

Clicks, Hashtags, and Ballot Boxes: Social Media Mobilisation and Political Participation among Generation Z in Oyo Central Senatorial District, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper investigated how social media mobilisation affects political participation among Generation Z in Oyo Central Senatorial District, Nigeria. The research was driven by the rising popularity of online platforms among the youth in political activities, as well as the gap that has existed between online political activities and offline participation. Following a qualitative empirical methodology relying on a secondary data set, the paper relied on research articles, election and policy publications, civil society publications, and reliable media publications. The data were thematically analysed to examine how social media sites like Twitter (since renamed X), Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok can be used to communicate politically, drive agendas, and mobilise the youth. The results show that Generation Z in Oyo central has been very active in digital politics and communicates using hashtags, online campaigns, and peer-to-peer exchange of information to increase political awareness and gather support on social and governance matters of interest. Nonetheless, the research also demonstrates that the high rates of online activity do not necessarily lead to offline political activity, such as voting, civic volunteering, and long-term engagement in local political activities. The factors that define this disconnection include misinformation, the presence of algorithm-driven echo-chambers, digital inequality, distrust in politics, and the existence of symbolic participation commonly referred to as slacktivism. The paper draws a conclusion that, despite the fact that social media has widened the scope of youths engaging in political activities, the democratic value remains limited unless conscious efforts are made to enable young people to tie digital mobilisation to civic action on the ground. The study recommended that it should adopt hybrid mobilisation approaches, which would involve combining online mobilisation with grassroots mobilisation, among others.

Keywords: Generation Z, social media mobilisation, political participation, hashtag activism, Nigeria.

Word Count: 280

Introduction

Political participation is one of the cornerstones of democracy, enabling citizens to influence governance and decision-making. Traditionally, political participation was limited to voting, attending rallies, or joining political organisations. However, with the rise of social media, especially among Generation Z (Gen Z), those born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s, political engagement has undergone a digital transformation. Social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp have become primary channels through which Gen Z receives political information, engages in activism, and organises civic action. This shift is particularly significant in Nigeria, where youth constitute over 60% of the population, yet historically remain underrepresented in political office and decision-making. In the Oyo Central Senatorial District, these trends are visible but under-researched. While digital campaigns, influencer activism, and hashtag movements have created vibrant online political spaces, there is uncertainty over whether these engagements translate into tangible offline political participation, such as voting or policy advocacy. This paper examined the use of social media as a political mobilisation tool and analysed the characteristics and political behaviour of Generation Z. It assessed how social media platforms influence political participation, with particular attention to click-based and hashtag activism. The paper also discussed the challenges involved in converting online political engagement into sustained offline participation.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the fact that social media has become a tool of political mobilisation among the youth in the country, it is not yet clear how much such strategies affect the actual political performance of the Gen Z in the Oyo Central Senatorial District. There has been a concern that online enthusiasm usually leads to the so-called slacktivism, which is superficial behaviour with no real political involvement. The ability to mobilise social media in governance is essential to enhancing youth involvement in governance.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this research is to address the impact of social media mobilisation on political participation by Generation Z in Oyo Central Senatorial District, Nigeria. Specific objectives are to:

1. evaluate the importance of social media sites, such as click-based and hashtag activism, to mobilise Generation Z to participate in politics;
2. explore the issues of the translation of the online political mobilisation into the offline political involvement of the members of Generation Z.

Research Questions

The research questions that guide the study are the following:

1. What are the effects of social media sites, such as click-based and hashtag activism, on the political participation of Generation Z in Oyo Central Senatorial District?
2. What are the obstacles to moving the online political mobilisation to the offline political participation of Generation Z?

