relevance for the manner of electoral value. Young people were able to actively participate in political debate and processes using social media. In most cases, university students were even at the centre of a social media trends that shaped narratives and, in some cases, became headlines in mass media. Students were therefore able to reinvent power and aggregate it for themselves considering their needs through in-depth debates. This transmutes to thorough scrutiny of public officeholders' or aspirants' policy thrusts, as well as speeches.

However, Mustapha, Olufadi, Azeez and Udende (2023) believe that social media use has a significant impact primarily on online political engagement and does not always correspond to offline political behaviour. This implies that social media are effective for promoting soft politics alone. Mustapha et al. (2023) went on to say that in this age of democratic malaise among young people, it is alarming that no social media has any discernible impact on offline political involvement. Additionally, earlier studies have noted that the new trend of social media transcends the established order and tends to forge deeper connections between politicians and the population virtually, resulting in a more robust and sophisticated political process (Chinedu-Okeke & Obi, 2016; Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2012).

Before now, a large volume of scientific research has been conducted on media campaigns and electioneering in Nigeria and globally. Researchers have largely explored multiple methods and case studies to investigate the relationship between variables such as social media, political campaigns, political mobilisation, and youth participation in political activities. With a focus on Nigeria, prior empirical literature includes youth political participation, good governance, and social inclusion in Nigeria (Akinyetun, 2021) and the use of social media for political participation by youths in Oyo State (Omotayo, & Folorunso, 2020). Likewise, Mustapha and Omar (2020) examined social media use and youths' political participation during the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections. Although Igyuve, Oyedokun and Santas (2023) earlier studied the influence of social media on the 2023 elections using the same respondents as this present study. However, they only focused on youths' mobilisation and not youths' participation. Hence, the need to fill the gap.

Research Questions

1. What is the attitude of university students towards social media political campaigns during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?
2. To what extent has social media campaigns influenced university students' voting behaviour during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?

Methods

The descriptive survey research design, which is predicated on the use of primary sources of information, was adopted in this study. This study was carried out among the final-year students of Nasarawa State University, Keffi, and Lead City University, Ibadan. The rationale for this demographic selection is due to two reasons: First, to sample the opinions of students from different parts of the country (North and South). Second, because the government approved entry age into the Nigerian universities is 16, therefore, final year students are expected to be above 18 which is the legal voting age in Nigeria. The population of this study was determined using the National University Commission (NUC) benchmark as cited in Okafor, Akwaji and Oga. (2018), that all recognised universities should not admit beyond 5,000 students in single academic session. Meaning, the final year students of these two universities should not be beyond 5,000. Therefore, the population is estimated to be 10,000. A sample size of 387 was derived using the statistical formula developed by Taro Yamane (1967) from the estimated population of 10,000. An online survey was developed to gather responses from the selected students using the purposive sampling technique. The data analysis was carried out using SPSS version 25, and the results were presented through descriptive analysis.

Ethical Clearance

Approval was obtained from both my academic supervisor and the department graduate coordinator, who certified the research instrument. Prior to data collection, explicit consent was sought from the participating university students, emphasizing the voluntary nature of their involvement. The purpose and significance of the study were clearly communicated to the participants, ensuring transparency in English language. Confidentiality of their responses was explicitly assured, with a commitment to utilising the gathered information solely for research purposes.

Results

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Profile

S/N	Variables		Frequency	Percentage
1	Sex	Female	228	58.9
		Male	159	41.1
		Total	387	100.0
2	Age Group	Below 18	8	2.1
		18-23	191	49.4
		24-29	124	32
		30 & above	64	16.5
		Total	387	100.0
3	Do you have PVC?	Yes	223	57.6
		No	164	42.4
		Total	387	100.0
4	Did you vote during the 2019 presidential election?	Yes	102	26.4
		No	237	61.2
		Not eligible	48	12.4
		Total	387	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 1 presents an analysis of the demographic information of the survey participants. The data indicates that 58.9% of the respondents identified as female, while the remaining 41.1% were male. This clearly demonstrates the higher participation of female students from the selected universities in this study. Examining the age distribution of the respondents, the sections reveal that individuals below the age of 18 accounted for 2.1%, those between the ages of 18 and 23 constituted 49.4%, ages 24-29 comprised 32.0%, and respondents aged 30 years and above made up 16.5%. It is evident that a significant portion of the participants fall within the age range of 18–23.

