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## Social Media and Changing Political Behaviors among the Youth in Kwara State of Nigeria

Lambe Kayode Mustapha  
*University of Ilorin, muslakay@yahoo.co.uk*

Olamide Hameed Olufadi  
*University of Ilorin, oolufadi@googlemail.com*

Adesina Lukuman Azeez  
*University of Ilorin, azeez.al@unilorin.edu.ng*

Patrick Udende  
*University of Ilorin, udende.p@unilorin.edu.ng*

Maryam Lasisi Mustapha  
*University of Ilorin, lasis.mo@unilorin.edu.ng*

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### Cover Page Footnote

Diminishing youth's political engagement has been a subject of concern to political stakeholders thus becoming a fertile field of inquiry by scholars in political science, political communication and electoral studies. Being a global phenomenon resulting from multiplicity of causations, youth civic and political engagements receive attention from multi-theoretical and cross-disciplinary perspectives with diversifying prognoses. From the political communication viewpoint, the quantum and quality of political information in the mediated public sphere as well as representation in and access to the media have remained important factors predicting limited youth political participation and civic engagement. A corpus of studies, mostly from advanced democratic climes, has, however, challenged the notion that youth's mainstream media exclusion, in terms of access to and representation in media, precipitates political malaise. Premised on the social media affordance, these alternative positions believe that youth may not be engaging in electoral politics, they are exploiting other political participation repertoires created by the new communication ecology. Giving these mixed findings, that are mostly Western-centric, we explore the forms of political behaviors of young people in Kwara State (N=381), North-central Nigeria within the theoretical prism of Civic Volunteerism Model. Findings revealed that social media political campaigns have positive relationships with both online and offline political participation, with online participation being higher, even after controlling for political knowledge and political efficacy. The results have practical and policy implications that need to be addressed to guarantee the future of participatory political culture in youth-dominated democracies like Nigeria.

# Social Media and Changing Political Behaviors among the Youth in Kwara State of Nigeria

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**Keywords:** Social Media, The Youth, Civic Volunteerism Model, Online Political Participation, Offline Political Participation.

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Diminishing youth's interest in participatory politics has become a topic of great concern among scholars globally. There is, however, no consensus about causation and consequences of this democratic malaise even as the future of participatory politics depends on youth's political enculturation and involvement (Sloam, 2011). In many developing democracies, the sit-tight syndrome of most political gladiators and dynastic politics are a few reasons behind political apathy among the youth. In countries like Angola, Uganda and Zimbabwe, for instance, 80% of the population were not yet born when their current president took office (CNN Report, 2015). The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in 2016, also conducted a survey with over 1,200 respondents from all over Kosovo (majorly youths) and found that around 90 percent of the youth within the ages of 18 and 25 had never been members of any political entity, non-governmental organisation, youth organisation or other youth groups. UNDP (2013), however, reports that young people are regularly associated with casual, insignificant aspects of political participation such as activism or civic participation. This subtle political participation and activism has significant influence on good governance as it creates media and public agenda that trigger policy agenda (Mustapha, 2012; Mustapha & Wok, 2015).

From mediacentric vantage point, lack of access to the public sphere, occasioned by political economy considerations (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006; Herman & Chomsky, 2002), has been considered a restrictive measure on youth's political orientation and participation. Media monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative roles, normative to building sound political and democratic culture, as advanced by McQuail (2009), have, for instance, been supplanted by increasing consideration of business and economic orientation (Trappel & Tomaz, 2021). In addition to increasing commercialisation and commodification of news and other media products, thus limiting citizens' access to empowering information, the need to frame issues in tandem with expectations of powerful elites reinforces democratic malaise resulting from media expectation gap. McNair (2010) is, for example, of the opinion that the contemporary public sphere offers citizens with incomplete information about politics thus distorting picture of reality. According to him, the mass media aid political actors to conceal sensitive information by paying little if any attention to inconvenient, sensitive information that could empower the citizenry.

Being an important resource and site for political enculturation, the media system is supposedly the sphere where political norms, values and cultures are learned and internalised by the citizens. The domination of the media system by political hegemony, however, stymies access to those political and democratic resources that aid citizens' civic knowledge and political efficacy. The colonisation of the media space, accentuated by commercialisation of the broadcast media, aided the old political actors in maintaining their strong hold on the nation's political system thus intensifying youth's political apathy and disengagement (Mustapha & Omar, 2020). Espousing the influence of political economic consideration, Soules (2015, p. 200) argues that "news media explain and legitimise the social order and thereby reinforce existing power structures." The political marginalisation of the youth leads to creation of 'generation D', a succession of disenfranchised youths with little to say on how their society is being governed (Furlong & Cartmel, 2012). The advent of social media and emergence of other digital platforms that allow deliberative engagement of the political and media systems are, however, changing the narratives about youth's political engagement (Boulianne, 2009; Mustapha & Mustapha, 2017; Raynauld & Lalancette,

