

Youth Online Political Participation: The Role of Facebook Use, Interactivity, Quality Information and Political Interest

Shamsu Dauda Abdu^{1,*}, *Bahtiar* Mohamad², and *Suhaini* Muda³

^{1,2,3}School of Multimedia Technology and Communication, College of Art and Science, Universiti Utara Malaysia.

Abstract. This paper focuses on the role of Facebook use, interactivity with politicians, quality of information and political interest as the predictors of online political participation among youth. The paper argues that Facebook use, interactivity, quality of information and political interests have the potential to engender online political participation among Nigerian youth. Also, by offering them an avenue for acquiring political information necessary for making an informed political decision through deliberations on Facebook; in order to bring new political changes and group mobilization. Therefore, the study was implemented with survey questionnaires collected from youth in Bauchi metropolis (N= 372). Findings reveal that Facebook use, quality of information and political interest positively correlates with online political participation while interactivity with the politicians did not significantly influence online political participation among youth.

1. Introduction

Historically, citizen's participation in the political processes has been considered a fundamental element of an ideal democracy. Thus, participation represents a significant component in political communication and democratic institution. Recent reports from western countries indicate decreasing youth participation in political activities such as low turnout at elections [1]. Some scholars raised an observation on whether all forms of political participation are declining or are youth now shifting paradigm of participation from an institutionalized form to social media sites such as Facebook to affect political and social change in the society. Empirical evidence has shown that the trends which describe an apathetic youth in their contemporary politics can be interpreted by the shift from traditional to expressive online participation [2]. Thus, a study of youth and their online political participation is timely and imperative because political behaviors are often articulated and nurtured at a younger age [3].

* Corresponding author: shamsud.abdul@gmail.com

Giving the above scenario, two decades ago, there has been serious academic concern about the low political participation among youth in many parts of developed and developing nations, thus, some scholars have identified this as a threat to good governance particularly in developing nations like Nigeria and also an impediment to their development agenda [4]. For instance, in Europe, America, Asia and Africa, youth are not stimulated by the traditional media such as radio, television and newspaper which invariably have limited influence on increasing their political interest [5]. Similarly, in Nigeria youth participation over the years has decreased because of the fact that youth in political space has been marginalized and often used as thugs by the selfish politicians who seek personal aggrandizement through violence. Consequently, this trend decreases youth morale to participate in politics [6].

Before the coming of social media, space in newspaper and airtime on radio and television were limited and expensive; thus youth, specifically cannot express their opinion nor participate in politics through the old media. Nevertheless, recent observations in the United States, Europe, Asia, Middle East and Africa shows that youth participation through political activities appears to be shifting paradigm to the online public deliberations [4]. Online social networking sites such as Facebook have brought new hopes and opportunities by connecting youth with politicians and like minds to share information and opinions [7].

Additionally, Facebook is now playing important roles refers to as “migration process” wherein youth around the world are using the platform to address their problem of political apathy, and also engaging in online political discussion that may eventually promote good governance and development in the society [8]. However, what remains unclear is whether Facebook use, interactivity with politicians, quality of information and political interest, may positively influence online political participation among youth and increase their participation.

2. The outside and inside battle

2.1 Online political participation

Obviously, with the increasing role of Facebook in political activities, participation has now taken a new form. Like posting and commenting online, joining and creating online groups, organizing protest events, participation in online discussions with friends and ‘liking’ on a Facebook profile of a political figure or party indicating political preferences; certainly have become widespread [9]. Thus, Facebook use for online political participation yield significant influence on youth. Conroy, Feezell and Guerrero [10] demonstrate that information exchange on Facebook fosters civic participation, trust, political and life contentment among youth.

Online political participation is online political participatory activities carry out on Facebook such as sending political messages on Facebook to the politicians, commenting on a candidate’s Facebook page, seeking donation for a political party or sharing political information on Facebook [11]. Thus, this provides youth more ways to be active in political affairs than what was not possible in the past generations [12].

Furthermore, online activities, especially on Facebook can easily be seen, read and viewed by a large group of youth because of its high connectivity, therefore it has a strong chance of reaching and encouraging them to participate. Gibson and Cantijock [13] observed that attention to political news and also sharing the news have more instrumental quality especially when they are carryout online. In Nigeria, youth have started embracing Facebook to engage in political activities; because they consider it as a medium that make their voice heard in the political activities. In summary, political participation as a concept

is dynamic and changing over the time with new form of communication system and it increases youth participatory political activities at the expense of traditional forms of participation [14].

2.2 Facebook usage

Evidently, the use of Facebook recently for online political participation, worldwide has greatly increased, especially among youth and they are particularly using it to influence social and political change. Studies have suggested that youth are now using Facebook to seek for political information, mobilize like minds, create user-generated content and share political views [15-16]. Increasingly, Facebook has been used to mobilize individuals to participate in politics and protest around the world. This, however, suggest that Facebook can help convert or mobilize the people that have been disengaged from offline politics to now participate in an online political activity.

This statement has synergy with the work of Theocharis and Quintelier [2], the authors believe that Facebook provides suitability and accessibility for a sufficient number of people, improved access to information, online opportunities for political expression and political action. Nevertheless, studies have indicated that Facebook is more powerful than traditional media [17]. Facebook provides a similar and advanced features in terms of exposure to information but has the additional benefits and advantages of global reach, better quality and greater speed and also an interactive medium of online political discussion. With these features, Facebook shows a significant role in the formation of political knowledge [18]. Additionally, youth today get their political information from Facebook rather than the legacy traditional media. Facebook may likely motivating online political participation through the access to information particularly among youth in Nigeria.

2.3 Interactivity with politicians

Interactivity is one of the important features of online participation which encourage users to interact with both content and sender of the message [19]. Studies that are mobilization-oriented concentrates on the idea of e- democracy which translate to an interactive online environment where youth for instance can inform themselves about topical political issues and at the same time correspond with political representatives. Facebook provides a great opportunity to politicians to reach out to their constituents and voters. The technology also link and facilitates interaction between community and elected political representatives by providing a public online 'Wall' a space where community members can easily write comments in favour or against their political leaders [20].

While social media in general and Facebook in particular provides important opportunities for youth to interact with politicians and various stockholders, youth can become friends and initiate other linkages with politicians in representatives bodies, government officials and prominent community leaders through Facebook [21]. Consequently, youth 'friendship' and interaction with those important political figures are likely to be vital source of political information and viewpoint. Therefore, these politicians may have the tendencies of mobilizing and influencing youth to participate in online political activities [22].

2.4 Facebook information quality

Studies have reveals that people use a particular channel of communication because of both external and internal factors for instance, the strength and quality of the information, the

credibility of source of the information, easy accessibility and understanding of the information, its timeliness, the organization and arrangement of the information and also the completeness and reliability of the information [23]. Similarly, individual personal purpose or intention of having good and reliable information can motivate people to select and use a specific media, therefore this can help in ascertain and justifying Facebook information quality as a motivating factor for youth unparticular for using Facebook for online political participation.

Clearly, what motivate youth to use Facebook is their ability to interact with friends and share quality and accurate information with people. Correa, Hinsley, and de Zúñiga [24], emphasized that the higher the speed and quality of information is and the higher possibility to be politically engaged with other issues and people. This translates that the content of information speed and its authenticity, will determine its acceptability and applicability to people who are already active and could eventually influence people opinions and views. Similarly, Young and Quan-Haase [25] argued that the nature and quality of information is positively related to the large amount of information an individual receive which may satisfy his communication need and propel the person to act or react.

One of the reasons why youth engage in Facebook is motivated by their political information needs and information quality is a significant predictor for online interaction [26], which may also increase information sharing since online communities lack face-to-face interaction Nevertheless, quality of information makes communication easier, clear and understandable. Youth quest for political knowledge and information make them so inquisitive to find out how and where to obtain the right and accurate information.

2.5 Political interest

Superficially, there is a large consensus among scholars that among all other predictors, political interests have a strong influence in terms of motivation to participate in politics. This statement has a synergy with the work of [27] they supported this assertion by emphasizing that political interest is an attitude that provide a stable and sustainable outcome in politics because it often tells whether an individual may be politically active or passive. Therefore, it may be correct to say that Facebook users promote political interest and influence friends in their network are likely to participate in online politics. Additionally, Vissers et.al [28] corroborated that opportunities for political participation are more likely to manifest if the level of political interest among youth specifically is high.

It will also be correct to advance the discussion that political interest is a necessary condition of participation as it measures youth's online political participation. Political interest is significant in political participation because it provide the motivation to get political information, skill or knowledge which is relevant in assessing political alternatives. Consequently, Facebook is now the alternative platform of political expression and political interest appears to be a significant antecedent and predictor of online political participation among youth [29-30]. Facebook political activities such as reading and posting political opinions, interacting with politicians on Facebook, and discussing politics with friends on Facebook groups may likely influence interest and knowledge about positive social and political issues, later facilitating participation in other online political activities [31]. This leads to the following hypotheses:

- **Hypothesis 1:** *Level of Facebook use positively influence the level of online political participation among youth.*
- **Hypothesis 2:** *Level of interaction with politicians positively influence the level of online political participation among youth.*

- **Hypothesis 3:** *Information quality positively influence the level of online political participation among youth.*
- **Hypothesis 4:** *Level of political interest positively influence the level of online political participation among youth*

3. Method

In this section, data gathering procedures, respondents and measurement of variables are presented. However, this study involves youth of Bauchi metropolis in Nigeria.

3.1 Respondents

Respondents in this research are the youth comprising both males and females; in Bauchi metropolitan area aged between 18 to 35 years old as recommended by the UNESCO definition of youth. The choice of youth as the focus population is based on the fact that these age groups often are using Facebook for political activities [28]. In Nigeria, youth have been in the frontline of struggle for independence and democracy; they also contribute and ensure good governance as well as demand for credible leadership in the country [32]. Similarly, Bauchi Metropolis has the characteristic of urban area with a high population, high level of development and awareness of politics. Approximately, 70.25% are males between the ages of 18- 22. The majority of the respondents holds Diploma certificate (51.1%).

3.2 Measurement Instrument

The measurement of online political participation in this paper relied primarily on items adapted from the work of Jung, Kim and Gil de Zuniga [33]. This instrument consist of political activities that youth carry out on Facebook such as sending or receiving political information on Facebook. The instrument used to measure Facebook Use includes items adapted from Ellison et al., [34]. This instrument consists of items that describe youth feelings and connection to Facebook. Interactivity with politicians was measured with the item scale adapted from the work Lee and Cho [35]. The items described how Facebook help youth with the opportunity to interact with pelicans and generate feedback from them. Information Quality was adapted from the work of Lim, [36] to measure the quality, speed and accuracy of information on Facebook. While Political Interest was adapted from the work of Whiteley, [37] to measure what motivate youth want to participate in politics online. Thus, each item was measured using 5-point Likert Scale.

Prior to the actual study, we conducted pre-test study among the youth in Nigeria. The pre-test conducted sought to determine the degree of reliability, trustworthiness, dependability of the measurement used in this study. Result of the pre-test shows Cronbach's alpha for online political participation was .824, Facebook use was .859, Interactivity was .863, Information quality was .891, and Political interest Cronbach's alpha was .883 respectively. Before testing the hypotheses, data underwent tests for normality which was conducted for each of the survey items. Tests for normality include kurtosis measures, skewness measures, and visual inspection of histograms. The majority of items appear to be within normality, and analysis indicates normal-shaped histograms.

4. Results

Data was analyzed by using multiple regressions to test the relationship between Facebook use, interactivity with politicians, information quality, political interest and online political participation among youth in Nigeria. Multiple regression technique was chosen because it allows researchers in social science to deal with complexity in human behaviours as adopted in previous studies [38-39]. The central idea of the multiple regression method is that it is used to test the relationship between a dependent variable and two or more independent variables. Thus, by applying a multiple regression technique we can also determine specific independent variables that have a major influence on a dependent variable. The hypotheses deal with the relationship between Facebook use and online political participation among youth respondents. Thus, a positive relationship was predicted in the hypotheses. Results of the multiple regression analysis suggest that there is a significant positive relationship between Facebook use, quality information, political interest and online political participation among youth ($r = .293, p < .005$) while there was no significant relationship between interaction with politicians and youth online political participation. Therefore, the results suggest that there is a direct relationship between Facebook use, quality information, political interest and online political participation. Specifically, it indicates that political interest has the highest correlation with online political participation.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Correlations and Reliability of Variables

	Variables	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1.	Online Political Participation.	.701	3.7806	.6730	1.000				
2.	Facebook Use	.827	4.2367	.5783	.293*	.394**	1.000		
3.	Interactivity with Politicians	.789	4.0582	.6594	.427**	.495**	.404**	1.000	
4.	Information Quality.	.725	3.6364	.6110	.378**	.396**	.346**	.496**	1.000
5.	Political Interest.	.776	4.1042	.6119	.492**	.412**	.336**	.505**	.455**

Significance * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 2. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.548 ^a	.301	.293	.56587	1.930

a. Predictors: (Constant), PI, FU, PQ, IF

b. Dependent Variable: ON

Table 3. ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	50.503	4	12.626	39.429	.000 ^b

