HARNESSING THE POTENCY OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS A POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AGENT FOR PROMOTING CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION IN THE 2023 PRE-ELECTIONS ACTIVITIES IN PLATEAU STATE

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media across the globe as a tool for Political Communication has facilitated social interaction between the electorate and politicians regardless of their age grades. The efficacy of social media as an agent of political communication in facilitating political information flow cannot be overemphasized. This paper examines the role of social media in promoting citizens' participation in the 2023 pre-election activities in Plateau State. The study is anchored on the Technological Determinism theory. It adopted the Descriptive Survey Design based on the Sample Size of 366, (61) respondents were purposively selected from six Local Government Areas to represent the seventeen LGAs in Plateau State. The Questionnaire was used as an instrument of Data Collection. Responses to the questions were collected and computed using a simple percentage. Findings revealed that Social Media have significantly enhanced citizens' participation in pre-election activities in Plateau State and beyond. It recommends that Social Media influencers should intensify sensitization and mobilization of citizens to actively participate in election activities to determine who will pilot the affairs of their local, state, and federal governments. The Study concluded that the crucial role played by social media in disseminating political information has ushered in a new civilization in the world's political scene and it has come to stay.

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Keywords: Social media, political communication, citizens' participation, pre-election activities

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an essential factor in shaping and reshaping the globe by empowering youths, women, and entrepreneurs among others to make decisions that will improve their lifestyles. It has also encouraged freedom of speech by availing its various platforms for the poor and rich as well as the urban and rural dwellers the opportunities to express their feelings or opinions on issues affecting them.

Social media is an essential tool in political communication that has deepened democracy in Nigeria and other developing nations of the world by encouraging citizens to actively participate in the political development of their country, especially during the pre-election and post-elections period. Over the last one and half decades, the role of social media has been maximized to become a strong tool in promoting political participation. During the former U.S. President, Barrack Obama's election campaigns in 2008 and 2012 as well as President Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 campaign election Research Information Network. (2011).

However, one of the latest developments in the world's political scene is the emergence of social media which is an instrument of political communication. This development has helped greatly in conveying political messages from political parties and politicians to the electorate and from the electorate to the political parties. This is made possible due to the agitation of the world as a global village because of the industrial revolutions and the current use of information technology and information systems which are seen as the fourth revolution. The wider acceptability of social media has impacted positively, political communication that helped in addressing the tyrannical censorship of the media by the government.

The advent of social media has created a new world of communication where information flows without any hindrance or censorship which gave rise to a new civilization that came with a free

flow of political information that politicians and political parties have exploited to reach out to the electorates in soliciting for their votes rather than recruiting thugs to disrupt elections and snatch ballot boxes for them. Social media has greatly helped in reducing the cases of election rigging and politicians now devoted most of their time, energy, and resources to soliciting votes.

The concept of political communication is crucial in promoting good governance, particularly in developing nations such as Nigeria. It takes place either in an informal, formal, private or public through various mediums either mediated or unmediated content. The concept also includes the production and generation of messages by political actors, the transmission of messages through direct or indirect channels as well as the reception of political messages.

Political communication, in summary, is concerned with the use of media which can be social or traditional to mobilize the electorate to actively participate in the governance of their local, state, and federal governments by first of all participating in the election processes (pre-election and post-election stages) to ensure that only credible people are elected into elective positions. Social media platforms are potentially powerful tools for disseminating information to the electorates for purpose of making informed political decisions that will improve their living conditions.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Social media has been widely applauded as an important tool in promoting political participation in Nigeria in recent times. For example, social media played a significant role in the 2011 and 2015 elections of former President Goodluck Jonathan and President Muhammadu Buhari as well as that of former U.S President Barrack Obama election. The elections were largely won as a result of social media influence on the various campaigns of former President Goodluck, Obama, and Buhari. However, despite the positive role of social media in promoting citizens' participation in politics as exemplified above as well as demanding the dividends of democracy, some sections of society still view social media from a negative lens. It

is against this backdrop that this study seeks to examine the efficacy of social media in promoting political participation in pre and post-electioneering activities such as mobilizing prospective voters to register and obtain their Permanent Voter's Card, voting, political parties primary election and campaigns for the main elections in 2023.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To ascertain the level of usage of social media in the promotion of Plateau State citizens' participation in the 2023 pre-election activities.
2. To determine the extent of social media influence on Plateau State citizens' participation in the 2013 pre-election activities.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of social media role in advocating for Plateau State citizens' active participation in pre-election activities in the state.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What is the level of social media promotion of Plateau State citizens' participation in the 2023 pre-election activities?
2. To what extent has social media influenced Plateau State citizens' participation in 2023 pre-election activities in the state?
3. How effective is the role of social media in advocating for citizens' active participation in 2023 pre-election activities?