2016). There have, however, been several debates on the capacity of social media for encouraging political participation among the youth (Muntean, 2015). While some scholars hold a general view that social media usage can reduce the participatory ability of the youth because of satisfactions derived from online vicarious political engagement (Bode, 2016; Bowyer, Kahne & Middaugh, 2017), others believe that the platforms offer important mobilising online information that triggers offline participatory behaviours (Bekafigo & McBride, 2013; Mustapha, Gbonegun & Mustapha, 2016; Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009; Vitak et al., 2011). This lack of consensus about the significant influence of novel media on youth political behaviours opens the field to further exploration from different geographical and political contexts. Given the mixed findings on the contributions of social media to young people's political behaviour, despite the fact the demographic class constitutes the major patrons of the platforms as well as substantial members of the electorate, and the emergence of new participatory repertoires on the digital space, this study elaborates the influence of social media on youth political behaviours by examining online and offline dimensions of political participation with special consideration of the role of demographic differentiation and differing level of political knowledge and political efficacy among the youth.

## **Literature Review**

This section discusses the Civic Volunteerism Model as the theoretical basis for youth's political engagement through the social media; social media and youth's political knowledge/political efficacy as well as social media use and youth's political participation.

### ***Civic Volunteerism Model***

Verba et al (1995, p. 271) defines civic skills as "requisite organisation and communal practice measured in terms of educational attainment, communication skills, organizational skills and leadership experience". The civic voluntarism model (CVM) has been deployed to understanding of political model by focusing on factors that account for political activity (Oni, Oni, Mbarika & Ayo, 2017; Ostranda, Kindler & Bryan, 2020; Verba & Nie, 1972). The model explicates three factors that trigger political activism namely resources, psychological engagement and recruitment (Verba, Schlozman & Brady, 1995).

Resources, under CVM, deals with cost involved in political participation in terms of time, money and civic skill. Being socially mediated encounter, political participation requires investment in information resources that enhances political efficacy of the citizens. As democratised communication platforms, therefore, the social media offer low-cost political information and facilitate participation given their ubiquity, interactivity, multi-modality and mobilizational potentials (Mustapha & Wok, 2014). The engagement dimension of CVM considers civic participation, a precursor of political participation, as a function of interest in politics, knowledge about politics, political efficacy and strength for political preference (Verba et al., 1995). The recruitment factor is, however, considered a consequence of resources and psychological engagement as it could emerge from participation in non-civic activities (Klofstad, 2011).

Civic volunteerism could be bolstered by social media use because of opportunity for young people to inculcate certain civic attitudes resulting from political discussion on the platforms. Besides, the platforms also offer recruitment opportunity for young people who coalesce with other interest

groups on social media to promote certain political causes or mobilise people for political action (Mustapha & Omar, 2020). With the avalanche of information on the social media and opportunities to carry out certain political actions such as signing online petition, donating to political parties and candidates, mobilising for political action, among others, youth's political engagement has been propped up in the contemporary time (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Leung & Lee, 2014). Hence, the notion that youth's marginalisation through the dynamics of hegemonic political and media systems is receiving theoretical and empirical re-evaluation given scholars' conclusion that the social media and other digital platforms are imbuing young people with civic skills and facilitating opportunity for recruitment thus replacing the influence of parents on young people's political orientation and behaviour (Andola & Jenkins, 2008; Vraga, Bode, Yang, Edgerly, Thorson, Wells, & Shah, 2014).

### ***Media Political Economy and Youth's Political Behaviour***

The gamut of media political economy literature is of the view that access to and representation in the media sphere is a function of social status. This presupposes greater opportunity for the upwardly mobile, chiefly the political and corporate elite. The belief that the media propagandise on behalf of the political and corporate elite (Herman & Chomsky, 2002), therefore, impinge on youth's maximisation of mass mediated information for political enculturation. Besides having limited access to the media space, youth's representation is oftentimes a product of powerful interests that considered the cohort as captive and passive audience that can be conditioned and exploited (Côté, 2013). Similarly, France and Threadgold (2015, p. 1) offer that "young people's lives can be shaped by economic forces and by classed symbolic and moral forces". The symbiotic relationship between political leaders, who are interested in influencing public opinion, and journalists, who depend on government officials for information subsidy resulted into monopolisation of public discourses in favour of the against public preferences (DiMaggio, 2017). The inability of the youth to participate in the creation of culture in the mainstream media thus diminishes their trust in their content with attendant implications for political socialisation (Mustapha & Wok, 2015). The advent of social media and their information democratisation prowess, however, changed young people's disposition to politics and public affairs (Bosch, 2013). The opportunity for the youth to engage politics on the social media sphere with minimal control of the established political actors limits political economy influence common to the mainstream media. Besides the limited gatekeeping mechanism usually employed to censor information that gets to the public on the mainstream media (Heinderyckx & Vos, 2016; Mustapha, 2018), the co-creational advantage of social media that turns users to prosumers engendered increasing opportunity for the youths to become politically active (Hirst & Harrison, 2007; Mustapha & Mustapha, 2017).