Residual	117.518	367	.320		
Total	168.021	371			

- a. Dependent Variable: ON
- b. Predictors: (Constant), PI, FU, PQ, IF

Table 4. Summary of Multiple Regression for Online Political Participation

	Expected sign	β	<i>t</i> -statistics	<i>P</i> -value
Intercept		.759	2.876	.004
<i>Independent variables</i>				
Facebook use	+	.083	1.462	.004**
Interactivity with politicians	+	.179	3.172	.145
Information quality	+	.131	2.245	.002**
Political interest	+	.357	2.182	.025**
Adjusted R ²			.293	
F-statistics (<i>df</i> 4, 367)			39.429	.000**
Durbin-Watson			1.93	
N			372	

Notes: ** significant at 0.05 (1-tailed), respectively; *Dependent variables* = ON, Online political participation; *Independent variables* = FU, Facebook use; IF, Interactivity with Politicians; IQ, information quality; PI, Political interest.

The overall pattern of results indicates a significant relationship between online political participation and Facebook use. Results shows that Facebook use, quality information and political interest are significant predictors for online political participation $\beta = .759$, *t*-statistics = 2.876 $p < .05$ and $R^2 = .293$. These results provide support for past research Vissers and Stolle, (2014), Ksiazek, Peer and Lessard, (2014), Carlisle and Patton, (2013), as well as provide support for the current hypothesis. Table 2 indicates that for Facebook use *t*-statistics = 1.462, $\beta = .083$, *p*-value = .004, $p < .05$, Information quality *t*-statistics = 2.245, $\beta = .131$, *p*-value = .002, $p < .05$, political interest *t*-statistics = 2.182, $\beta = .357$, *p*-value = .025, $p > .05$. Thus, political interest has significant impact on online youth political participation.

5. Discussion

This study suggests that Facebook use, quality information and political interest play an important role in influencing youth online political participation. As can be seen in Table 4, Facebook use, quality information and political interest, show a significant relationship with online political participation. This finding demonstrates an important aspect of political interest on youth online political participation in Nigeria. Thus, for government, politicians or political party to take a meaningful decision or formulate policy in Nigeria, all components of online political participation (Facebook use, information quality, and political interest) must be given a priority in terms of budget allocation and policy implementation. This is because they play a significant role in influencing and perhaps in determining youth online participation. Thus, government, political stakeholders' especially political parties and candidates in Nigeria should focus more on what motivates youth to

have an online political interest so as to address youth political apathy in order to increase their participation. Based on the analysis and outcome of the results, the following model of online political participation was developed.

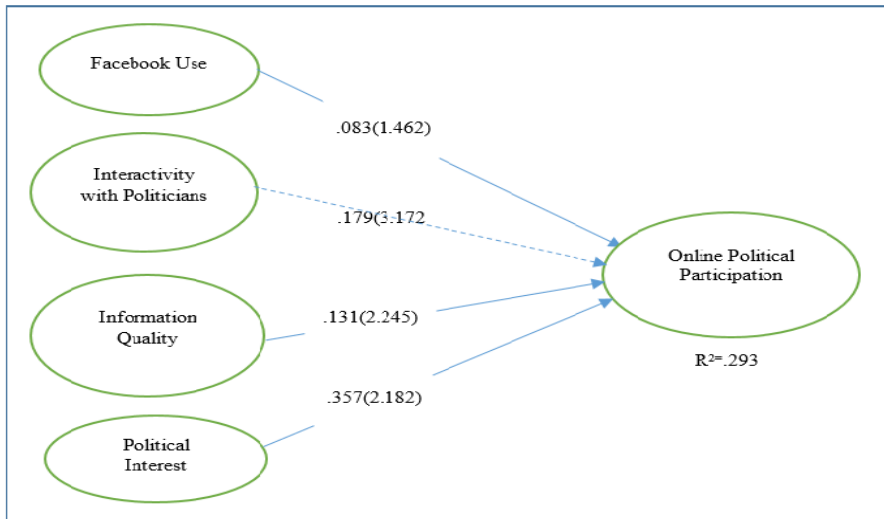


Fig. 1. Model for Online Political Participation

6. Conclusion

To this end, it is imperative to state that online political participation amongst youth is largely dependent on the use of Facebook because more youth are often showcasing stronger reliance on it as their online platform for securing political information they need to make an informed political decision. Hence, targeting and tailoring political messages online to the youth through Facebook and what motivate youth to develop an interest in politics should be an important factor in future campaign strategies. As youth continues to become increasingly dependent on Facebook to keep up with the demands of their socio-political lifestyle and civic engagement, it can be assumed that youth will continue to rely on online forms of social interaction.

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