Social Media as a Political Mobilisation Tool

Political mobilisation is the process by which individuals and organisations are urged to take part in political affairs, including voting, protesting, advocating, and engaging in civic activities. It is the process of developing a shared identity and mobilising citizens at the institution, organisations, and social networks (Owoyemi, 2018; Jenkins, Ito, and boyd, 2016). Although the point of traditional mobilisation was a strong focus on political parties, face-to-face encounters, printed media, and broadcast platforms, the current mobilisation processes are more and more organised in digital spaces, especially social media platforms (Edegoh and Samson, 2017). Social media platforms have become the centre stage of agenda-setting and the mobilisation of hashtags in the digital age. *Twitter (since renamed X), Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok* allow political agendas to become visible as hashtags, trends, and viral content, resulting in the formation of the discourse and political agenda (Ifukor, 2020; Tufekci, 2017). The hashtags are symbolic rallying points that bring together the voices that are spread across, as political messages are spread quickly and gain traction in networked publics. This way, the youth, and more specifically Generation Z, can be in a position to package, raise the volume on grievance, and use the same to get a group of people around common interests. Collective and connective action are also played out through social media, in which participation is not determined by the formal membership of an organisation, but through a personalised digital interaction. The idea of connective action presented by Bennett and Segerberg describes a situation in which people communicate individualised political utterances over networks with very minimal central direction, allowing a large number of people to be involved without top-down leadership systems (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013). This model is particularly applicable to youth-driven online movements, whose existence has been perpetuated by peer networks, influencers, and emotionally appealing content instead of party organisation. In Nigeria, the importance of social media in political mobilisation is apparent in the protest movements and the electoral politics.

The 2020 movement of protests called EndSARS showed how protests could be organised via digital means, relayed real-time information, raised funds, and gained international attention. *Twitter hashtags, Instagram posts, and WhatsApp broadcasts* helped Gen Z activists to coordinate decentralised and yet coherent mass action, which represented a major change in the political participation of the young generation (Owoyemi, 2018; Tufekci, 2017). In a similar vein, social media has been incorporated into campaign strategies by the political parties and candidates during elections. Nigerian electoral studies demonstrate that platforms, like WhatsApp and Twitter, are utilised to spread campaign messages and mobilise the supporters and target young and undecided voters, especially in the urban centres with high digital

penetration (Ekwueme & Folarin, 2017; Omoruyi, 2022). Nevertheless, the mobilising potential of social media is limited by a number of constraints, such as misinformation, digital gaps, and disproportionate engagement. False information and organised disinformation combined with algorithm-based echo chambers, damage informed participation in politics and increase polarisation (Enli, 2017). Moreover, Internet access and digital illiteracy, particularly around the urban and rural areas, restrict the inclusiveness of online mobilisation activities (WATHI, 2020). These limitations serve to understand why a high rate of online political participation is not always followed by long-term offline political participation like voting or volunteering. In general, it can be said that social media has altered the process of political mobilisation by increasing the possibilities of agenda setting, collective action and youth involvement. In the Nigerian scenario, it has enabled the Generation Z to participate in politics without necessarily involving itself in the established institutional structures. However, its efficiency relies on the extent to which digital interaction is combined with the offline political interactions and the way issues associated with misinformation and access are handled.

Generation Z: Characteristics and Political Behaviour

Generation Z can be generally defined as those individuals born between the middle and early 1990s and early 2010s and represent a large percentage of the Nigerian population. This generation differs in relation to other previous generations because it is a digital generation, and it has been raised being exposed to a great deal of access to mobile devices, social media and internet-enabled communication. Politically, this digital orientation forms how Generation Z obtains information, connects with societal matters and becomes involved in civic life (Omotayo and Folorunso, 2020). In Nigeria, politically, Generation Z is so far an issue-driven and expressive generation and not necessarily one that is loyal to a political party or political institution over the long term. Most young people in Nigeria have shown cynicism and mistrust towards the conventional political players, and this is mainly because of long exposure to corruption, poverty, unemployment amongst youths and observed electoral malpractices. Consequently, the political involvement of this group of people usually goes beyond the official system of party membership and voting to online lobbying, protest organising, and online discussion of matters concerning the government. *X*, *WhatsApp*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* are the lumbar arenas of political dialogue between Gen Z. Through these platforms, political news travels quickly, peer-to-peer argumentation, and decentralised mobilisation on common issues of concern such as police brutality, accountability of governance, electoral reform, and social justice.

