Evaluation of South-East Nigeria Residents' Perception of Social Media Usage in Facilitating Public Sphere Discourses

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Abstract

The study investigated the perception of social media usage in facilitating public sphere, with a focus on the south-eastern part of Nigeria. It aimed at determining whether the social media were perceived as facilitating creation of participatory opportunities for democratic and deliberative interactions and discussion of public issues among the study population. The study adopted descriptive survey design. The population for the study was the population of the South-East of Nigeria, comprising Abia State, Anambra State, Ebonyi State, Enugu State, and Imo State. The sample size was determined using the Australian calculator. The multi-stage cluster sampling technique was adopted to select the respondents for the study. Questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection in the study. The study found that residents of South-East Nigeria perceived the social media as facilitating public sphere discourses, and used the social media for participation in public affairs. They used Social media to facilitate access to public information and views on public affairs. The study recommends provision of actionable guidelines to direct the use of social media across the three spheres of government in a coordinated and integrated manner.

Keywords: Social Media, Public Square, Nigeria, Public Affairs, Participation

Introduction

Communication is the life blood of every individual, society and nation all over the world, at intra-personal, interpersonal or mass level. The media of communication drive human communication and interactive efforts towards creating relationships and sharing ideas, information and opinions in the society.

Interestingly, the new media have created a shift in audience use of communication for social, economic and political purposes. The diversity of content disseminated by new media has created opportunities such as the ability for more voices to be heard. They provide unprecedented access to information, and can reach even disinterested audience members through personalized, peer-to-peer channels like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram. With the increasing ubiquity and popularity of the social media, issues and events that might be outside the purview of mainstream journalists or neglected by them can be given prominence by ordinary citizens through the various social media platform.

The concept of public sphere as theorized by the German Scholar, Jurgen Habermas directs attention to the historical evolution of the democratic role of the press. The public sphere, according to Habermas, is a space between the economy and the state providing an autonomous and open forum for public debate. Access to the space is free and freedom of association and assembly is guaranteed (Graham 1986, McQuail, 2010). The basic principles underlying the constitution and functioning of public sphere include general accessibility, especially to information, the elimination of privilege and the search for general norms and their rational legitimacy.

Social media have been praised in various cycles as the magic wands that revitalize deliberative and participatory democracy. This perception is attributable to social media's abilities to remove barriers to participatory political communication which are experienced in the mainstream media like newspaper, magazine, radio and television. Social media offer a new world of unrestricted communication, a free true market place of ideas. The former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, cited in Kennedy (2011), described social media as, "town square, classroom, market place, coffee houses and night clubs." Social media with their

features - openness, accessibility, interactivity, equality of participants, free flow of information, have opened up a space of much greater democratic possibility, have the mobilizing power which could be used to emancipate the masses; can be used to facilitate the development of small alternatives; provide civil society with a revitalized public sphere. They are instruments for democratic participation because they cannot be controlled. These can foster self-government, reduce reliance on traditional political authorities and facilitate public discourses.

The social media's potentials to provide platforms for free and safe discussions and interactions on public issues, in contrast to the restrictive nature of the mainstream media, draw attention to the tendencies of the two media forms (mainstream media and social media) to facilitate or inhibit public sphere. This study investigated social media usage in facilitating public sphere in Nigeria, with a focus on South Eastern part of Nigeria.

Statement of the Research Problem

There is the general assumption that the health of democracy in any country is to a large extent dependent on the supply of information in the right quantity and quality in the public realm. It is believed that citizens need to be adequately informed for them to participate actively in the political process. Communication and the institution for its dissemination have become central to the functioning of democracy. Meyer 2002, cited in Nwosu, (2007, p. 117), asserts that:

No democracy worthy of the name gets by without a minimum of symmetry in the communicative links that connect the political leadership with the rank and file, or without a sufficiently developed public sphere for the flow of information and argument, or finally, unless the communicative atmosphere of society promotes efforts to deliberate and reach conscious decisions.

Press as people's representatives ought to offer the widest possible range of interpretation frames, to enable the citizens be aware of what they are confronted with and thus make their choices. Public sphere also has as its goal, the role of checking the activities of government – its policies/action. Notwithstanding, the contemporary mainstream media seems restrictive. The restrictions may stem from editorial policies, ownership structures, media commercialization and politicization. These, the researchers think, may render the mainstream media ineffective as platforms for public sphere. However, the effect of the dialogic, democratic and deliberative nature of the social media, as against the restrictive nature of the mainstream media, on the public sphere is not clear.