Although people depend on the government and the mainstream media for information about the external world that is out of reach, out of sight and out of mind (Lippmann, 2022), political actors acknowledge that the inability to get deeper truth, needed to function as critical and informed citizens, led to the consideration of social media sites as platforms for reaching young adults with alternative information (Burton & Shea, 2010; Perloff, 2014). The social media environment, as a new political public sphere, thus affords the youth opportunity to hold opinions without fear of isolation common with mainstream media due in part to the political economy conditionalities. With limited elitist's interest in controlling the content of the social media, young people across

the world have been leveraging them for reinvention of their political involvement (Mustapha & Omar, 2020). The presence of online political discussion opportunities resulting from the non-restrictive nature of online and social media platforms thus accentuates youths' political knowledge, sophistry and efficacy (Coleman & Moss, 2012; Papacharissi, 2004).

### ***Social Media Use and Youth's Political Efficacy***

Political efficacy is one of the most important and well-studied concepts in democratic political participation literature (Morrell, 2003). It was first introduced in the 1950s by Campbell and associates and defined as the belief that one's actions can influence political processes, which in turn makes civic political participation worthwhile (Campbell, Gurin, & Miller, 1954). Research on political attitudes and behaviour has since confirmed the link between efficacy and political participation (Delli Carpini, 2004; Mande, Mustapha, Omar, Mustapha & Ahmed, 2022). Further investigations suggest that political efficacy comprises of two interrelated components namely internal and external efficacy. Internal efficacy describes the belief that individuals can understand political life and participate effectively in it, while external efficacy refers to the notion that political actors and institutions are likely to be responsive to the demands of citizens (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). External efficacy is related to the idea of political trust. Citizens who trust their government are also likely to think and believe that they can influence its decisions (Davis & Owen, 1998). Research has established that the use of media in general, and for news consumption in particular, is associated with increased efficacy (Pinkleton & Austin, 2011).

Around the turn of the previous century, scholars also began dwelling on studies on the impact of Internet and online news exposure on political actions and attitudes. While positive associations have often been hypothesized, results have been far from conclusive (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011). One group of studies reported sizeable level of positive effects of Internet access on political participation (Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Mossberger, Tolbert & McNeal, 2008). Others found little or no effects (Boulianne, 2009). One explanation for these inconsistencies is that the normally used measures of exposure were not enough to serve as a good predictor of civic political participation (Bakker & De Vreese, 2011).

Studies looking specifically at political efficacy have been similarly inconsistent in their findings (Coleman, Morrison & Svennevig, 2008; Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard, 2010). In one of the early studies looking at political efficacy, Davis and Owen (1998) found that online audiences tend to be rated high on efficacy measures, having a greater confidence in their ability to influence the processes in politics, compared to the general public. Davis and Owen further suggested that attention to news media can be seen as a manifestation of a general connectedness to the political world. Lee (2006) hypothesized that social media can reduce all blockade to political participation and increase political efficacy by providing easy ways to communicate with civic activist groups and political office holders. Based on a survey of US college students, he concluded that Internet use for information seeking and online political communication were predictors of internal efficacy, but not external efficacy.

Using data obtained from the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey, Kenski and Stroud (2006) found a positive relationship between social media use and political efficacy. Though statistically significant, the impact of Internet access they saw was relatively small. Another set of scholars

exploring the impact of the social media on political efficacy reported results that were less encouraging. A study by Scheufele and Nisbet (2002) found literally no effect of using the Internet for information purpose, and a negative effect of social media uses for entertainment. The researchers concluded that the Internet media have a limited role when it comes to promoting citizenship. Longitudinal analyses also found a limited or no linkage between efficacy and online exposure to information concerning politics (Jennings & Zeitner, 2003).

### ***Social Media and Youth Political Participation***

Youths across the world with various racial and ethnic backgrounds are taking part in politics through the various social media. Examples of these are by initiating online political groups, jumpstarting political blogs, or forwarding and sharing political information in form of texts, audio or videos with friends, thus reinstating their voices in the political realm (Cohen & Kahne, 2012). Chatora (2012) highlights the mediating role which social media have played in a number of protests in Africa and elsewhere in the world, namely: violent protests in the UK from July- August 2011; popular protests in Tunisia which forced their President, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali out of office on 14th January 2011 and; protests in Egypt which precipitated the forced resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on 11th February 2011.