EndSARS protests of 2020 became a landmark in Gen Z politics in Nigeria. It exercised the organisational capability of digitally networked youths to organise protests, document state violence, and make demands collectively without depending on conventional, political leadership systems (Chinedu-Okeke & Obi, 2016). This changing political behaviour also manifested itself in the 2023 general elections. Although the Independent National Electoral Commission gave reports of high turnout regarding the registration of the youths as well as online political participation, the turnout of the young people was inconsistent. The issue of insecurity on the day of the election, logistical issues, political disappointment, and lack of confidence in the election process were some of the factors that limited the transfer of digital

enthusiasm to offline engagement. The same trends can be observed in the Oyo Central Senatorial District. Young people of Generation Z are actively involved in the politics of the Internet, posting campaign materials and becoming advocates in the form of hashtags during the elections. Nevertheless, this tremendous rate of digital involvement does not necessarily result in voting, civic volunteering, and subsequent participation in local governance. The given gap highlights the necessity to discuss not only the presence of Gen Z in the digital realm but also structural, institutional, and contextual issues that define their engagement in political activities. In general, Generation Z is a politically aware and institutionally sceptical generation. Their participation is influenced by online connectedness, activism based on issues, and expressive participation, yet sustained barriers still inhibit the transformation of online mobilisation into enduring democratic action.

Theoretical Underpinning

The study is underpinned by Diffusion of Innovation Theory (DOI), which was propounded by Everett Rogers. The theory is appropriate to support the reasoning of social media mobilisation and political participation by Generation Z in Oyo Central Senatorial. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory is the communication of new ideas, practices, or technology through specific channels over time within members of a social system (Rogers, 2003). Social media platforms, hashtag activism and digitally mediated political engagement are some of the new trends in the current political behaviour of Gen Z, and these are examined in this research. The theory is especially applicable as the process of political mobilisation via social media is not taken up simultaneously and equally. The innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards can be used to classify Gen Z users. Influencers, activists and politically aware youths tend to be innovators and early adopters, bringing political messages via hashtags, viral videos, and online campaigns. These messages are then spread over peer networks through tools including *X*, *WhatsApp*, *Instagram* and *TikTok*, slowly shaping the political awareness and attitude. It is through this process that the political discourse online cuts across and gains momentum, and turns into a normal aspect of the youth culture. The gap in online activism and offline political participation, as noted in the study, can also be explained using the Diffusion of Innovation Theory. Although social media can successfully support the knowledge and persuasion phases of the diffusion process, the transition to the decision-making and action phases, such as voting, volunteering, or civic advocacy, is limited by various factors, such as political mistrust, false news, online gaps, and institutional obstacles. DOI offers more of a socio-communicative outlook that encompasses political involvement as a social and collective activity. In general, Diffusion of Innovation Theory provides an effective explanation model of the spread of digital political ideas among Gen Z and why their transfer to a significant offline political engagement has not been consistent.

Methodology

This paper considered a qualitative empirical study through analysis of secondary data as a research design to investigate the impact of social media mobilisation on political participation by Generation Z in Oyo Central Senatorial District, Nigeria. The qualitative method was proper due to the aim of the study to comprehend the patterns, meaning, and contextual issues that determined digital political engagement as opposed to the quantification of statistical relationships. Secondary sources that could be verified, such as peer-reviewed journal articles,

electoral and policy reports, publications of the independent national electoral commission, civil society reports, and other credible national and international media, were used to obtain the data. These sources offered practical knowledge on the usage of social media, political involvement among the youth, and digital mobilisation in Nigeria. The thematic analysis was the primary method of analysis used in the study. Appropriate texts were screened, coded and classified into themes in accordance with the study objectives, which entailed platform-based mobilisation tactics, forms of youth participation and issues that influence the transfer of web activism to participation.

Discussion

Platform-Specific Mobilisation Dynamics in Nigerian Politics

In addition to the general mobilisation capacity of social media, platform dynamics that define the way political participation and engagement occur in the Nigerian context have a specific influence on the political involvement of the population. The two platforms specify certain forms of communication, coordination, and political expression, which have a role in shaping the interaction between political actors and citizens both in the electoral and non-election time. Twitter (now X) acts mainly as a real-time political conversation, agenda-setting, and engagement between the elite and the citizens. The trending hashtags during election periods are usually used to kick-start or enhance political debates, campaign stories, and accountability, particularly among Nigerians. Voter education, election monitoring, and issue-based debates have been advertised with hashtags like #NigeriaDecides and VoteNotFight, particularly between urban and digitally literate younger generations (Ifukor, 2020; Omotayo and Folorunso, 2020). Direct interactions between the journalists, civil society participants, politicians, and citizens that are supported by the open and interactive structure of the platform make traditional gatekeeping less relevant. By comparison, *WhatsApp* is a more intimate and regional factor in the mobilisation of politics. It is the features of groups with the broadcasting characteristic that allow specific communication inside communities, religious networks, youth associations, and party sets. Research on Nigerian elections shows that political parties and campaigns are turning to WhatsApp as an information distribution channel, mobilisation, and spread of electoral information to the ground (WATHI, 2020; Ekwueme & Folarin, 2017).

Yet, the WhatsApp group is also prone to misinformation and unverified political posts, and its closed nature facilitates their delivery to the voters in such a way that the platforms are hard to control. The short videos, images, and symbolic content are the elements of political communication supported by the usage of visual-oriented platforms like *Instagram and TikTok*. These platforms have been specifically effective in making the political messages more simplistic, personalisation candidates and reaching out to the younger voters who are more used to visual storytelling rather than the lengthy political texts. These platforms allow political actors and youth-led movements to frame political issues in an innovative way, and although interaction on such platforms may be focused on expression and visibility, it is not necessarily focused on deliberation and institutional engagement. Facebook continues to be useful in political community-based interactions, particularly among the older generation and the semi-urbanised people. Facebook is also appropriate in long-term political communication, as compared to mobilisation, because political actors, party websites, and civic organisations use

it to organise their debate, respond to policy stances and recruit their followers over a longer period. In spite of these platform-specific benefits, structural challenges do exist. An unequal availability of digital infrastructure strengthens urban-rural imbalance in political participation, and misinformation and partisan manipulation degrade deliberation in democracy. These interactions indicate that platform-specific approaches can help improve political reach, but this can only be effective when wider institutional trust, digital literacy and inclusive access prevail.

The Role of Clicks and Hashtags in Political Engagement

The hashtag activism has taken a significant role in political participation within Nigeria and especially among the youth who use social media to express grievances, organise fellow youths and make an impact on the political debate. The aggregation of personal statements into group storeys through hashtags improves the visibility, political discourses, and mobilisation around a common issue. This type of digital activism has become a significant part of the Nigerian political arena in recent years. As of the end of the 2020s, the most notable cases of hashtag-based mobilisation in Nigeria are still the #EndSARS movement. Through *X*, *Instagram*, and *WhatsApp*, young Nigerians recorded cases of police brutality, organised their protests, fundraised, and garnered international concern. According to scholars, the movement showed the ability of hashtag activism to go beyond online articulation and spur massive offline political action even without centralised leadership (Akinola, 2021; Tufkeci, 2022).

Equally, political participation in elections has also been encouraged through hashtag campaigns. The NigeriaDecides hashtag has been used as an online platform to educate and monitor elections and provide real-time election coverage during the electoral process and especially the 2023 general elections (INEC, 2023). At the subnational level, youths embrace digital activism by adapting hashtags like #OyoYouthDecide that encourage first-time voters to take part in the electoral activities and question the records of the candidates. Other than protest and voting, policy-oriented youth engagement has also been backed by hashtag activism. Though other movements, such as the one called #NotTooYoungToRun, started even earlier, recent research indicates that the active digital presence of these movements has made youths remain politically aware and demand to be included even after the enactment of the relevant legislation (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020; Solihat, 2024). Although critics warn that hashtag activism can promote symbolic action and no lasting action, Nigerian experience in the recent past indicates that when made sustainable and tied to offline action, hashtag activism can influence political awareness, agenda-setting, and participation among young citizens.

Challenges to Effective Mobilisation

Although the application of social media as a form of political engagement by Generation Z in Nigeria is increasing, there are a number of interconnected issues that restrict its ability as a method of maintaining civic and democratic engagement. Such challenges are socio-political, technological and institutional in nature and have been brought to the fore, especially in recent election periods. One of the biggest challenges is the spread of disinformation and misinformation, particularly during elections. In the 2023 general elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was constantly forced to make public clarifications to refute false announcements that were being circulated on *WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, and *X*, such as false results sheets, fictitious postponement notices, and deceptive claims about electronic

transmission of results (INEC, 2023). This misinformation destroyed the trust of the population in the electoral processes and led to voter confusion and indifference, especially among voters who were too young and first-time voters. Similarly is the issue of algorithmic amplification and echo chambers. The social media platforms are more favourable of emotionally charged content and polarising information, which tends to strengthen the existing political biases. According to Nigerian researchers, juvenile users are often exposed to homogenous political opinions formed by ethnic, regional, or partisan identity, leaving a lack of possibilities to have critical and cross-cutting political discourse (Akinola and Adesina, 2022; Omoruyi, 2022). Such interaction enhances political polarisation, hence undermining deliberative participation.

Another major limitation is the digital divide. Urban areas like Lagos, Ibadan, and Abuja boast of a relatively high internet penetration, but most rural and semi-urban communities, such as some areas of Oyo Central Senatorial District, still have low connectivity, high internet rates, and a lack of access to digital infrastructure. These disparities limit the participation of most youths in the process of mobilising politics online regularly (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020). Also, there is the issue of slacktivism. Even though the online discussions and hashtag campaigns by the Nigerian youths are very high, these activities do not necessarily translate into physical engagement, which includes voting, party participation, and volunteering to participate in programmes. Elections in 2020 indicated the disillusionment with political institutions and the ineffectiveness of official involvement, with online political interest not being translated into actual attendance (Solihat, 2024). Lastly, there is the digital repression and political fatigue. Young Nigerians still fear and engage in self-censorship due to the repercussions of the 2021 Twitter ban, Internet monitoring, and the arrest of digital activists. Outing to political violence, unfulfilled needs and state oppression have also played a role in youth burnout, which undermines a long-term engagement in politics. Overall, although social media presents new opportunities in mobilisation, it can be said that the ability of social media to serve a democratic purpose is limited due to misinformation, digital inequalities, distrust in politics, and institutional factors that define the boundaries of youth civic engagement in Nigeria.

Conclusion and Way Forward

This paper discussed how social media mobilisation affected the political participation of Generation Z in the Oyo central senatorial district, Nigeria, by focusing on the opportunities and challenges of digital engagement. The results show that social media platforms have greatly increased political awareness, issue-based debate, and expressive engagement among Gen Z. Hashing tools, online movements, and peer communication digital tools have empowered the youth to interact with the political issues without necessarily involving party systems and conventional institutional approaches. Nevertheless, the research also discovered that the high levels of web-based political activism do not always lead to a long-term offline political engagement, including voting, civic volunteering, or organised political action. Misinformation, trust in political institutions, digital inequality, political fatigue, and structural challenges have continued to restrict the power of social media to be used as a means of deep democratic engagement. These results are consistent with the aims of the research as they prove the mobilising power of social media and the factors that impede its effective introduction into the Nigerian democracy. In general, even though social media has emerged as an inseparable aspect of youth politics in the Oyo Central Senatorial District, the quality of democratic influence through the engagement of digital mobilisation, everyday political engagement,

institutional credibility, and inclusive structures of participation depends on purposeful efforts to bridge the gap between digital and offline politics.

Recommendations

- ✓ Regulatory mechanisms should be enhanced by government agencies and election authorities to fight fake news online, especially during elections and while at the same time protecting the freedom of expression.
- ✓ There should be increased investment in digital infrastructures, particularly in the rural and semi-urban regions of Oyo Central, to minimise disparities in political participation.
- ✓ Online advocacy and offline voter education, community discussion, and grassroots mobilisation should be incorporated in the activities of civil society organisations to make sure that online activities get translated into actual political activities.
- ✓ Cooperation with local communities would increase the level of trust and involvement.
- ✓ Issues-based and policy-oriented communication that embodies youth interests, like the accountability of governance, work, and social justice, should be embraced by the political actors.
- ✓ There is the possibility of filling the gap between online mobilisation and offline participation by enlisting the assistance of credible individuals in the local power structure and youth leaders in the area.
- ✓ The digital literacy programmes on online fact checking, critical media consumption, and responsible online political participation should be implemented in schools, universities and youth organisations in order to provide the young people with the skills that they require to navigate digital political spaces effectively.

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