As a result, this study sought to ascertain the south east residents' perceptions of social media usage in facilitating participatory and opportunities for democratic and deliberative interactions and discussion of public issues.

Research Questions

The following research questions were accordingly raised consequent upon the research specific objectives:

1. To what extent do residents of South Eastern part of Nigeria perceive the social media as facilitating public sphere?
2. To what extent do residents of South Eastern part of Nigeria use social media for participation in public discourse?
3. To what extent does social media use facilitate South East Nigeria residents' access to public information and views on public affairs?

Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted on the use of the social media as public sphere and other purposes. This segment of the study centres on review of the methodologies and findings of studies on usage and applications of the social media.

Ibrahim (2013) investigated Nigerians' usage of Facebook during 2012 *Occupy* Nigeria Protests. The study found that there is a strong affinity between real public sphere and networked public sphere. This was established at the critical value: r = 0.576 and significant at 0.05 level of significance. The study revealed that the socio-economic and political issues discussed by the online protesters motivated offline protesters during the protests.

Ciboh (2015) studied older adults' Social Media Use and Social Capital in Nigeria. Drawing on a sample of 336 older adults, aged 50 years and above working in 13 government ministries in Benue State, Nigeria, the results of the study showed that Nigerians went online regularly using mostly their mobile phones and spend much of their time on social media platforms, on Facebook predominantly. It indicated that about one in every seven (14.3%) of all older people sampled spent at least one to two hours on visits to favourite social network sites and about one in every five (20.5%) of senior citizens said they spent an average of 2 to 3 hours at any given time; slightly more than one quarter (26.4%) of all adults sampled said they spent between 3and 4 hours whenever they went online.

A study by Edogor, Jonah and Ojo (2014) investigated the influence of social media on youths' usage of traditional mass media in Nigeria. The study was conducted using survey research method with sample size of 500. Multi-stage sampling technique was adopted to draw the sample and questionnaire was used as instrument for data collection. The study found that social media created wider links enabling youth audiences using them to access traditional mass media online. The study also found that youths use social media to date, indulge in cybercrimes, discuss national issues like economic, politics, and socio-religious matters; but most of them do not use the media to communicate to their national leaders on aforementioned issues.

Similarly, Asogwa (2015) studied social media as a voice to the voiceless with a focus on the Nigerian experience. Survey research design, with questionnaire as instrument for data collection, was used for the study. The study investigated how the social media was used to give voice to the voiceless especially in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria which led to a change in administration. From the data generated and analyzed in the study, 160(42%) of the respondents participated by sending and receiving messages via twitter; 200 (53%) participated by sending and receiving message via WhatsApp while 20(5%) participated using other social media network, none of them used the traditional media.

Boulianne (2015), cited in Asogwa (2015), did a meta-analysis of current research on social media use and participation. The study analyzed 36 studies on the relationship between social media use and civic engagement, specifically actions like voting and protesting. Some of the studies focused on youth populations, others on social media use in selected countries. Within these 36 studies, there were 170 separate "coefficients" — different factors potentially correlated with social media use.

Pew Research Center's (2015) study found that 66% of social media users (39% of American adults) have engaged in one of eight civic or political activities with social media,38% of those who use social networking sites (SNS) or Twitter "like" or promote material related to politics or social issues that others have posted, 35% have used social networking sites to encourage people to vote,34% have used the tools to post their own thoughts or comments on political and social issues, 33% have used the tools to repost content related to political or social issues that was originally posted by someone else,31% have used the tools to encourage other people to take action on a political or social issue ,28% have used the tools to post links to political stories or articles for others to read, 21% belong to a group on a social networking site that is involved in political or social issues, 20% have used the tools to follow elected officials and candidates for offices.

Ballew, Omoto and Winter's (2015) study on using Web 2.0 and social media technologies to foster pro-environmental action found that Web 2.0 and social media are increasingly becoming part of daily life. Citing a 2015 report on usage of more than 240 countries across the globe, the authors stated that approximately 42% of

the world's population were active Internet users (an increase of 21% from 2014) and 29% have an active social media account (up 12% from 2014).

Research Design
The study adopted descriptive survey research design, with questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. The researchers considered the design appropriate for the study because it provided an opportunity to elicit first-hand information from the sampled members of the study population. Survey, Osuala (2005) maintains, does more than uncovering data, it also interprets, synthesizes, and integrates data, and points to the implications and their interrelationships.

The population comprised all the residents of the five South-East States of Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Abia and Imo states. The population of South-East based on 2006 census was **16,365,555** (National Population Commission, 2006). However, considering that 2006 is too far to serve the purposes of this study. The study adopted the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) 2017 population projection for south-east Nigeria which was 22,126,230. The population of the study was, therefore, 22,126,230. The Australian Calculator was used to determine a sample size of 400 respondents for the study, at 95% confidence level.

Method of Data Analysis
The data generated for the study were presented and analyzed using charts and simple percentages. Out of the 400 copies of the questionnaire that were administered to the respondents, 397 copies were correctly completed and returned while three (3) copies were not returned. Data presentation and analysis in the study were based on the 397 copies of the questionnaire that were returned. There were 219 (55.16%) male respondents and 178 (44.84%) female respondents that completed copies of the questionnaire.
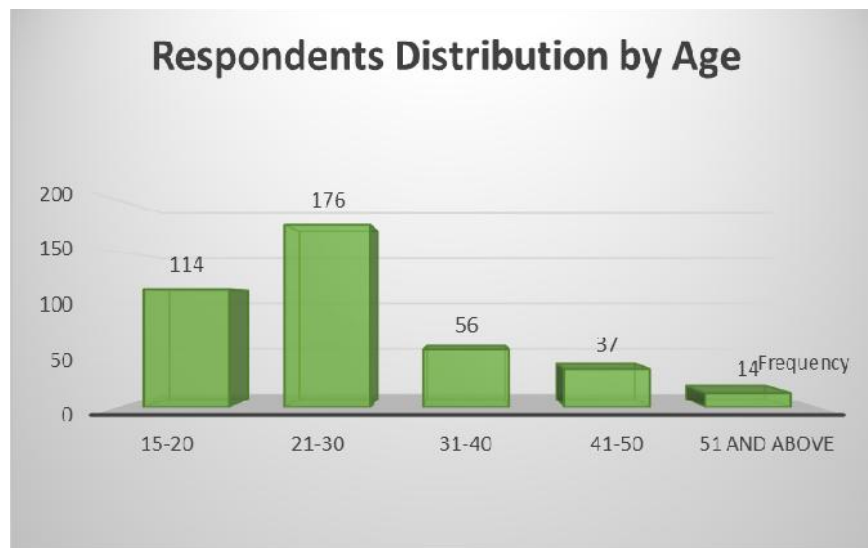

Chart 1 above indicates that 114 (28.75%) of the respondents were between the ages of 15 and 20 years; 176 (44.33%) of them were between the ages of 21 and 30years; 56 (14.11%) of them were within the ages of 31-40 years; 37 (09.32%) of them were within the ages of 41-50 years, and 14 (03.53%) of them were 51 years and above.

The implication of this result is that most of the respondents were those that could be termed more exposed to social life, at the age of 15-20 and 21-30 with the highest percentage of 28.72% and 44.33%, respectively.
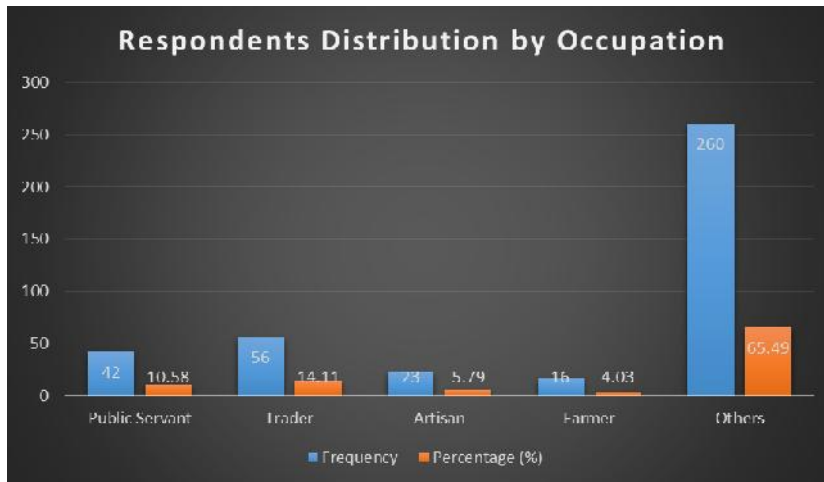
Chart 2 above indicates that 42 (10.58%) of the respondents were public servants; 56 (14.11%) of them were traders; 23 (05.79%) of them were artisans; 16 (04.03%) of them were farmers and 260 (65.49%) of the respondents had other occupations.