Adelabu (2011) notes that the accomplishment of President Obama's Presidential crusades in 2008 and his emergence as the first African American leader of the United States was generally credited to his dynamic utilization of Facebook to assemble a huge number of volunteers, and voters. Social media were adopted and widely used in Nigeria since the 2011 elections tools for political communication (Dunu, 2018), after witnessing its successful usage by Obama. Facebook, Twitter and other social networks reinforce political messages and build online and offline supports that help drive interesting debates about any politician and/or political party. In fact, the social media provide a potential to stream and broadcast real live political rallies and party conventions online, in such a way that supporters who cannot participate physically can be involved from a distance effortlessly. It is in view of this that Kahne and Middaugh (2012) believe that social media can dramatically change how much young people engage in political participation, which includes exercising voting rights.

Social media have become useful not only in engaging in political debates and discussions, but also mobilizing youth in taking certain actions. Okoro and Santas' (2017) study, affirmed that it is as a result of this inherent political communication and interaction potentials that social media have been able to influence choice of candidates during elections. The influence of social media on youth's mobilisation is also captured by World Youth Report (2005, p. 13) thus: "It is becoming increasingly apparent that through modern day mass media, ICTs and global interconnectedness have combined to influence the lives of young people, creating what is referred to as global media driven youth culture. This has now become the most prominent means via which youth tend to engage in politics as it has become the platform through which their voices can be heard."

Amidst these arguments, Chinedu-Okeke and Obi, (2016) offered that there is a form of political participation across various social media networks, which has led to a paradigm shift in the electioneering process in Nigeria. As such, many empirical studies have documented how social media have been able to aid different kinds of political participation across the globe. Dagona,



Karick and Abubakar (2013), in their study of the use of Facebook in youth political attitudes and participation, noted that there was a significant relationship between Facebook use and political participation which afford people from different perspective to unite and engage in various political debates. Salman and Saad (2015), in a similar result, implored the Malaysian government to take advantage of engaging the youth on digital platforms with a view to achieve better political participation.

A plethora of instances have witnessed the involvement of youths on various social media protests, where they were mobilized against various government policies. The #Occupy Nigeria protest done in 2011 against the hike in fuel pump price in Nigeria from N65 to N145 per litre trailblazed social media-propelled protests in Nigeria (Hari, 2014). The #bringbackourgirls (#BBOG) campaign on Twitter, challenging government passivity to securing kidnapped schoolgirls by Boko Haram militants, got supports from many respected global citizens, including the then First lady of the U.S, Michelle Obama, after its extensive diffusion on the social media. The most remarkable use of social media for mobilization was the massive protest done on various social media platforms against the social media bill, which passed first reading in the House of Representatives (Coker, Adeyeri & Adeniran, 2022; Ewang, 2019). Part of the reason for the annulment of the bill was a mega protest done on social media to prevent the government from regulating information on social media. All these forms of online political participation have offline consequences as demonstrated by apparent responses of the government to the yearnings of Nigerians as promoted by the protests.

## **Hypotheses**

Based on the foregoing arguments that established a nexus and young people political participation, via social media capability to offer opportunity for both online and offline activisms and civic engagements, the following hypotheses are advanced:

- H1: Social media use predicts online political participation even after demographic variables, political knowledge and political efficacy are controlled for.
- H2: Social media use predicts offline political participation even after demographic variables, political knowledge and political efficacy are controlled for.

## **Methodology**

This study utilised a cross-sectional mixed-methods design that sampled respondents purposively among young Kwarans who consider themselves as avid users of social media for political information during the 2019 general election and interview of key social media groups' administrators. In addition to 381 survey respondents, twelve key informants, very active members on the social media platforms, were interviewed to obtain additional data on how political economy of the media bears influence on the use of social media and what consequences this bode for political participation. Using structured questionnaire, the study collected data on respondents' demographic variable, social media use, level of political knowledge, level of political efficacy, online political participation and offline political participation. A double-barrel purposive sampling, based on the use of social media for political information and being a Kwara indigene from the three senatorial districts, was employed in this study. Quantitative data from the field were analysed using IBM-SPSS (Version 25.0) after thorough screening, reliability check and

computation of scaled items; while responses to the interview questions were analysed thematically and supported with quotes from responses that relate to the main crux of the study.

## Measures

*General Social Media Use:* A measure of social media use for generic purposes, based on five-point Likert scale measuring usage along the continuum of 1=never and 5=always. Social media considered are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and WhatsApp, which have become common social media platforms enjoying huge patronage among the youth (see, for example, Mustapha, Omar & Atoloye, 2019).

*Political Social Media Use:* Five indicators of political social media use measured on five-point Likert scale (1=never, 5=always) in this study are follow update on politics, mobilise youth for political action, engage in political discussion, share political information and stage online political protest.

*Exposure to Political Campaign on the Social Media:* Measured using five items on a five-point Likert scale where 1=no exposure at all and 5=very high exposure. Items used are watch/read political campaign on the social media, know about political parties' programmes via the social media, social media offer information about candidates, social media campaigns offer differences about candidates, and social media reinforces parties' identities.