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Communication

The success of an individual and organizations, institutions, and communities depends largely on communication. The term communication is a basic necessity for human existence because human beings cannot do without communicating with friends and relatives. The common definition of the term is that is a process of sharing information, feelings, and ideas between two or more people through previously agreed language, code, sign, or symbol. Asamoah (2011) says the communication process includes all acts of transmitting

messages to channels that link people to the languages and symbolic codes which are used to transmit messages; it includes how messages are received and stored as the rules, customs, beliefs, and conventions, which define and regulate human relationship and event. While corroborating Asemah's assertion, Lar and Yakubu (2003) affirm that communication is a process by which human beings relate to one another. When people communicate they automatically unlock the gate for sharing information, imparting knowledge, etc.

Social Media Origin

Social media, according to Suminas (2010), is the interactive technology that allows individuals to interact among themselves as well as share content generated. Similarly, Newson, Houghton, and Patten (2008) asserted that social media are online tools that utilize the internet to facilitate the free flow of information online. This has also facilitated participation and collaboration among citizens on political issues affecting either positively or negatively. It also has a wide range of internet-based and mobile service that allows users to participate in online interaction and created content.

Social media platforms 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. Therefore, social media is a veritable tool for bringing people together and closer to the underlying denominator of communication and interaction among them.

Whenever the term social media is mentioned, what readily comes to mind are those Internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online. Buttressing further, Bartlett et al (2015) said social media platforms are interactive web-based media that offer citizens the opportunities and place to connect and share opinions, experiences, views, contacts, knowledge, expertise, as well as other things.

Social media belong to a new genre of media that focuses on social networking. It allows users to express themselves, interact with friends and share information with greater freedom as well as publish their views on issues on the World Wide Web. (Adibe, & Chibuwe, 2018) noted that social media promotes the democratization of knowledge and information, thereby making people both information producers and consumers.

Social media emerged with the advent of the internet and the World Wide Web. They are usually associated with the term "Web 2.0" which is used to describe websites that provide an opportunity for a user to interact with the sender of a message. Nnadozie (2007) observes that "Web 2.0" refers to the state of the web from 2004 till date; a period when interactive websites emerged as opposed to "web 1.0" which describes the state of the web before 2004. Web-based communities, social networking sites video-sharing sites, wikis, and blogs, are among examples of web 2.0 sites.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE PROMOTION OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA

The Internet provides a platform for Social media to operate. The Internet has provided a "society" inside the society wherein social media users live. Individuals live on the internet; the same way they live in a society (Onyedikachi M. et al, 2017). This factor has its numerous advantages the internet provides a platform through which all individuals irrespective of tribe, religion, sex, and educational background can be reached without sentiment or discrimination.

However, on the levels of political participation, (Madueke, et al 2017), asserted that there are two broad levels of political participation which are; direct and indirect participation. Direct participation includes voting and standing for election, voting in a referendum, contributing to a town hall meeting, joining in an industrial action (strikes), organized rebellion, mass protest, and demonstration and revolution. Indirect participation includes; political discussion, payment of taxes, signing a petition, and supporting boycotts. Indirect

participation is further classified as; conventional and unconventional political participation.

Conventional participation is in accordance with laid down rules and regulations, that uses the instruments of representative democracy to make input in governance. Examples of conventional participation are; voting during an election, standing for an election, contributing to a town hall meeting, voting during a referendum, and industrial actions (strikes). While unconventional participation is a behaviour that defies laid down rules and regulations. It does not go through formal governmental apparatus often resulting in violence. Examples of unconventional participation are; protest marches, demonstrations, organized rebellions, boycotts, deferring government warnings, and revolutions.

Social media makes it possible for a large number of audiences, scattered all over the country and even beyond to be reached at the same time without geographical limits or boundaries as well as provided platforms for the target audience to be reached at almost little cost. The huge sum of money that was used in mobilizing citizens to participate in political activities through the traditional media has been reduced as a result of unprecedented social media usage in Nigeria. Another advantage of social media usage is that politicians and political parties take their campaigns to electorates regardless of their sex, age, religion, and ethnic differences. Politicians now harness the avalanche platforms provided by the internet, especially social media platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook to disseminate their manifesto to woo electorates to vote for them.

According to Onyedikachi, et al (2017), politicians and political parties use social media to mobilize the electorates to vote for them, and government at all levels (local, state, and federal) also uses the social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook to disseminate government's programmes and policies to the masses to woo the masses to key into the programmes and policies.

On his part, Abubakar (2011) reports that the internet has provided a "society" inside the society wherein we live. Individuals

"live" on the internet the same way they live in society. Some of the advantages of social media in enhancing political participation are:

i. Social media provide platforms through which all individuals irrespective of tribe, religion, sex, educational background, etc can be reached without sentiment or discrimination.
ii. Social media make it possible for a large audience, scattered all over the country and even beyond to be reached at the same time without geographical limits or boundaries.
iii. Social media provide platforms for the target audience to be reached at almost zero cost thereby reducing the huge sum usually spent in mobilization people is drastically reduced.

Social media has numerous importance in enhancing political mobilization in Nigeria. Politicians and political parties are now taking serious advantage of the cheap and wide reach of social media to campaign and market their manifesto to the electorates, especially to those at the grassroots level. Social media provide a larger scale for mobilization and campaigns. Politicians have now shifted their campaigns to social media where they recruit social media handlers whose job is to add followers and constantly post programmes and activities of their principals on social media platforms with to woo support for their principals.

While it is a known fact that social media platforms are easily accessible and inexpensive, (Madueke, et al 2017) opined that social media enhance political participation, especially among youths who form a majority of its users. Social media helps in shaping political communication by segmenting its audience through diversification of coverage and exposure. By weakening the gate-keeping role in social media, political communications are formed and shaped. Unlike what is obtainable in the traditional media which are usually flooded with a press release and government-generated information, social media permits the immediate sharing of information. This goes a long way in influencing and mobilizing a lot of Nigerians to participate in elections in Nigeria and beyond. A very good example of social media

mobilization of Nigerians to participate in elections was the 2015 presidential election that brought President Muhammadu Buhari.

PARTICIPATION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

It is the right of the people to participate in the decision making process concerning their affairs. Participation is a call for genuine involvement of the poor rural communities in the development process of their communities which can either be both human or physical advancements of society. Bessette (2004) sees participation as a planned activity based on participatory processes which facilitate dialogue among different stakeholders, around a common development problem or goal while Mefalopulos (2008) opines that participation is at the heart of meaningful development.

Participation in development processes has been adjudged as the answer to why a lot of development initiatives between the 1970s and 80s failed to achieve the objectives of transforming developing nations due to the non-involvement of local stakeholders and misconceptions in perceptions about the key community problems. Affirming the significance of community participation in development initiatives, Tufte and Mefalopulos (2009) opine that engaging stakeholders is all about carrying the representatives of various groups and associations alone in development initiatives and seeking a broader consensus around development initiatives. Participation increases the sense of ownership and guarantees the sustainability of the project. For effective and genuine participation to occur, there must be a horizontal flow of communication, which should be based on dialogue.

According to Bwakan (2022), Participation is all about carrying the representatives of various groups and associations alone in development initiatives and seeking a broader consensus around development issues. Participation increases the sense of ownership and guarantees the sustainability of development in a community. For effective and genuine participation to occur, there must be a horizontal flow of communication, which should be based on dialogue.

Political participation, on the other hand, implies citizens' participation in the acts, events, or decisions taken by the key political

stakeholders for the benefit of the general electorates such decisions are taken during the party's primary elections where delegates elect a candidate that will represent a particular political party in a general election. Abubakar (2011) asserts that political participation is the engagement of the masses in any political process before a collective decision is taken. It entails citizens' participation in issues that serve as a yardstick for choosing political leaders and decisions on political issues. The eight characteristics of participation, according to (Asekun-Olarinmoye et al., 2020), are as follow:

i. Participation is a right, not something handed out by the state.
ii. Participation must be long-term and not expert driven.
iii. Participation is about voice and self-representation.
iv. Participation is both institutional and non-institutional.
v. Participation means broadening the culture of representation.
vi. Participation becomes information sharing, where communities become informed about the decision.
vii. Participation may be through consultation, where communities influence decisions.
viii. Public participation is collaboration, with joint decision making.
ix. Participation is on empowerment and self-determination.

The eight characteristics of political participation revolve around citizens' involvement in all the stages or processes of making or taking important political decisions. However, Hague and Harrop (2001) identified two levels of political participation, namely; direct participation and indirect participation. Direct participation entails voting and contesting an election, voting in a referendum, and making a contribution during town hall meetings among other forms of political participation. While indirect participation, on the other hand, includes: political discussion, payment of taxes, and signing petitions among other forms of indirect participation.

They further classified political participation into conventional political participation and unconventional political participation. Conventional political participation entails a kind of participation that is in accordance with laid down rules and regulations which has to do with representative democracy that gives someone room to make input in the governance of his/her local, state, and federal government. While unconventional political participation entails the type of behaviour that defies laid down rules and regulations. Such participation violates laid rules and regulations often resulting in violence. Violent protest/demonstration is an example of unconventional participation.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A POLITICAL COMMUNICATION MEDIUM

The concept of political communication emerged as a paradigm from the top-down (government policymakers to the masses) to the bottom-top (masses to government). This pattern of information flow is rapidly gaining acceptability across the globe. It empowers the masses to initiate the communication process while government follows as against the old practice where the masses are the followers.

The social media pattern of information flow takes the form of a bottom-top approach and is embraced all over the world. In the 2008 US Presidential election of Barrack Obama, social media platforms greatly played an influential role in the campaign. This has made social media an alternative to traditional media. Since then the use of social media as an alternative channel of political communication has continued to grow when Obama broke the world record in the history of social media use for political purposes during his presidential elections.

Globally, social media is now being embraced by politicians as an alternative channel of campaigning to woo electorates to vote for them. It has significantly changed how modern political campaigns are run with ease and electorates follow every bid of campaigns through various social media platforms. Politicians now take advantage of the wider coverage of social media to engage meaningfully with the electorates. Lately, politicians in Nigeria like their counterparts in other countries of the world have continued to use social media platforms to campaign and win elections.

According to Kushin and Yamamoto (2010), young people now access political information from social media more than any other age group. They want immediate returns in the form of the betterment of lives rather than the development of their immediate communities and those elected into political offices to owe them the duty of financial settlement instead of developing the various constituencies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Technological Determinism Theory

The theory was propounded by Marshall McLuhan in 1964. The theory better explains the issues of discourse in this study. He observed that new media technologies in communication will soon determine social interaction between human beings and turn the world into a global village. The advent of social media platforms has democratized access to information and enhanced freedom of speech and opportunities for political engagement between the electorates and the politicians as well as political parties.

The significance of the theory to the study is that technological determinism theory has led to the emergence of social media platforms which has helped in redefining Nigeria's political system greatly. Nigerian politicians and political parties now use social media platforms to campaign to the electorates to vote for them. Baran (2004) says the theory is a force that drives the economic, cultural, political, and technological development of a nation and is determined by how much power is given to people to use technological development.

The theory is suitable for this study because it helps in explaining how technology makes it possible for social media users especially youths to receive political campaign messages and act on the messages in a positive manner that promote citizens' participation in politics. The electorates in turn through the technological devices at their disposal can receive and react to political messages thereby making them active and not passive participants in the electioneering processes or activities.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted the survey design method. A questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection. The use of a survey method for data collection is justified by the fact that it is a suitable and most appropriate method of gathering data related to demographics, opinions, and perceptions (Asemah and Kierian, 2018). The population for the study comprises the seventeen Local Government Areas (L.G. As) in Plateau State. The 17 L.G. As are; Barki Ladi, Bassa, Bokkos, Mangu, Jos North, Jos South, Jos East, Kanke, Kanam, Panskhin, Langtang North, Langtang South, Qua'an Pan, Shendam, Mikang, Riyom, and Wase. Two L.G. As are selected to represent the three Senatorial zones in the state. Jos South and Bassa L.G. As are to represent Northern Senatorial Zone, Pankshin and Mangu L.G. As are to represent Central Senatorial Zone while Qua'an Pan and Langtang North are to represent Southern Senatorial Zone.

A total of 366 respondents were randomly selected; 61 from each of the six L.G.As to represent the state. Responses to the questions were collected and computed using a simple percentage.

$$\frac{NR}{TR} \times \frac{100}{1}$$

Where NR ◎ Number of respondents

TR ◎ Total number of response

100 ◎ is the percentage

1 ◎ is constant

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

Research Question One: What is the level of social media promotion of Plateau State citizens' participation in the 2023 pre-election activities?

Table 1: Level of Social Media Participation in 2023 pre-election activities

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very High	304	83.1
High	41	11.2
Low	21	5.7
Undecided	0	0.0
Total	**366**	**100**

Source: Field Survey, 2022

Analysis of data in table 1 indicates 304(83.1%) of the respondents answered: "very high" when asked what is the level of social media usage for the promotion of Plateau state citizen's participation in the 2023 pre-election activities in the state, 41 (11.2%) answered "High" while 21(5.7%) answered "low" when they were asked the same question as above. This is an indication that the majority of the respondents are aware that social media platforms are used for promoting political participation in the state.

Research Question Two: To what extent has social media influenced Plateau State residents' participation in pre-election activities in the state?

Table 2: Extent of social media influence on resident's participation in politics

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Highly Influential	291	79.5
Influential	51	14.0
Low	24	6.5
Undecided	0	0.0
Total	**366**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2022

Analysis of data in table 2 shows that 291(79.5%) of the respondents answered "Highly Influential" when asked what is the extent of social media influence on Plateau state residents to participate in the 2023 pre-election activities in the state, 51 (14.0%) answered "Influential" while

24 (6.5%) of the respondents answered "Low" when asked the same question. This is an indication that residents of Plateau state rated social media as a highly influential tool in mobilizing residents of Plateau state to participate in politics.

Research Question 3: How effective is social media in advocating for Plateau state citizens' active participation in pre-election activities?

Table 3. Effectiveness of social media in advocating for active participation in politics

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Effective	281	76.8
Effective	63	17.2
Low	22	6.0
Undecided	0	0.0
Total	**366**	**100**

Source: Field survey, 2022

Analysis of data in table 3 shows that 281(76.8%) of the respondents answered: "Very Effective" when asked what is the effectiveness of social media in advocating for Plateau state residents' active participation in pre-election activities in the state, 63(17.2%) of the respondents answered "Effective" when asked the same question while 22(6.0%) answered "Low" when equally asked the same question. This is an indication that the majority of the Plateau state residents rated social media as highly effective in advocating for citizens' participation in the 2023 pre-election activities in the state.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings from the data presented and analyzed from Question One show that majority of the respondents rated the extent of social media's role in promoting citizens' participation in the 2023 pre-election activities as very high. This finding is supported by an earlier observation made by Onyedikachi, et al (2017) which held that the evidence of social media's extent of mobilizing the electorates to vote for the candidates of their choice at all the levels of government being

local, and state or federal. The government also uses social media platforms (Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook) to disseminate the government's programmes and policies to the masses with the view of keying into the programmes and policies.

Secondly, from research question two, findings from data presented and analyzed show that two-thirds of the respondents agreed that the extent of social media influence on residents' participation in the 2023 pre-election activities is very high in Plateau state. This is evident from the analysis of data in table two which shows that 291(79.5%) of the respondents answered "Highly Influential" when asked what is the extent of social media influence on Plateau state residents to participate in the 2023 pre-election activities in the state.

Finally, from research question three, analyzed data show that the majority of the respondents agreed that social media is very effective in advocating for citizens' active participation in the 2023 pre-election activities in Plateau state. This is evident from the analysis of data in table three of this which shows that 281(76.8%) of the respondents agreed that social media is very effective when asked what is the effectiveness of social media in advocating for Plateau state residents' active participation in pre-election activities in the state,

CONCLUSION

The critical role of social media in political communication, particularly as it regards citizens' active participation in all election stages cannot be overemphasized. It has come to shape and reshape the democracies of developing nations such as Nigeria. The advent of social media has helped in changing the perception of many Nigerians about political participation from passive to active participants. This has enhanced the political development of the country as the number of current campaigns for perceived better candidates for various elective positions in the forthcoming general elections using the various social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram) is now unprecedented. It has equally changed the ideology of politicians using thugs to disrupt elections by snatching ballot boxes in areas where they are losing to issue-based campaigns intending to woo electorates to vote

for them rather than rely upon rigging. They have now left no other option than to play the game according to the rules by appealing for votes. Social media practice as an instrument of political communication is still very new but there are huge prospects for political parties, politicians, and electorates to cultivate the positive usages of social media to entrench good governance by mobilizing the electorates to participate in both pre and post-election activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Politicians and political parties should intensify issue-based campaigns using social media to attract votes rather than relying on rigging to win elections.
2. Social media influencers should intensify sensitization and mobilization of Nigerians to actively participate in the 2023 election processes to curb the problem of election malpractices or irregularities.
3. Social media influencers should ensure political messages circulated on social media platforms are factual and not fake or fictional in order to earn the trust of their followers.
4. Social media content(s) in the current electioneering period should mainly be messages that will promote citizens' active participation in all politicking activities such as encouraging voter registration, PVC collection, and voting on the day of the election.
5. Social media coverage should be expanded to cover rural settlements to increase and trickle down the sensitization and mobilization campaign messages on the need for citizens to participate and drive the process of the country's political development by participating in election stages (pre-election and post-election).

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