



SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN NIGERIA: A CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT: *In Nigeria, social media has transformed the political landscape, by playing a critical role in political mobilization and civic engagement. This conceptual paper explored the intersection of social media and political activism in Nigeria, focusing on how platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Youtube have enabled citizens to organize, mobilize, and influence political outcomes. Drawing on the Social Movement Theory (SMT), this paper analyzed the dynamics of online activism, its impact on the political and media processes, and the broader implications for Nigerian democracy. This study also considered some challenges, such as misinformation, digital divide, and the government's surveillance, that pose threats to activists' lives.*

KEYWORDS: Activism, Digital, Political, Social Media, Digital divide, Social movement, Political Mobilization etc.



INTRODUCTION

Background and Significance

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, has experienced a major transformation in its civic and political arenas due to the popularity of social media. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook and Instagram have become essential political mobilization and engagement tools. With the robust traditional media that can serve as a watchdog for democracy being owned and controlled by political elites in the country, social media provides the average Nigerians, particularly the youth, with a platform to share their perspective on governance, demand accountability, and be actively involved in the political process (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018).

The ability of social media to bypass the gatekeeping aspect of the traditional media has liberalized access to information and made available to the citizens, the mechanism to mobilize and stage large-scale protests, as seen during the #BringBackOurGirls protest in 2014, and the #EndSARS movement in 2020. These mostly youth-led protests against the government's nonchalant attitude towards the release of secondary school girls abducted by the notorious Boko Haram, and the police brutality against the youths were largely organized through social media, demonstrating the transformative power of these platforms in Nigeria's political space (Olurunisola, 2015; Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020).

The rise of social media in Nigerian politics is especially important given the flaws of traditional media, which are often subjected to government's control, censorship, and limited reach to rural areas. Social media, in contrast, allows for real-time communication, grassroots organization, and the amplification of marginalized voices (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015). It has allowed the citizens the opportunity to speak their minds, react to government policies, and become, to some positive extent, stakeholders in the government.

Purpose

This paper explores the role of social media in civic engagement and political mobilization in Nigeria, as anchored in the Social Movement Theory (SMT). The study analyzes key events such as the #BringBackOurGirls protest, the #EndSARS movement, election campaigns, and other forms of political activism facilitated by social media platforms. Furthermore, it discusses the problems associated with social media activism, including misinformation, online harassment, and government surveillance, while evaluating the long-term impact on political participation and governance in Nigeria. The paper's core aim is to emphasize the importance of social media in the democratization of governance in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Movement Theory as it relates to this work explains the framework for how social media facilitates political mobilization in Nigeria. SMT describes the mechanisms by which collective action is organized and sustained, highlighting the role of shared grievances, resources, and opportunities (Tilly, 2004). In our digital age, these mechanisms are constantly carried out through social media platforms.

SMT proposes that social movements arise when individuals perceive a shared injustice or grievance, which leads to collaborative action targeted at social or political change. In Nigeria,



and as seen in other countries, social media functions as a virtual public sphere where grievances such as corruption, poor governance, and human rights abuses are articulated and amplified. The platforms provide powerful channels for organizing, mobilizing, and coordinating collective action.

Moreover, SMT highlights the role of resource mobilization and political opportunities in the success of social movements. Social media has become a key resource in Nigeria, by helping to generate funds, recruit volunteers, and attract international attention. Political opportunity structures (i.e., shifts in power or governance that make it easier for movements to succeed) can also be observed in Nigeria, where increased internet penetration and youth frustration with the political elite have created fertile ground for digital activism (Tufekci, 2017).

Social Movement Theory, as an interdisciplinary field, served as a framework for explaining the different concepts highlighted in this paper. The aspects of framing, resource mobilization, and political opportunity structure (i.e., shifts in power or governance) that form the core mechanisms of the Social Movement Theory, were properly reflected.

Social Media and Political Mobilization/Civic Demonstration in Nigeria

1. Digital Activism and Election Campaigns in Nigeria.

Social media has reshaped the patterns and styles political activism is done in Nigeria. Years back, it was only through political parties, trade unions, or traditional media outlets that political mobilization in the country was carried out. However, with the high percentage in the use of internet connectivity and smart phones among Nigerians, particularly the youths, there has been an increasing shift to social media as a space for political organization and mobilization.

