Assessment of the Impact of Youth's Online Political Participation on Democratic Development in Ghana and Nigeria

Okonkwor Ugochukwu Stephine & Ngozi Nwogwugwu, PhD

Abstract
Online political participation is an element of civic engagement which makes sites such as Facebook and Twitter have emerged as new channels for political activity. Concerns about decreased youth engagement have prompted more research in this area. Unfortunately, previous studies have produced contradictory results, possibly as a result of a lack of understanding and theorization of the concept of youth online political involvement. As a result, the article will be based on the Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET). The study found that social media, information quality, and political interests have the potential to encourage African youths to engage in online political involvement. Also, by providing the youths with a way to obtain the political knowledge they need to make an informed political decision through dialogues on various social media platforms, they would be able to bring about political reforms. As a result, in order to examine the notion of youth political involvement in democratic progress in Ghana and Nigeria, the paper adopted survey research design. The findings show that the media's quality of information and exposure has an impact on youth's political knowledge and interest, which has an impact on participation. Youth's online political involvement has impacted mass participation in Ghana and Nigeria, which implies enhancing democratic development in the two countries is crucial for democratic development, and it is through social media that concerns are expressed. The study recommends that rather than relying entirely on traditional media which may not reach majority of both countries population which are the youth, the government of both countries should take advantage of social media in order to enhance democratic development through youth online political participation.
Keywords: Political Participation, Youth, Democratic Development, Nigeria, Ghana

Introduction

Democracy has emerged as the most globally acceptable system of government since the last decade of the 20th century. Across the different continents, countries that were hitherto regarded as authoritarian have embraced democracy. Within democracy, Print (2007) divides 'engagement indicators' into three categories: civic indicators, electoral indicators, and political engagement indicators. Group membership, volunteering with civil service groups, and working to solve community problems are all examples of civic participation. Voting in elections, donating to political candidates/parties, and advocating alongside political candidates/issues are all examples of electoral indicators. Meanwhile, political involvement indicators include rallies, boycotts, calling out to the media or politicians about concerns, and using the internet to effect political change, all of which are relatively unconventional ways to participate

When discussing democracy, the concept of democratic development is relative. Huntington (1991) defined the notion as a phase of evolution that manifests itself in the shape of increasing waves that systematically transcend the arena of global politics. It is, in other words, the shift from non-democratic to democratic governments. According to Alumona (2010), democratic development is a process that occurs over time, with the state and the entire populace being the key actors who must demonstrate commitment to ensure that sustainable democracy runs well in the entire society.

It is only a system that experiences sustained development of the various democratic processes that can be able to achieve democratic consolidation. The two largest democracies in West Africa, Ghana and Nigeria need to sustain efforts at widening the political space as well as achieving citizens satisfaction with democracy in order to be rated are achieved democratic consolidation (Nwogwugwu 2017).

According to Diamond (1997), the third wave of democracy has altered the global balance of political regimes. Whitehead (2002) asserted that democratic development is best understood as a complicated, long-term, dynamic, and open-ended process. It is characterized by development toward a more ruled-based, consensual, and participatory kind of politics. These processes take various forms, but a typical occurrence begins with the selection of the principal offices of government through competitive elections in which the majority of the populace participates. The democratic government should also be reformed and chosen using the model of procedural legitimacy. Smith (2003) aptly noted that procedural legitimacy is associated with democratic systems of governance as a pro-democracy movement in a healthy political environment with reference to the elite and electorate competing for political power.

Various behaviors related with citizenship, such as party politics, have an impact on governmental affairs or politics participation (activism). Making an appeal, signing petitions, participating or organizing demonstrations, wearing campaign insignia or badges, and contacting official policymakers are all examples of these behaviors. Electoral participation is another action that is frequently linked to political engagement. Faced with such a wide range of conceivable actions, scholars have attempted to classify political engagement or create a typology of participation in a number of ways (Hoskins, 2013).

Online political participation is non-conventional form of political participation that uses digital modalities of participation. Since the beginning of the 21st century, non-traditional (also known as non-electoral or non-institutional) forms of participation have grown in popularity (Shore, 2014). As a result, a wide range of activities now referred to as political engagement have emerged, broadening the democratic experience.