*Political Knowledge:* In this study, items used in measuring political knowledge, measure on five-point Likert scale (1=no knowledge at all; 5=very much knowledgeable), are 'I know that Nigeria practices presidential democracy, I know the federal legislature consists of the Senate and House of Representative, I know that voting age in Nigeria is 18 years old and above, I know that federal, state and local governments are the three tiers of government, and I know the maximum life span of elected president and governors is eight years.

*Political Efficacy:* Political efficacy measures degree of confidence in political system and process. It is indexed by five items on five-point Likert scale where 1=no confidence at all and 5=very confident. Items used are 'I have good understanding of the political system and process', 'I feel confident discussing politics with my peers', 'I feel confidence about participating in politics', 'I feel I can influence government policies' and 'I have perfect understanding of political terminologies and languages in Nigeria'.

*Online Political Participation:* This construct measured level of agreement of seven items on five-point Likert scale where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. Items include 'I participate in online voting', 'contact public official online', 'support political party online', 'support political candidate online', 'engage in online political discussion', 'canvass vote online', and 'follow activities of government via online media'.

*Offline Political Participation:* Offline political participation indexed respondents' participation in politics based on agreement to a seven items on five-point Likert scale consisting of 'I belong to a political party', 'I attend political rallies', 'I support political candidates financially', 'I volunteer

for political candidate’, ‘contact members on political development’, ‘I encourage people to vote’, and ‘registered to vote during election’.

## Findings

Descriptively, data collected on the main constructs in this study were analysed using means and standard deviations. The constructs (general social media use, political social media use, exposure to political campaigns on the social media, political knowledge, political efficacy, online political participation and offline political participation) were summed to obtain indexed used in testing the hypotheses advanced in the study.

Table 1. Descriptive and Reliability Statistics of the Constructs

| Variables                                    | Alpha | Mean | SD   |
|--|-------|------|------|
| General social media use                     | .788  | 3.07 | 1.13 |
| Political social media use                   | .876  | 3.44 | 1.01 |
| Exposure to social media political campaigns | .875  | 3.45 | 1.06 |
| Political knowledge                          | .859  | 3.83 | 0.91 |
| Political efficacy                           | .916  | 3.31 | 1.07 |
| Online Political Participation               | .929  | 3.07 | 1.14 |
| Offline political participation              | .891  | 3.45 | 1.05 |

## Demographics

On the average, respondents in this study are twenty-five years old ( $M=25.5$ ,  $SD=5.18$ ,  $Min=18$  and  $Max=35$ ). With slight male (54.6%) majority and education level ranging from Senior School Certificate of Education (24.2%) and postgraduate qualification (13.0%), BSc/HND category (40.9%) has the highest share of the respondents. In terms of respondents' religions, those with Islamic orientation (51.2%) have a slim lead. Respondents from Kwara Central (35.6%) are in majority, followed by those from Kwara South (33.0%) while those from Kwara North (31.4%) are the least. While the sampling design was not probabilistic, the demographic distributions mimic a fair representation of the population and offers a bit degree of external validity.

Table 2: Demographic Profiles of Respondents

| Variables   | Frequency  | Percentage   |
|---|------------|--------------|
| <b>Age (in years)</b>   |            |              |
| Less than 25  | 188        | 49.6         |
| 26-30   | 104        | 27.4         |
| Above 30  | 87         | 23.0         |
| <b>Total (<math>M=24.53</math>, <math>SD=5.18</math>, <math>Min=18</math>, <math>Max=35</math>)</b> | <b>379</b> | <b>100.0</b> |
| <b>Gender</b>   |            |              |
| Male  | 208        | 54.6         |
| Female  | 173        | 45.4         |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>381</b> | <b>100.0</b> |
| <b>Geopolitical Zone</b>  |            |              |
| Kwara Central   | 137        | 35.6         |
| Kwara North   | 121        | 31.4         |
| Kwara South   | 127        | 33.0         |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>385</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

|                  |            |              |
|------------------|------------|--------------|
| <b>Education</b> |            |              |
| SSCE             | 93         | 24.2         |
| NCE/OND          | 84         | 21.9         |
| BSc/HND          | 157        | 40.9         |
| Postgraduate     | 50         | 13.0         |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>384</b> | <b>100.0</b> |
| <b>Religion</b>  |            |              |
| Christianity     | 184        | 48.3         |
| Islam            | 195        | 51.2         |
| Other            | 2          | 0.5          |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>381</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

### Independent, Control and Dependent Variables

The key constructs in the study, measured with scaled items all indicated, to some degree, presence of key properties of measuring the variables. As presented in Table 2, all the constructs' reliabilities were well above .70 minimum threshold, meaning the items were good measures of the constructs. Similarly, the zero-order correlations among constructs in the study yielded correlational results that are not inordinate or depicting multicollinearity (Table 3). These results guaranteed the fitness of the data for the inferential statistics (hierarchical regressions) used in testing the hypotheses advanced in this study.