SM Platforms like Instagram, Facebook and X (twitter), facilitate activists to spread information fast, mobilize protests, and be able to bypass government restrictions. For example, during the 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections, two prominent political parties – the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) – made good use of SM platforms in engaging the voters, mostly the younger ones in the urban areas. These platforms allowed for real-time political debates, voter education, and grassroots mobilization (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Okon, et al., 2025). A good example of how this featured in 2023 elections can be seen from the #Obidient movement that heralded millions of Nigerian youths on X worldwide, to support the Labour Party’s presidential candidate.

Social media has also become a critical tool in Nigeria’s election campaigns. Political candidates and parties use platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to relate, particularly to the young and urban populations. During the 2015, 2019 and 2023 presidential elections, both incumbent and opposition candidates invested heavily in social media strategies, recognizing its potential to sway undecided voters and mobilize grassroots support.

However, the role of social media in elections is not without controversy, because political campaigns have used these platforms to spread misinformation and disinformation, leading to concerns about the integrity of online political discourse. False information about candidates, election dates, and voting procedures circulated widely on social media during 2015 elections, influencing voter behavior and, in some cases, inciting violence (Albright, 2017). Also, during the 2023 presidential election, electorates flooded the social media with results from different



polling booths, which conflicted with the official results from INEC. The results from the electorates were rejected because INEC is the only legal institution to announce election results in Nigeria (Electoral Act, 2022).

2. The #EndSARS Movement.

One of the most significant cases that portrayed social media's role in political mobilization in Nigeria is the #EndSARS movement. The movement was initially created in 2018 to serve as a voice against the inhuman activities of the Police special force, known as the 'Special Anti-Robbery Squad' on citizens of the country, especially the youths. But was reborn in 2020 when social media report of the shooting of a young man by SARS operatives in Delta state was posted on X (Uwazurike, 2021). So in 2020, Nigerian youths took to the social media to protest against 'SARS', a Police special force notorious for human right abuses with the hashtag #EndSARS. And the hashtag quickly went viral, drawing attention from both national and international audiences (Amzat et al., 2021).

Social media platforms, particularly Twitter, served as the primary tool for coordinating protests, sharing real-time updates, and raising funds. Celebrities, influencers, and activists played crucial roles in amplifying the message, while platforms like Instagram and WhatsApp were used to document police violence and organize relief efforts for injured protesters. The movement's decentralized nature was facilitated by the very structure of social media, allowing for horizontal rather than hierarchical organization (Tufekci, 2017).

The #EndSARS movement exemplifies how social media can serve as a catalyst for democratic activism in Nigeria, even in the face of government repression. Despite attempts by the government to curtail the protests through social media shutdowns and the arrest of activists, the movement persisted, forcing the government to announce the disbandment of SARS. Though challenges remain in terms of police reform, the movement marked a significant moment in Nigerian political history, showcasing the power of social media in driving political change (Nwaubani, 2020).

3. The #BringBackOurGirls Protest. The abduction of 276 secondary school girls in Chibok, Nigeria, on April 14, 2014, by the militant group Boko Haram, caused the emergence of the "#BringBackOurGirls" campaign. The incident garnered international recognition and responses, which highlighted and opened up broader and clearer issues regarding terrorism, gender violence, and the vulnerable situation of girls and women in conflict zones.

This awareness spread greatly and went viral through the social media platforms, particularly X and Facebook. Shortly after the abduction, the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls began trending via posts by some grassroots movements that included concerned Nigerian activists and citizens, and were responded to by international figures. The aim of the campaign was to raise awareness and pressure the Nigerian government and the international community to take action for the girls' safe release (Mackey, 2014).

Social media played an incredible role in mobilizing support and spreading awareness on the global stage, thereby attracting the attention of world figures like the former First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, and other celebrities who voiced their support by sharing the hashtag on their timelines (Clark, 2015). The quick spread of the information through social media platforms boosted the organization of protests. Furthermore, by creating a sense of



urgency and collective outrage, it achieved what traditional media would have struggled to do (Davis, 2014).

The use of social media also portrayed the disconnection between government action and public expectation, leading to increased backlash against the responses from the government to the crisis (Ogunyemi, 2019). The campaign's persistence clearly showed the immense strength of social media in shaping public discourse and influencing policy agendas. Thus, Oriola (2020) states that "Boko Haram released 106 girls in two tranches after ransom payment and prisoner exchange". The movement wouldn't have achieved this feat, without the vitality of social media.