All the respondents, 397 (100%) stated that they used social media in facilitating open (public sphere) discussions.
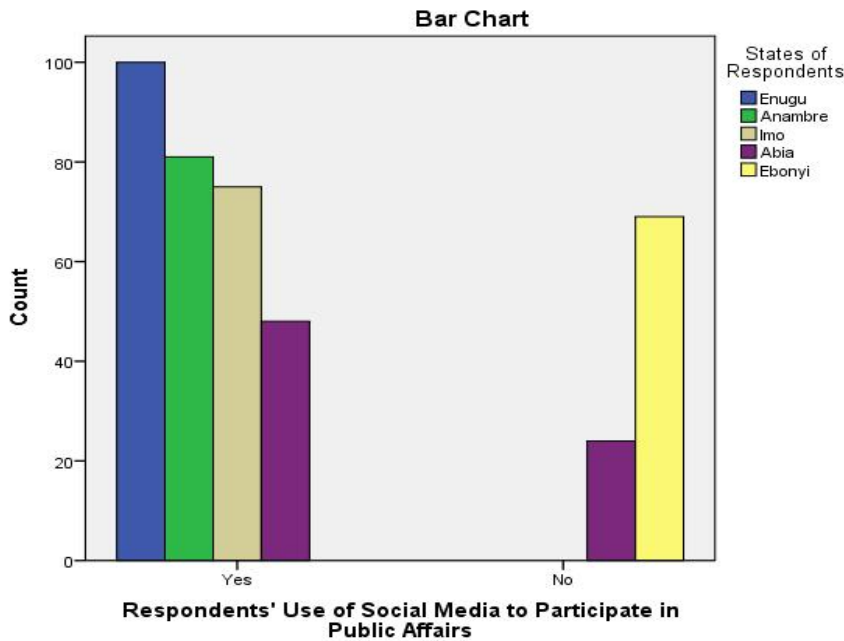

Figure 3 above shows the responses of respondents on whether they used social media to participate in public affairs. From the table, 304 (76.57%) of the respondents indicated that they use social media to participate in public affairs, while 93 (23.43%) of them said they did not use social media in to engage in public affairs.
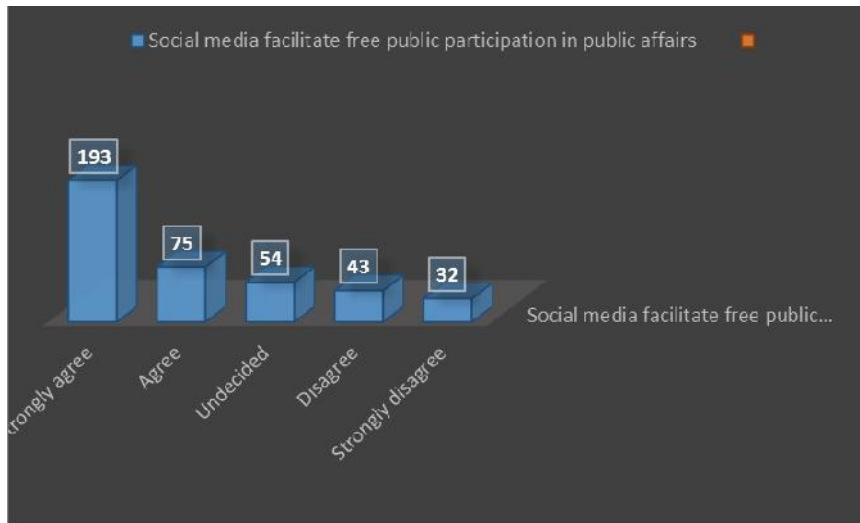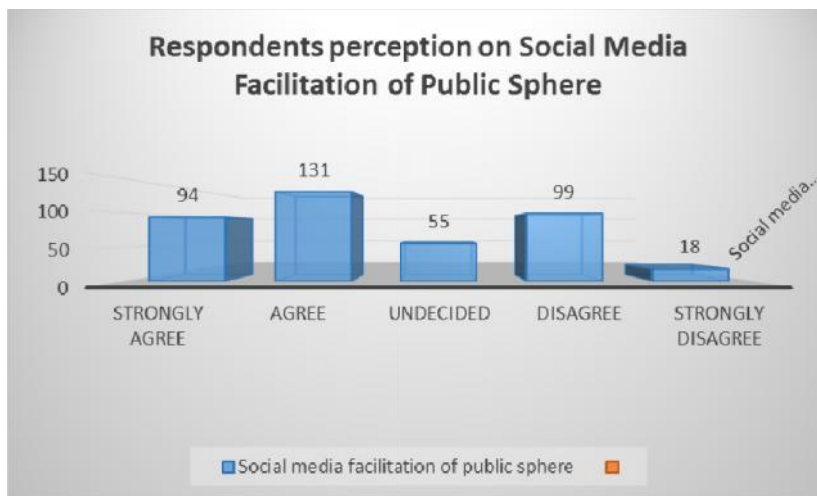
Chart 4 above shows that 193 (48.61%) of the respondents strongly agreed that social media facilitated free public participation in public affairs; 75 (18.90%) of them agreed that social media facilitated free public participation in public affairs, while 54 (13.60%) were undecided. However, 43 (10.83%) of the respondents disagreed to the view that social media facilitated free public participation in public affairs, and 32 (08.06%) of them strongly disagreed to the view that social media facilitated public affairs.

The data displayed on chart 5 above indicate that 94 (23.68%) strongly agreed that social media facilitated public sphere; 131 (33.00%) of them agreed that social media facilitated public sphere, while 55 (13.85%) were undecided. However, 99 (24.94%) disagreed to the view that social media facilitated public sphere and 18 (04.53%) of the respondents strongly disagreed to the view that social media facilitated public sphere.
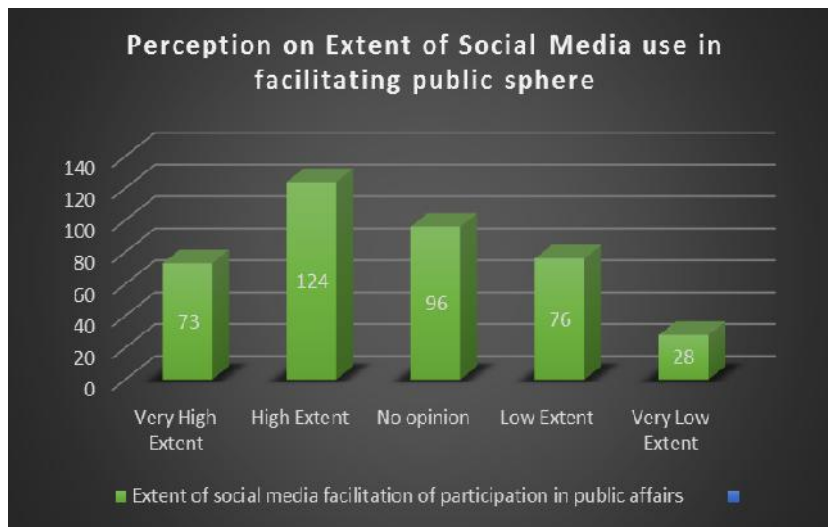
Data chart 6 above show that 73 (18.39%) of the respondents indicated very high extent; 124 (31.23%) of them ticked high extent; 96 (24.18%) of them offered no opinion. However, 76 (19.14%) of the respondents indicated a low extent of social media facilitation of participation in public affairs; and 28 (07.05%) of them indicated a very low extent of social media facilitation of participation in public affairs.

Discussion of Findings

The results of the study indicate that all the respondents (100%) used social media in facilitating open (public sphere) discussions. This implies that the use of social media to facilitate open (public square) discussions was high among residents of South Eastern part of Nigeria.

A majority of the respondents, 304 (78.57%), strongly agreed that social media facilitated public sphere. This finding is in consonance with the findings of Johannessen (2013) that the social media can contribute in developing public discussions and the public debate.

Similarly, 304 (78.57%) respondents indicated that they used social media to participate in public affairs, while 93 (23.43%) of them said they did not use social media to engage in public affairs. This finding implies that there was high use of social media to participate in public affairs among residents of south eastern part of Nigeria.

In line with and to strengthen the foregoing finding of the study, 268 (67.51%) of the respondents strongly agreed that social media facilitated free public participation in public affairs. This, therefore, implies that social media is used to a very large extent in facilitating public participation in public affairs in the study area.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, the researchers conclude that the social media offer opportunities for democratic, participatory and deliberative interactions and discussion of public issues in the study area. The findings of the study indicated that social media platforms were highly utilized by residents of south-eastern part of Nigeria to facilitate public discourses, thereby enhancing public participation in public affairs.

Recommendations

Based the findings of the study, the researchers advanced the following recommendations:

1. The researchers recommend provision of actionable guidelines to direct the implementation of social media across the three spheres of government in a coordinated and integrated manner

2. Governments should use social media as means of open and free communication and interaction with the citizens, given that social media provide the citizens with platforms for accessing public information and participating in public affairs.
3. There should be periodic sensitization campaigns by relevant government agencies and the civil society on the public communication ethics and rules that will help improve the content of the citizens' social media posts.

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