The 21st century has recorded increasing development of democratic practice across the African continent, with globalization which is enhanced by information communication technology (ICT) being a primary driver. Increased access to information which the internet has made possible has resulted to increased participation in politics by well-informed youths (Nwogwugwu 2020). The social media plays a vital part in this enhanced online political participation by Youth across Africa. Most importantly, social media provides a tool for involvement by exposing youths to political information (Gil De Zuniga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014). It also provides a variety of political engagement options and significantly reduces the cost of participation in terms of both time and effort. As a result, one of the most important features of social media is the ability it provides individuals to get political information they want without having to go through the gatekeeper function of traditional media (Policy and Legal Advocacy Center, 2011). Bae (2014) argues that, because of the significant penetration of political material on social media and the lack of control over the flow of information on it, youths can come across politically engaging content while engaging in diverse apolitical activities on the platform.

Traditional methods of political participation were monetized and open to various forms of corruption thereby limiting the active participation of the youth. Nwogwugwu (2018) avers that the political heavyweights also known as the big men, utilized the services of the youth to undermine democratic processes to the advantage of the big men. Empirical research suggests that the move from traditional to expressive online engagement can explain the patterns describing an apathetic youth in today's politics (Theocharis & Quintelier, 2014). This makes it pertinent, to investigate and understand the extent of youth online political participation and how it can affect democratic development in Ghana and Nigeria, the two largest democracies in West Africa. This study

therefore examined the impact of youth online political participation on democratic development in Ghana and Nigeria.

Review of Literature

Sida (2010), youth political participation refers to the involvement of young people in political activities, civic life, active citizenship, and policy making. This could take several forms, including serving on a local government council, voting in an election, or participating in the budget process of a local government. Ibezim (2019) notes, youth political participation is bedeviled by a myriad of challenges, taking the lead is lack of understanding of the benefits that youth political participation holds. The author goes further to state that unemployment, social exclusion, limited capacity, resource, and tools are other problems facing youth.

Young people find themselves on the perimeter of power, while working as 'vote machines' and party apparatchiks, because they lack social and political capital (Bob-Milliar, 2014). Disillusioned by formal politics, some young people may abandon the political system entirely (Booysen, 2015). Honwana (2012), on the other hand, claims that "what appears to be apathy and depoliticization signifies a deliberate migration away from traditional venues of party politics toward other modes of interaction with society and the global world." The concept of young people engaged in "unruly politics" (Richards, 1995) is congruent with a theme in youth literature about generational tensions, which argues that young people have a tendency to reject or disturb the current quo (Honwana, 2012).

Landsdown (2013) mentions three attributes of effective and meaningful youth participation to include; first, it can be consultative, in which young people's voices are heard in an adult-assigned consultation process, or through a youth-led advocacy initiative, in which they have the capacity, mandate, and information to fully perform their roles. Second, it can include youth-led participation, in which young people have a direct influence on decision-making within their own youth communities, such as through youth-led NGOs, student councils, and youth parliaments with budgets and competencies. Third, it can include youth collaborative participation, in which young people participate effectively in regular political decision-making processes, such as voters, members of parliament, political parties, or advocacy groups.

The political preferences of young Africans, their preferred mode of political participation are relevant information needed to show the relationship between the generational identities and political behaviour in Nigeria, as well as the fact that the Nigerian youth represent an increasingly important electorate. Youth political participation is impacted by, and manifests itself in, non-political aspects of their lives. Youth cultures, or the region of youth's experiences that includes "consumer goods, modes of education, routes of labor, leisure activities, and spaces for socializing" (Murillo 2017), can be a space for manifestations of citizenship. Furthermore, youth cultures can serve as gateways to more explicitly political behaviors, such as when apolitical social media engagement leads to political discourse and, even further, to offline political activism (Ojok & Acol 2017).

Young people, according to Loader, Vromen, and Xenos (2014), who are dissatisfied with traditional political institutions such as political parties, would rather engage politically through networks that they form themselves, utilizing media that they are more comfortable with. Because of their receptiveness to the novelty and experimentation that social media provides, the use of the internet in collective action, and specifically social media, may appeal to young people (Tandon & Brown, 2013). During the Egyptian revolution, social media was widely utilized to organize events and share information in ways that helped to sustain the revolution's activism. During the 'Arab Spring,' Twitter in particular was widely used, prompting some to dub it the 'Twitter Revolution.' Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms enable users to not only consume but also (re)produce news in a timely and effective manner. As a result, "conventional media are no longer the

only voice that narrates and interprets relevant facts of immediate reality, or the only bearers and creators of public opinion" (Ferré-Pavia & Perales Garca, 2015; Gyampo, 2017).

In general, rather than relying on traditional media to create a narrative that may be at odds with the message that the movement itself wishes to put out, the Internet gives collective action participants more freedom in framing their cause (Gyampo, 2017). It is the Internet's democratizing function, particularly social media that allows it to exercise state control over communication while also providing a powerful platform for alternative viewpoints (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010).