Table 3: Zero-order Correlations among Key constructs in the Study

| Constructs | 1 | 2      | 3       | 4       | 5       | 6       | 7       |
|------------|---|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| 1 GSU      | 1 | .342** | .218*   | .211**  | .301**  | .276**  | .178*   |
| 2 PSU      |   | 1      | .405*** | .422*** | .483*** | .503*** | .204*   |
| 3 XPC      |   |        | 1       | .387**  | .399**  | .436*** | .398**  |
| 4 POK      |   |        |         | 1       | .479*** | .531*** | .562*** |
| 5 POE      |   |        |         |         | 1       | .457**  | .426**  |
| 6 ONP      |   |        |         |         |         | 1       | .486*** |
| 7 OFP      |   |        |         |         |         |         | 1       |

\*<.05, \*\*<.01, \*\*\*<.001

**Key:** GSU=Generic Social Media Use; PSU=Political Social Media Use; XPC=Exposure to Political Campaigns on Social Media; POK=political knowledge; POE=Political Efficacy; ONP=Online Political Participation; OFP=Offline Political Participation

### Test of Hypotheses

The two hypotheses advanced in this study explored the predictive power of social media use on online political participation (H1) and offline political participation (H2). The results as presented in Table 4 reveal differential contributions of demographic, control and independent variables to the dependent variable. Using hierarchical regressions, which control for the effects of demographic variables, political knowledge and political efficacy, the study found significant influence of education ( $\beta=.027$ ,  $p<.05$ ), political knowledge ( $\beta=.281$ ,  $p<.001$ ), political efficacy ( $\beta=.434$ ,  $p<.001$ ), which are controlled variables on online political participation.

The three social media variables, general social media use ( $\beta=.108$ ,  $p<.01$ ), political social media use ( $\beta=.147$ ,  $p<.01$ ), and exposure to social media political campaigns ( $\beta=.138$ ,  $p<.001$ ), yielded positive and significant contribution to online political participation. Besides 49.5% variance explained ( $R^2=.495$ ), the three models demonstrated significant relationship with online political participation as well as incremental  $R^2$  across the blocks. With these results, hypothesis one of this study stands affirmed.

Table 4. Regression showing the influence of social media use on political participation after controlling for demographic variables, political knowledge and political efficacy

| <b>Model</b>                                | <b>Online Political Participation</b> | <b>Offline Political Participation</b> |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Block 1: Demographics</b>                |                                       |  |
| Age   | -.075                                 | -.066                                  |
| Gender                                      | .066                                  | .028                                   |
| Education                                   | .112*                                 | .045                                   |
| $\Delta R^2$                                | .027*                                 | .009                                   |
| <b>Block 2: Control Variables</b>           |                                       |  |
| Political knowledge                         | .221***                               | .343***                                |
| Political efficacy                          | .528***                               | .500***                                |
| $\Delta R^2$                                | .434***                               | .524***                                |
| <b>Block 3: Independent variables</b>       |                                       |  |
| General social media use                    | .108**                                | .034                                   |
| Political social media use                  | .147**                                | .025                                   |
| Exposure to social media political campaign | .138***                               | .084                                   |
| <b>Total <math>R^2</math></b>               | <b>.495***</b>                        | <b>.545***</b>                         |

Entries are standardized beta coefficients

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

Hypothesis two of the study was tested using hierarchical regression with same predictors, but offline participation as the dependent variable. While the entire models predicted 54.5% variance in offline political participation, and revealed incremental  $R^2$  across the blocks, the social media variables bear no significant impact on offline political participation. These findings reveal that social media have minimal if any impact on offline political participation.

### Qualitative Responses

Twelve key informants from which information was elicited to establish political economy influence on the media use as well as association between media use and reliability of political information and, subsequently political participation, offered divergent opinions. For example, many of the informants agreed to using both mainstream and social media complementarily, with social media being given more patronage for several reasons like mobility, opportunity for direct

clarification, minimal censorship and opportunity for opinion expression. Informant 3, for instance, says:

*I mainly turn to social media to follow happenings from a number of social media groups that I belong. Even, most mainstream media news and information I encountered oftentimes come from those attached or reproduced on the social media sites and those sent to my social media platforms by friends and family members.*

Some informants use more of social media because they get information freely, sometimes on demand and at times accidentally.

*I don't bother myself seeking news on the mainstream platforms because my friends share important news of the day with me and I sometimes stumbled on news while using certain online platforms,* said Informant 7.