Furthermore, Table 1 indicates that 57.6% of the study participants possess a Permanent Voters Card (PVC), while the remaining 42.4% do not. Moreover, the data reveals that only 26.4% of the respondents voted in the 2019 presidential election, while 61.2% did not. However, 12.4% declared themselves ineligible during the election period of the 2023 presidential election.

Table 2: Social Media Campaigns and University Students' Political Participation

N	Variables		Frequency	Percentage
1	How often did you participate in social media discussion pertaining to the 2023 presidential election	Always	38	9.8
		Very often	131	33.9
		Sometime	168	43.4
		Rarely	50	12.9
		Never	0	0
		Total	387	100.0
2	In what way has the social media influenced your voting decision 2023 presidential election?	Ignoring candidates' manifestos	60	15.5
		Countering rivals manifestoes	90	23.3
		Educating friends on voting procedure	227	58.7
		Others	10	2.6
		Total	387	100.0
3	To what extent has social media influenced your voting decision in 2023 presidential election?	To a great extent	161	41.6
		Moderate influence	98	25.3
		Limited influence	54	14.0
		No influence	74	19.1
		Total	387	100.0
4	How did you respond to 2023 presidential election campaigns on social media?	Like	176	45.5
		Share	58	15.0
		Comment	71	18.3
		Ignore	82	21.2
		Total	387	100.0
5	Which of these campaigns are you more exposed to during the 2023 presidential election?	#NigeriaDecides2023	284	73.4
		#TakeBackNaija	39	10.1
		#ReadyToRun	10	2.6
		#NigerianStudentsMustVote	54	14.0
		Total	387	100.0
6	Did the social media campaigns prompted you to join a political party or rally ahead of the 2023 presidential election?	Yes	118	30.5
		No	269	69.5
		Total	387	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 4.4 contains responses on the university students' attitude towards social media campaigns during the 2023 presidential election. The frequency of respondents' participation in social media discussions related to the 2023 presidential election is noteworthy. This indicates a substantial interest among many respondents in discussing election-related matters on social media. Regarding the influence of social media on participants' behaviour in the 2023 presidential election, 58.7% played a pivotal role in educating friends on voting procedures, while only 15.5% ignored candidates' manifestos. This demonstrates that a significant proportion of participants actively contributed to civic engagement by sharing information and knowledge about the election process.

The impact of social media on voting decisions in the 2023 presidential election is evident, with 41.6% greatly influenced and 25.3% moderately influenced. This emphasizes the substantial role that social media played in shaping the electoral decisions of a considerable number of respondents. In responding to 2023 presidential election campaigns on social media, 45.5% liked posts, 15% shared them, and 18.3% made comments, while 21.2% chose to ignore election-related posts. This diverse range of responses underscores the interactive nature of social media campaigns and the various ways in which participants engage with political content.

The prominence of #NigeriaDecides2023 in social media campaigns is significant, with 73.4% of respondents exposed to this hashtag. This suggests that this specific campaign hashtag was widely utilized and reached a considerable audience during the 2023 presidential election. However, despite the high exposure to social media election campaigns, 69.5% of respondents did not join a political party or attend rallies ahead of the 2023 presidential election. This indicates a disconnect between social media engagement and active political participation, highlighting that exposure to online campaigns did not necessarily translate into offline political involvement for a substantial portion of the respondents.

Table 3: Social Media Campaigns and University Students' Voting Behaviour

N	Variables		Frequency	Percentage
1	Did you vote during the 2023 presidential election?	Yes	153	39.5
		No	234	60.5
		Total	387	100.0
2	Does your social media campaign exposure influence your choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria	Yes	240	62.0
		No	147	38.0
		Total	387	100.0
3	Is your choice during the 2023 presidential election influenced by the aspirant's social media usage?	Yes	138	35.7
		No	249	64.3
		Total	387	100.0
4	Do you think that the 2023 presidential aspirants are popular due to their usage of social media in their political campaigns?	Yes	229	59.2
		No	158	40.8
		Total	387	100.0
5	In subsequent elections, will you vote a presidential candidate with no or lesser online presence and activism?	Yes	190	49.1
		No	197	50.9
		Total	387	100.0
6	Apart from social media, what other factor influenced your choice of presidential candidate during the 2023 election?	Political party	34	8.8
		Ethnicity	23	5.9
		Religion	19	4.9
		Past records	253	65.4
		None	58	15.0
		Total	387	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2023

The data gathered in response to the social media campaigns and university students' voting behaviour is presented in Table 4.5. The results indicate that only the majority (60.5%) abstained from voting in the

2023 presidential election. This underscores a significant portion of participants opting not to partake in the electoral process. A notable 62% of respondents acknowledged that exposure to social media campaigns influenced their choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election, emphasizing the impact of online campaigning on voters' decision-making. The acknowledgment by 59.2% of participants that presidential aspirants gained increased popularity through social media usage underscores the platform's role in shaping public perceptions and candidate visibility during political campaigns. Regarding the influence of aspirants' social media usage on voting decisions, the suggests a mixed perception among respondents about the impact of candidates' online presence on their electoral choices.

Looking ahead, 49.1% of respondents expressed a willingness to vote for a presidential candidate with little or no online presence in subsequent elections, while 50.9% indicated they would not. This indicates a potential continued importance of online activism and presence in shaping voter preferences in future elections. In exploring other factors influencing participants' choice of presidential candidates during the 2023 election, 65.4% cited past records. This underscores the significance of candidates past records as a major influencer in voters' decision-making during the election.

Discussion

From the analysis presented regarding the demographic data of the respondents, female students from the selected universities participated in this study than males. This portrays an increase in political participation among young women. The age distribution of the respondents revealed that most of them are between the ages of 18 and 29, which constitutes 81.4%. The demographic data further revealed that 57.6% of the study participants have their Permanent Voters Card (PVC). Also, the data revealed that only 26.4% of the respondents voted during the 2019 presidential election, while 61.2% did not. However, 12.4% were non-eligible as of the election period.

Research Question 1: What is the attitude of university students towards social media political campaigns during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?

The result of this research question on the knowledge of social media campaigns and university students' political participation during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria demonstrated that most of the respondents often participated in social media discussions pertaining to the 2023 presidential election. This shows that most of the students were interested in discussing election matters on social media. This is in line with the assumptions of the media dependency theory, which states that audiences depend on media information to meet their needs and goals and that social institutions and media systems interact with audiences to create needs, interests, and motives in them (Defleur & Rokeach, 1989). That is, social media will be more significant to the students if they are more reliant on it to satisfy their needs.

In response to the ways in which social media influenced participants' voting decisions in the 2023 presidential election, the result revealed that a greater percentage of the students educated their friends on voting procedures rather than ignored them. This confirms that the majority of the participants educated their family and friends on the need to take part in the presidential election. In connection with these results, Godswill and Ibe (2020) noted that social media served as the primary information source and the foundation for voter opinion development as electorates prepared for the 2019 presidential election. Likewise, the analysis presented revealed that the respondents were influenced by the social media largely in making decisions towards the 2023 presidential election. This shows that social media influenced the voting decision of majority of the study participants. Also, the data presented on how students responded to 2023 presidential election campaigns on social media revealed that the majority responded by liking such posts, while others shared, and made comments.

The data gathered regarding the social media campaigns showed that the respondents were more exposed to #NigeriaDecides2023 during the 2023 presidential election than to #TakeBackNaija, #ReadyToRun, and #NigerianStudentsMustVote. This indicates that #NigeriaDecides2023 was the most popular hashtag or at least, the one most of the students were exposed to during the 2023 presidential election. However, 69.5% responded “No” to the questions asked on whether the social media campaigns prompted them to join a political party or a rally ahead of the 2023 presidential election. This clarifies that despite the respondents’ high level of exposure to social media election campaigns, this did not make them join a political party or, at least, attend rallies ahead of the presidential election which is worrisome.

Research Question 2: To what extent has social media campaigns influenced university students’ voting behaviour during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?

The data gathered in response to the social media campaigns and university students voting behaviour confirmed that most of the participants did not vote during the 2023 presidential election. Accordingly, it can be deduced that the difference in the number of respondents who voted in the 2023 presidential elections is those that were ineligible in 2019. Similarly, in a study conducted by Okafor et al. (2018) to examine the extent of political participation in the South-Eastern and South-Southern Nigeria among the students within voting age, it was reported that there is a low level of political participation and political socialisation in the educational institutions. This present study selected respondents from Oyo State (Southwest) and Nasarawa State (North Central) and reported a low level of political participation among Nigerian youths in education institutions, in line with the study of Okafor et al. (2018).

Before now, a study conducted by Mustapha et al. (2023) revealed that social media usage has a greater influence on online political participation than offline types of political behaviour. This means that social media is only potent in the promotion of soft politics. According to Mustapha et al. (2023), the fact that all social media have no significant influence on offline political participation calls for concern in this era of democratic malaise among the youth. Also, more previous studies have acknowledged that the emerging trend of social media transcends the old order and tends to bring both politicians and the electorate into a closer bond without physical contact, leading to a more robust and sophisticated political process (Chinedu-Okeke & Obi, 2016; Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2012).

This result of this study also affirmed that social media campaign exposure influenced their choice of candidates during the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. Following that, the majority of the candidates disagreed that their choice during the 2023 presidential election was influenced by the aspirant’s social media usage. This confirmed that, although the respondents’ exposure to social media campaigns during the 2023 elections influenced their choice of candidates, the respondents were not influenced by the presidential candidates’ personal usage of social media. According to Oyedokun, et al. (2022), social media has been crucial in recent elections in Nigeria as it is tactically deployed by various political actors to capture the attention of the citizens, especially the youths. The study concluded that social media has reshaped the terrain of political communication in Nigeria and that it should be consistently exploited in coming elections to capture citizens’ interests, especially the youth.

Also, the results revealed that the presidential aspirants became more popular due to their usage of social media in their political campaigns. This ascertained that social media made the presidential candidates more popular. Accordingly, the respondents revealed that they would not vote for a presidential candidate with no or less online presence and activism in subsequent elections. The results of Okoro and Santas (2016) also revealed that the two major presidential candidates in the 2011 election were popular because they used social media in their political campaigns.

Political participation in Nigeria, for example, has been found to be racial, class-based, and religious, both at the individual and group levels (Adeleke, 2016). To dispute this notion, the results of the analysis which examined other factors that influenced participants’ choice of presidential candidate during the

2023 presidential election, revealed most of the respondents were immensely motivated by their candidate's past records rather than their political party affiliation, ethnicity, and religious beliefs. This result contradicts the report of Babayo (2019), which discovered that, even though the two leading candidates this time emerged from the same region, unlike in past elections, the results of the general election in Nigeria in 2019 remained to reflect the country's ethno-religious and regional voting patterns. Okoro and Santas (2016) also reported that, aside from political communication on social media, voters' choice of political candidates during the 2011 presidential election was influenced by other indices such as religious affiliations and ethnicity. This confirms that Nigerian voters have grown beyond voting for aspirants based on religion or ethnicity. Rather, voters (most especially youths) are now more interested in choosing candidates based on their past records.

Conclusion

The study concludes that there was high online political discourse among respondents during the 2023 general elections but this could not translate into active offline participation in the political process such as joining political parties and registering to vote and be voted for, attending party rallies, and coming out to vote on voting days. The study recommends more political education to encourage these active social media users to translate their heavy online political participation to offline political involvements for a possible paradigm shift in the nation's political system. The university authorities can achieve this by organising periodic seminars focused on political orientation for these youths whom we say are the leaders of tomorrow.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest in this research. The study was conducted impartially, and the author have no affiliations that could bias the results or interpretations in this article.

Authors' Contributions

I, Dolapo Michael Oyedokun takes full responsibility for all aspects of the research presented in this article. This includes the conception and design of the study, the acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of all data, as well as the drafting, revising, and finalizing of the manuscript.

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