Posting political messages on a personal or friends' wall, sharing political thoughts, joining political groups, like political candidate sites, and commenting on friends' political postings are just a few of the activities available through basic Facebook capabilities (Vitak, et al., 2011). Clearly, Facebook mimics conventional forms of involvement in which many real-world events take place online (Warren, Sulaiman, & Jafar, 2014). Political activity on Twitter includes posting political tweets, retweeting or quoting political tweets, following politicians, political parties, or political Twitter accounts, and replying to tweets from these groups (Valenzuela, 2013). As a result, because social media is so deeply established in the political culture of today's youth, (Olabamiji, 2014), it can be said that the youth are involved in online activism either by providing or receiving political information, political knowledge, political interest, and policy satisfaction.

(Bosch, 2016) indicated that Twitter is a way in which youths are being active in politics as it encourages political listening where politicians can see the expression of every kinds of people and also know what solution can be proffered. While youths are perceived as generally apathetic and disinterested in mainstream party politics, they are actively engaging in political discussion for causes which may be seen as more personal, but which are still intensely political. This is a sort of sub activism which helps to create new biographies of citizenship. Moreover, these online discussions should not be seen as detached from traditional media platforms, particularly, as these media outlets have agendas as most are being controlled by the government.

While youths are often considered as apathetic and uninterested in mainstream party politics, they are actively participating in political debate for issues that are more personal but yet quite political. This is a type of sub-activism that aids in the creation of new citizenship biographies. Furthermore, these online debates should not be considered as apart from traditional media platforms, especially because most of these channels are controlled by the government and hence have agendas. While youths may not consume mainstream journalism on a daily basis, Twitter provides an element of immediacy, existing alongside more established news outlets and providing a venue for political action. Through their sub activism, the youths who participate in these online debates convene in this space and are available together to create a networked public sphere, generating venues for counter-memory manifestations. These Twitter discussions about governance issues have fostered the creation of a forum where individuals not only have a voice, but also listen to each other, regardless of their real or apparent differences. As a result, the #endsars, #freesenegal, #endbadgovernanceinnigeria, and #weareremovingadictator movements on Twitter can be viewed as a collaborative effort of opposition to normative memory construction.

Policy satisfaction encompasses a wide range of topics, including economic, political, and social concerns. As a result, policy satisfaction in a democracy is concerned with the government's role in problems such as press freedom, minority group protection, and court system accessibility (Shore, 2014). As a result, policy satisfaction is seen as a core democratic ideal. As a result, in a democracy, the most important policy a government should follow is one that would favorably impact the lives of its citizens' youths. However, in order for this to happen, their voices must be heard on a variety of policy problems. Previously, this may have been accomplished through traditional media; however, social media has now taken over this function. This is due to the fact that social media creates a direct link between the public and the government (Johnson & Kaye, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Cognitive Engagement Theory as its theoretical construct. The term "cognitive engagement" refers to the willingness and ability of individuals to learn about politics, which eventually leads to participation. It entails the amount of effort that young people are willing to put forth in order to participate in politics, as well as how long they are willing to do so (Charles, 2010).

Ronald F. Inglehart proposed the Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET) in 1977 as the Cognitive Mobilization Theory (Alaminos & Panalva, 2012; Dalton, 1984). At the time, cognitive mobilization theory proposed that more educated teenagers with greater access to knowledge would have a greater impact on political engagement. (Inglehart 1977; 1990). Thus, at the heart of CET is the notion that political participation is the result of an individual's education, access to information, political knowledge, political interest, and policy satisfaction (Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2004).

Like any other theory, Cognitive Engagement Theory has its critics. According to Pattie, Seyd, and Whitely (2004), a major criticism of CET is that, as a choice-based theory involving information processing, it fails to account for the possibility that individuals may choose not to act on political information once they have it, particularly in the absence of incentives. Furthermore, it is unclear why educated people should be willing to act on information gained through the media. A higher level of education may suggest more cognitive ability, but it does not automatically signify a desire to participate in politics. As a result, even if people are well educated and politically engaged, they may require certain resources in order to participate. This theory is relevant to this present study it highlights that in fact youths active engagement in the political process through online platforms. Such online political participation are fueled adequate education, knowledge of the process, and access to information which the internet provides, making it possible for the youths to make contributions that address their needs and those of the wider society.