There is also concern about influence on media and credibility of news. Informants have divergent opinion on which of the platforms offers most credible news. Some believed that professionalism guarantees credibility of mainstream media while other felt that mainstream media serve the interests of their owners. According to Informant 1, *the mainstream media operate based on the principle of social responsibility and professional accountability which are not common to those who merely publish information on the social media.* Similarly, Informant 3 holds that mainstream media have much to lose if they violate professional codes and hence operate with much more credibility: According to her, *since there are sanctions from regulatory agencies, the mainstream media behave professionally and responsibly.* These lines of thought were, however, countered by other informants who believed that the mainstream media leveraged on association with government and corporate elites to misinform the masses. In the words of Informant 2, *there seems to be alliance between the regulators and those who owned the media outlets that guaranteed unrestrained freedom, including manipulation of the members of the public.*

Some informants believe that political economy influences credibility of mainstream media premised on the notion that the domination of mainstream media ownership by political gladiators portend danger for democratisation of information. According to Informants 4 and 5, almost all big political actors in Nigeria have investment in print and electronic media. Informant 7 similarly posed that: *who among the top-rated politician is not a media entrepreneur? They have colonised the media space and those outlets not owned by politicians offer open allegiance to one political party or the other.* In another breath Informant 3 cautioned that *Nigerian mainstream media, by their open alliance with political candidates and parties, have shown that they are too political to be trusted, which was why many young people with mobile phone and internet connection source news online and from the social media.*

With regards to avenue for sourcing political information, the social media trumped the mainstream media due to the apparent domination of the mainstream media spaces by the political elite and their corporate media collaborators. According to Informant 5, *seeking political information from the mainstream media is like surrendering one's freedom to be feed with propaganda. To me, the mainstream media promote the agenda of their owners and go the whole hog to see that only the worldviews of their owners are given attention while alternative perspectives are usually consigned to the dustbins.* Although she is sceptical of the social media

too, because of their potential to propagate fake news, informant 9 believed that the mainstream media propagandise a lot: *while fake news on social media can be fact-checked and debunked easily, mainstream media mostly escape intense scrutiny when they publish manipulative information about politicians and political parties they are supporting.*

The online and social media platforms offer incisive information about politics and politicians than the mainstream media (Informants 7 and 10). *In fact, it is common these days to see mainstream media trailing the social media in terms of investigative journalism on politician in today's Nigeria* (Informant 10). According to Informant 8, both media genres thrive on sensationalism, however, the social media are becoming more audacious in terms of their readiness to expose wrongdoings of political gladiators than their mainstream counterparts. *The social media give indicting news about politicians without any form of colouration when the mainstream media shy away from calling spade a spade*, she said. These responses show that most of the key informants venerate the social media as sites for credible political information than the mainstream media.

On the contributions of the media forms (mainstream and social) to political participation, informants offered mixed feelings, believing that both platforms have serious implication for dwindling political interest and participation. Informant 1, for example, said that one cannot know the truth about politics in Nigeria as claims and counterclaims in both mainstream media and social media create confusion and accentuate hopelessness about Nigeria political system. In his words, *wherever you turned, you are fed with unbelievable information that weakens your trust in politics, politicians and political institutions.* This belief is also inherent in Informant 10 stance that *politicians and their supporters' manipulation of the media system is doing great disservice to consolidation of democratic values in Nigeria.* Similarly, Informant 3 offered that he would rather remain active on the online platform, using his knowledge to guide people, than participate in political process that is skewed in favour of the elite due to their controlling interest in the media enterprise and financial power to sponsor impoverished youth to disrupt the online media in their favour.

Informants 2 and 5 also believe that youth disinterest in mainstream politics in Nigeria devolves from lack of trust in the system which is being aggravated by conspiratorial impunity usually sponsored by the political elite and cover-up by the mainstream media who hardly provide robust investigative journalism to make political criminals face justice. According to Informant 2, *besides owning the media and the power to dictate the agenda, the Nigerian political elites have eroded youth's trust in politics by sponsoring narratives that portend hopelessness.* Similarly, Informant 5 said that *one's interest in active politics is determined by trust in the media and other political institutions, which have been hijacked already in Nigeria and the powerful elite.* All these reveal the reasons for diminishing interest of Nigerian youths in active, offline politics while compensating for their exclusion by being hyperactive in the online political sphere.

## Discussion

This study contributes to ongoing debate on political significance of social media, particularly among a generation that venerate the platforms as means of holding and expressing their opinion in societies where hegemonic dominance of the mainstream media marginalises them. Findings reveal that young people are not only using social media for generic purposes, they obtain political gratifications from the platforms. The results also show that young people sampled in this study



consume some degree of political campaign from the social media. The youth also agree that they do not only use social media for interaction, they use it to achieve various political objectives, as they mostly share various information about politics with their social media contacts (see also Salem & Mourtada, 2012).

The results, however, reveal that social media use bear great influence on online political participation than offline types of political behaviours. This means that social media are only potent in the promotion of soft politics or what some scholars have described as slacktivism (Anduiza, Cantijoch & Gallego, 2010; Vitak, Zube; Smock, Carr, Ellison & Lampe, 2010). The fact that all social media variables (generic social media use, political social media use, and exposure to social media political campaigns) have no significant influence on offline political participation calls for concern in this era of mainstream media-induced political apathy and democratic malaise among the youth (Ogochukwu, 2014; Vromen, 2008, 2011).

Importantly, this study supported the age long assertion that political knowledge is a better predictor of political behaviour, including political participation (Memoli, 2011). Same finding was recorded in the case of respondents' political efficacy. The results show that these two variables have significant contributions to both online and offline political participation. This is not strange given the intuitive notion that knowledge leads to efficacy, which trigger political interest and, ultimately, political participation (Vaccari, Valeriani & Barbera, 2015; Yu, 2016).

Although the findings affirmed the significant role of the mass media as important political and democratic resources, there was the belief that the social media trump their mainstream counterparts given their democratising features that venerate opinion expression and opportunity for dissent that are seemingly insuperable in the mainstream media. Due to the influence of key political actors and corporate elite who provide the wherewithal to sustain the media system via provision of information subsidy and advertising funds, it is believed that the mainstream media act as megaphone of members dominant classes as theorised by political economy scholarship (DiMaggio, 2017; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Hirst & Harrison, 2007). This aligns with Perloff's (2014) assertion that the power of conventional media to shape political agenda for vast majority of people has been supplanted by online media genres that are now shaping mainstream media, public and policy agenda.

## **Conclusion**

In all climes and across ages, informed citizenry has been described as the fulcrum of democracy. Being the purveyor of information that imbue the citizens with rationalities that guide effective use of ballot, the media have been fundamental to and considered as key actors in the building of democratic culture. The increasing democratisation of media space, triggered by evolutionary digital/social media, raises the hope that the time-honoured role of media as open marketplace of idea and public sphere, currently attenuated by commercialisation of the mainstream media and stringent political economic considerations, would be better fulfilled. The massive migration of young people to the social media spaces as main information avenues also increases the hope that the politically-apathetic youths will find their way back to the realm of offline political activism. Of course, several studies have explored these possibilities with mixed findings (Vitak, Zube; Smock, Carr, Ellison & Lampe, 2010; Vromen, 2008, 2012).

This study, premised on Civic Volunteerism Model, explored the possibility of social media to provide resources, psychological engagement and recruitment repertoires that can stimulate young people's political activism. The study also incorporates political knowledge and political efficacy as key predictors of political participation. This is in line with the belief that political behaviour is a function of multi-faceted factors besides exposure to mediated political information. Additionally, the study crystallises the motives behind the canonisation of social media in political socialisation and participation of young people and attributes deification of the platforms to their democratic features which provide opportunity for ungated political deliberations and expression and facilitate evasion of elite-influenced mainstream media content.

The study contributes to ongoing debate on the nexus between the novel media and political participation. While online participation has been found to be a plausible means of political engagement in advanced climes, where it serves as precipitant of offline participation, its import in developing democracies is just mushrooming. Hence, findings in this study corroborate the notion that online political participation fills people with the belief that they are engaged citizens even when their soft engagement yields little if any impact on actual political action like voting, protest behaviour and other forms of mainstream civic engagements.

The importance of political knowledge and efficacy, confirmed in this study, reinforces the need to develop programmatic strategies that could enhance political complexity, efficacy and deftness of young people in developing democracies like Nigeria's. In view of this, it is important to call for restructuring of educational curriculum to incorporate robust civic education and enculturation that would boost political and civic morale of the future democratic actors. As Nigeria's democracy advances, there is the urgent need to reduce gerontocratic tendencies that discouraged young people from participating in politics. The youth should also maximise the democratising prowess of social media to create a 'Great Community' of politically-informed citizens on whom the future of Nigerian democratic culture depends.

Despite the arrays of hope noticed in the results, this study suffers from some inherent limitations that need be explored in the future. With regards to measurement, the study limits the use of constructs of civic volunteerism which negates the principle of theory-based exploration. However, the allusion made to the theory as a part of the literature indicates the potential of social media-driven activism for consolidation of democratic culture. Despite its necessity, due to absence of appropriate population framework that could guide the sampling design, the recourse to purposive sampling limits external validity of this study. Hence, it is suggested that future studies should use rigorous sampling technique that can enhance generalisation of the inferences that emanated from this study. Similarly, more research, using sophisticated designs and analytical tools would be needed given the dynamism of social media spaces and existence of contingencies that could alter the outcome of human-computer interactions. The elaboration of the phenomenon with other concepts such as political interest, online political discussion, political news sharing behaviour, immediacy, among others is also essential to understand the ramifications of the link between social media use and youths' political engagement. Despite the inherent flaws, the results in this study, however, raise important areas needing attention in order to maximise the democratising opportunities of social media.

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*Lambe Kayode Mustapha, Olamide Hameed Olufadi, Adesina Lukuman Azeez, Patrick Udende, and Maryam Lasisi Mustapha* are from the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Ilorin in Ilorin, Nigeria. Correspondence should be sent to [muslakay@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:muslakay@yahoo.co.uk), or [klm@unilorin.edu.ng](mailto:klm@unilorin.edu.ng).