As the campaign continued, it had challenges due to a lack of substantial information regarding their whereabouts. Nevertheless, the #BringBackOurGirls movement laid the groundwork for ongoing discussions about the vulnerabilities faced by girls in conflict scenarios and the necessity of urgent humanitarian responses (Cohen, 2016).

The #BringBackOurGirls campaign captured the importance of social media in modern activism. It clearly showed how digital platforms can trigger global movements, mount pressure on institutions, and attract attention to critical issues, regardless of challenges and limitations that may arise.

The Challenges of Social Media in Political Mobilization and Civic Engagement

1. Digital Divide

Despite the positive effect of social media platforms in Nigerian politics, access to these platforms is uneven, which reflects the country's broader socio-economic inequalities. Internet usage and access is higher in urban areas compared to rural regions. Also, the younger and more educated Nigerians are more likely to engage in and contribute to online political discourse than their less educated older counterparts (Kemp, 2023). This digital divide raises questions about the inclusivity of social media-driven political engagement and whether it accurately represents the views of the broader population.

2. Misrepresentation of Information

Distortion and fabrication of information, which have been on the fast rise on social media, pose a significant challenge to political mobilization and civic engagement in Nigeria. Fake news, manipulated images, and misleading narratives often go viral on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, especially during election seasons or periods of political unrest. The Nigerian government has expressed concerns about the increase and effect of false information on public order and national security. And there is a plan to legislate the 'Protection from Internet and Manipulation Bill', otherwise known as the 'Social Media Bill', to regulate and control the high level of deceit and manipulations on social media (Ojebode, 2020).

However, critics say that such regulations could deny citizens their freedom of speech and open participation on social media. Therefore, the challenge lies in balancing the need to curb harmful distorted information while preserving the freedom of expression that social media provides.



3. Government Trailing and Online Suppression.

Though social media enables political mobilization, it also exposes activists and citizens to increased monitoring and bullying by the government. The Nigerian government has implemented various forms of online investigation, and in some cases, activists have been apprehended for their social media posts (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2020). For example, during the #EndSARS protests in 2020, there were rumors of government efforts to surveil social media users, close down internet services, and jail the key mobilizers. This proves to be a major concern as the safety of the activists who use social media for political purposes is not guaranteed.

The threat of this pervasive control may have a frightening effect on online activism, as individuals might be deterred from expressing their views openly for fear of facing government retaliation. Thus, while social media offers unprecedented opportunities for political engagement, it is also an avenue where the lives of those involved in digital activism are seriously endangered.

DISCUSSION: The Long-Term Impact of Social Media on Nigerian Democracy

The role of social media in Nigerian politics is likely to continue growing in importance, particularly as internet access expands and younger generations become more politically active (Oluleye et al, 2023). Social media has the potential to enhance democracy by providing citizens with tools for political engagement, promoting transparency, and holding leaders accountable. However, its influence will depend on the ability of Nigerian society to address the challenges posed by misinformation, surveillance, and the digital divide.

Media literacy is a key factor in the future of social media-driven political mobilization. Now that more Nigerians engage with social media platforms, there is an increasing need to educate them to critically assess online information, recognizing misinformation, and effectively participating in civil discourse. Strengthening media literacy programs can empower citizens to use social media more effectively and responsibly for political engagement.

Moreover, as social media becomes increasingly pivotal to Nigerian politics, regulations that protect freedom of expression and limit the spread of harmful content should be implemented. Striking this balance will require collaboration between government, civil society, and technology companies to ensure that social media remains a tool for democratic participation rather than for repression.

CONCLUSION

Social media has emerged as a powerful force in political mobilization and civic engagement in Nigeria. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have democratized political discourse, allowing citizens to organize protests, campaign for political candidates, and demand accountability from their leaders. The #EndSARS movement exemplifies the potential of social media to facilitate large-scale political mobilization in Nigeria, even in the face of government repression.



However, the use of social media in Nigerian politics is not without its challenges. Misinformation, digital divide, and government surveillance all pose significant risks to the sustainability of social media-driven activism. Addressing these challenges will be crucial to ensuring that social media can be fully utilized as a tool for promoting democracy and civic engagement in Nigeria.

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