Methodology

The adopted survey research design as it is a quantitative research that depends on the current attitudes, beliefs, and practices. This design provides the platform for the researcher to obtain data covering the large population of youths in both Ghana and Nigeria within a short period of time without influencing the variables techniques in attempting to evaluate the concept of youth political participation and democratic development in Ghana and Nigeria. The population of the study was 129, 378, 081 youths (18,558,111 from Ghana and 110,819,970 from Nigeria). The sample of 400 was determined using Taro Yamane's formula (1967). Validated questionnaire was the instrument for data collection. Four hundred (400) copies of the questionnaire were administered online via google forms. The response rate was 98%. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics.

Findings and Analysis

How does youth's online political participation affect mass participation in politics in Ghana and Nigeria?

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis of Youth Online Political Participation Affect Mass Participation in Politics in Ghana and Nigeria

Variables	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral Disagree		Strongly Disagree	Mean	Standard deviation
			Total=400				
Participation in politics through online platforms makes it possible for majority of citizens to be active in politics.	35.5%	47.3%	10.5%	5.0%	2.0%	4.09	.912
Youths engage in online political participation through twitter.	38.0%	49.0%	9.5%	2.8%	.8%	4.21	.782
Youths engage in political discourse on public policy through posts on Facebook.	21.8%	46.3%	25.8%	5.5%	%.8	3.83	.857
Participation through online platforms makes it possible for most youths to contribute to policy making.	31.5%	45.3%	11.0%	10.0%	2.3%	3.94	1.013
Average						**4.02**	**0.891**

Key: SA=Strongly Agree, A= Agree, N=Neutral, D= Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree, U= Undecided. Decision rule if mean is: 1-1.49= Strongly Disagree; 1.5-2.49= Disagree; 2.5-3.49= Neutral; 3.5-4.49, Agree; 4.5-5= Strongly Agree.

Table 1 shows that respondents agreed that participation in politics through online platforms allows the majority of citizens to be active in politics (X = 4.09, SD = .912), that participants agreed that youths engage in online political participation through twitter (X =4.21, SD=.782), and that participants agreed that youths engage in political discourse on public policy through posts on Facebook (X =3.83, SD=.857).

The average score of the statements is 4.02 with a standard deviation of 0.891, indicating that on average, respondents agree with the statements under youth online political participation affect mass participation in politics in Ghana and Nigeria, with variations in responses revealed by the average standard deviation of .891, which implies that online youth political participation encourages inclusive political development.

Discussion

The findings of the study show that youth online political participation has impacted mass participation in Ghana and Nigeria, which implies enhancing democratic development in the two countries. The findings agree with the earlier study of Ojok and Acol (2017) who found a significant impact of youth's online political participation on the nature of political participation. The study noted that online political participation makes it easy for youths to feel a sense of political participation. Further, the findings also corroborates Ferré-Pavia and Perales Garca (2015) who found that there is an impact of online political participation on youth political participation, while Warren, Sulaiman, and Jafar, (2014) found a relationship between online political participation and the nature of youth political participation.

The study noted that Twitter was widely used prompting some to dub it the 'Twitter Revolution.' Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms enable users to actively participate in political processes as well as

discourse of public policies. The implication is that nations can no longer rely entirely on traditional methods of participation in this era of technology, where majority of their population are more active online.

The study reveals that posting political messages on a personal or friends' wall, sharing political thoughts, joining political groups, like political candidate sites, and commenting on friends' political postings are just a few of the activities available through basic Facebook capabilities (Vitak, *et al.*, 2011). Clearly, Facebook mimics conventional forms of involvement in which many real-world events take place online (Warren, Sulaiman, & Jafar, 2014).

Conclusion

Youth online political participation provided the veritable platform for young people in Ghana and Nigeria, who were disenfranchised by the dynamics of the traditional methods of participation from active participation in the democratic processes. Various social media platforms have provided the platforms for mass participation of people across the different regions and states in the two countries, thereby enhancing democratic development.

Twitter and Facebook have emerged as the preferred platforms for youths in Ghana and Nigeria to participate in discourses on public policy, as they utilize them to make inputs in the policy processes, which were not possible using traditional methods of political participation. Online political participation has therefore widened the political space in the two countries thereby enhancing democratic development, as tweets and posts as served as strategies to mobilize people for active political participation in both countries.

The study recommends that rather than relying entirely on traditional media which may not reach majority of their population which are the youth, they should take advantage of social media in order to enhance democratic development through youth online political participation.

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Okonkwor Ugochukwu Stephine, Department of Political Science and Public Administration Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria

Ngozi Nwogwugwu (PhD), Department of Political Science and Public Administration Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria