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Influence of social media on Abuja Youths behavior in 2019 general elections: A study of twitter

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Abstract

This study “Influence of Social Media on Abuja Youths Voting Behaviour in 2019 General Elections: a study of Twitter” was conducted to ascertain how Twitter can be engaged as a platform for influencing voting behavior particularly on youths in the city of Abuja. Anchored on Technology Determinism theory. The survey research design was adopted with online questionnaire as instrument for data collection, on a sample size of 100 respondents. Findings from the study revealed that ‘Twitter’ as a social media platform play a vital role in influencing youths, the study also found out that ‘Twitter’, was effective in enhancing voters behavior. Based on the findings the study concludes that Twitter which is one of the most common social media platform especially among youths, play crucial role in influencing voters behavior to some extent, despite the challenge of it being banned by the Federal Government lately. Thus the study recommends that more political parties should be encouraged to have a noticeable presence on the internet. Also the Federal Government should intensify its ICT drive in education and other sectors of the country as the reach of the social media surpasses that of any traditional media.

Keywords: Influence, social media, voting behaviour, elections

Introduction

Over the years, the empowering growth of the internet and technology has exposed majority of the Global population to different interactive platforms. The emergence of the internet as the new medium of the 21st century now changes the mass medium substantially and this has made everything towards the digital era which has therefore created a pathway for the use of social media. Social media is considered to be a new information network using a form of communication utilizing interactive and user-produced content. Social media has grown tremendously and has been recognized widely for various purposes as they capture more attention and traffic on their sites.

According to Ayankoyacalitz and culten (2015), the social media concept involves the use of internet based application and services for communication, collaboration and exchange of contents by individuals and groups. This suggest that social media offers the public a chance to express their opinions on social-economic and political factors that affects many people within a society. From the forgoing context as stated, social media has made the world a “global village” with the quick transfer of information overriding the challenges of time and distance (Friedman, 2007). It provides a space for the audience to participate even in political matters such as voting and public agitation.

Elections are one of the most popular issues in the social agenda. Through political discussions, people learn about political attitudes and behavioural intentions that are present in their social environment. In line with this, those who perceive a supportive atmosphere for political participation are likely to engage in political activities (Glasford, 2008; Glynn *et al.*, 2009). Voting behavior is a form of political behavior exhibited by electorates which can be influenced by a lot of factors ranging from emotional, religion and even ethnicity, leading them to make certain decisions.

The social media has become a powerful medium which may affect voting behavior because of its potential to provide direct and cheap access to the production and consumption of current information at any part of the world without editorial filtering (Sunstein, 2001). Several empirical researches on the voting behavior of both adults and the youth demonstrate the pivotal role of information, motivation, and behavioral skills to voting behavior (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, Glasford, 2008).

Scholars contend that youth who are well informed about polity have a greater number of resources and skills more likely to vote.

To this, not only do social media provide information about political affiliations, candidates and their part manifestoes, it also provides a platform through which voters can relate and interact with themselves on issues about the candidates. Nearly every political party in the country use social media to campaign and advance its plans to supporters. This study therefore investigates the Influence of Social Media on Abuja Youths Voting Behaviour in the 2019 General Elections: a study of Twitter.

Statement of the Problem

Social media plays a very important role in today's contemporary world as it is growing rapidly and moving everything towards the digital era.

This study emphasis is on social media and how it has influenced the voting behavior of youths. Although the Social media has helped in increasing the popularity of their candidate or parties, it has the capacity to make or mar their chances and voters perception. Social media can be used by various parties to propagate false news, rumors and propaganda about individual candidates or parties and such information on the internet spread extremely faster than expected and often leads to disastrous outcomes.

This has a huge influence on voter's behaviour, as most voters who read stories online have a tendency to believe such stories without cross checking facts and so their decisions is based on such news.

This study therefore aims to look at the influence of social media on the voting behaviour of youths in the 2019 General Elections: a study of Twitter.

Objective of the Study

The aim of this study is to determine the influence of social media on voter's behavior among Abuja youths in the 2019 General Elections. The specific objective of the study includes:

- To find out if social media influences voter's behavior in Abuja.
- To determine the influence social media has on voter behaviour among Abuja youths.

Conceptual Clarification

Social Media

The concept of "social media" has attracted so many definitions from different disciplines. In a lay man's explanation, it may simply connote "within group interactive communication". According to Suomen Toivo-Think Tank (2012), social media are new information network and information technology using a form of interactive communication skills, where users produce the content of information and interpersonal relationships are established and maintained in the process. A typical social media services could be content sharing, web communities, or an internet forum. Typical examples of social media include; Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WeChat, MySpace, snap chat, Google+, WhatsApp, and many more.

Social media is an online tool and utility that allows communication of information, online participation and collaboration and on the media, the users are not passive like in the case of television, radio and magazine; rather they are active in the formation and exchange of information

Adedeji (2015) in (Sweetser and Laricsy, 2008). Social media literacy is important because it provides an opportunity for increased confidence in becoming an active citizen in the society.

Social media are media for interaction as a superset beyond social communication. It is ubiquitously accessible, and enables by scalable communication techniques. It allows for exchange of ideas and opinions, quickly and easily with just a click. The media is a body that users would find attractive and even hard to do without.

Voting Behavior

The study of voting behavior began in the late eighteenth century (Jensen 1969), although most of the very early work does not meet strict scholarly standards.

Voting behavior is a form of electoral behavior. It is a term that explains why voters take decision to vote a party/candidate and vote for or against and this determines the voting pattern of electorate and it is often influenced by voter's loyalty.

Rice (1928, p. p.vii) stated: "The phenomena of politics are functions of group life. The study of group life per se is a task of sociology." In general terms, despite variations in emphasis between different approaches, the sociological study of voting behavior is concerned with the way individuals obtain, select, and process information related to the political arena; the various forces that shape this process; the relevance individuals attribute to the political sphere; and how they decide to participate in or refrain from specific political actions. Elections provide a convenient focus, a point where the often elusive and latent processing of political information manifests behavioral correlates such as voting or abstaining and supporting one candidate or the other.

Literature Review

Social Media and Voting Behaviour

The internet is the new mass medium that affects many aspects of everyday life. At inception, social media was regarded by professionals as a mere social platform where people meet to socialize. Today social media is that and more. Social media platforms like twitter have become a notable venue for people to try to convince their friends to vote.

The internet could affect voting behavior because of its potential to provide direct and cheap access to the consumption and dissemination of information. Not only do social media provide information about political affiliation, candidates and their party manifestoes, it also provides a platform through which voters across cultural divides can relate and interact with themselves on issues about these candidates.

With the advent of the social media; twitter, face book, Instagram among others which has contributed largely to the success of electioneering process in the world. The media helps in performing her surveillance function and mobilizing the electorates to taking informed decisions on parties and candidates with whom to support or cast their votes. (Anderson *et al.*, 2017:69-70) ^[3].

According to Anderson *et al.*, (2017:70) ^[3] information and communication technologies appear to resuscitate hope for social and political change in Africa and, indeed ICTs have been at the Centre of the democratic project in many countries.

Voting and Voting Behaviour

Voting is the main form of political participation in liberal democratic societies and the study of voting behavior is a highly specialized sub-field within political science. The analysis of voting pattern invariably focuses on the determinants of why people vote as they do and how they arrive at the decision they make.

Voting is one of the stages in the election process. It is an indication of a choice or opinion as to a matter on which one has a particular right to be consulted. It is the franchise of citizens to support or against a particular person, view, programme or policy.

Voting according to Collins English dictionary is the action or process of indicating choice, opinion or will on a question such as the choosing of a candidate, by some recognized means such as a ballot. In all states, voting is free and voluntary; no one can be compelled to vote. It is also a crime to try to stop another person from voting. Voting is private, no one can see how another person votes and a person may vote only ones in an election.

Voting behavior on the other hand is the way that different people tend to vote. The notion of voting behavior implies the study of voter's preference, alternative, programmes, ideology, etc., on which elections are fought. Among other things, voting behavior helps to arrive to a decision which official are chosen to run our governments. It is rather a complex and multifaceted subject.

Twitter and Voting Behaviour

Twitter's relevance in politics can be seen in its ability to make the politician connect with the electorate through text, audio or video without any gatekeeping interference. Candidates and their campaigns can gauge reactions to their messages in real time. Voters can easily share their standpoint while politicians can track and respond to voters evolving views in the course of the campaign (Kpako, 2016) According to the latest statistics from www. Twitter is estimated to have about a quarter of a billion active users globally. These numbers continue to grow at an astronomical rate daily as more people get to know the benefits of social media.

Twitter helps voters understand political issues as they emerge. Voters use the Twitter platform via the internet to read political news, share political knowledge through information exchange and obtain responses that enable them situate their participation in politics. Twitter is not new to presidential electioneering campaign around the world.

Writers (Palser, 2007; Darly, 2008; Pal & Gonawela, 2017) confirms that twitter is a source of political news as it provides new opportunities for unmediated dialogue between candidates and voters, and when the ensuing messages are accepted by these voter's they offer a powerful form of endorsement. The result is that voter's access to information increases, leading to "a revitalized democracy, characterized by a more active informed citizenry" (Levin 2003, p. 82).

Role of Twitter in Voting Behaviour

The gradual switch from traditional media to social media is something that must be taken into account by all political campaigns because if taken advantage of, social media opens up the possibility for politicians to structure their campaign to address constituents with different beliefs on a more personal basis Tumasjan *et al.* (2011).

(Wallsten, 2007: woolley *et al.* 2010) found out in his study that young people tend to get political information from social media more than any other age group. It is becoming clear that online tools play a significant role in shaping public opinion and setting political agenda.

The more the public relies on Twitter as not only necessary lines of communication, but as rewarding parts of the communicative campaign, the more value and influence twitter will have aside from campaigning. Politicians have found social media useful for connecting with their constituency.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Technology Determinism Theory.

Technological Determinism Theory

Technological determinism theory was coined by a Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhanin (1948). The theory presumes that a society's technology drives the development of its social structure and cultural values (Asemah, 2011).

The theory posits that media technologies shape how we as individuals in a society think, feel, act and how society operates as we move from one technological age to another. The medium determines the content of communication. The medium also has power to manipulate our perception of the world.

Scholars like Asemah (2011) and Maggai (2016) argues that the technological determinism theory regards the wider dimension of information craze in the society as a direct result of the information explosion fostered by Information and Communication Technologies. It believes that the social, historical, economic and cultural changes occurring in human society today could be linked to the invention and development of new technologies. These technologies emphasize - new media and social media in particular are turning the world into an interactive forum, allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends, share personal information as well as publish their own views on issues on the internet.

The relevance of technological determinism theory to this study is understandable on the basis that media technology shapes how individuals think and act; it also draws attention to the strength of communication technologies in fostering human interactions and thus can be engaged in influencing voting behavior.

Methodology

The study utilized the survey method using questionnaire to solicit responses from eligible youths resident in the Federal capital territory (FCT), Abuja and have Twitter accounts. With a sample size of 100 respondents drawn from the population of 3,464,000 as at 2021 a 5.67% increase from 2020.

The purposive sampling technique otherwise known as judgmental sampling was used for this study. Ohaja (2003) averred that purposive sampling is used when a researcher needs certain characteristics in his sampling elements and he wants to ensure that those chosen have those characteristics.

Data Presentation

The data presentation is based on the data obtained from the questionnaire administered.

Table 1: Devices utilized for accessing Twitter

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
Laptop computer	0	0
Mobile phone	98	98
Tablet	2	2
Total	100	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Data in table 1 shows the distribution of devices that respondents use to access their twitter accounts. A total of 98 respondents representing (98%) affirmed to use their mobile phones to access their twitter accounts, 2 respondents representing (2%) affirmed to use their tablets, while 0 respondents representing (0%) affirmed to use their laptop computer. This implies that majority of Twitter users use their mobile phones to access their accounts as ascertained by the 98 representing (98%) of the entire respondents.

Table 2: Major source of information on participation in voting

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
Television	34	34
Newspaper/ magazine	2	2
Twitter	64	64
Total	100	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Data in Table 2 shows the major source of information on participation in voting. About 34 respondents (34%) stated television was their primary source, while 2 respondents (2%) reported newspaper/magazine as their source and another 64 respondents (64%) declared that Twitter was their source of information. This means that majority get their information on participating in voting from Twitter as affirmed by 64 respondents (64%).

Table 3: Distribution of respondents exposure to voters registration exercise messages on Twitter

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes, I have	68	68
No, I haven't	17	17
I can't recall	15	15
Total	100	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Data in Table 3 shows respondents response to a question posed to them asking if they saw any message on twitter asking them to participate in voters registration exercise. A very large number (68, representing 68%) responded in the positive confirming that they indeed saw messages of such, only 17 respondents (17%) reported not seeing such message while 15 respondents (15%) cannot recall if they did or not.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents' response to calls to participate in voters' registration exercise

Responses	Frequency	Percentage%
Yes i did	59	59
No ididnt	41	41
Total	100	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Data Table 4 shows the respondents response to the question given to them asking them if they registered to vote. 59 respondents (59%) responded that they registered to vote while the other 41 respondents (41%) responded that they did not.

Table 5: Sociological factors that influence voters' behavior

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Income	10	10
Occupation	10	10
Education	10	10
Gender	10	10
Age	20	20
Religion	10	10
Ethnic background	10	10
Geography	10	10
Family	10	10
Total	100	100

Source: Field Survey, 2021

The data contained in Table 5 shows the responses of respondents to factors that influence their behaviors during voting process. About 10 respondents representing 10% of the total population of the study affirms that they are influence the income flow, 10 respondents representing 10% of the total population says they are influenced through occupational group, some affirmed that they are influenced by gender peer, some said through age group and social media interaction, some said religion, others said through ethnic background, and another segment of people said through geographical environment, while the remaining 10 percent said they are influenced through family members. To sum it up, this implies that a great numbers of the audience which falls under the youth age are influenced to vote through social interaction and age group.

Discussion of Findings

The study sought to find out if social media influences voters behaviour in the 2019 General Elections in Abuja. In response to this objective, to a very mild extent, twitter as a social media platform has an influence on some youths. The study also sought to determine the influence social media has on Abuja youths voters behavior. In response to this objective, data evidences indicated that most of the people are influenced positively. In the same wise, the study found that our understanding of the factors that influence voting appears to be largely unaffected by the misreporting phenomenon. The study also made valid findings that voters are influenced by sociological factors such as income, occupation, education, gender, age, religion, ethnic background, geography, and family. These factors are somewhat triggered by social activists.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study concludes that 'Twitter', which is one of the most common social media platform especially among youths, play crucial role in influencing behavior in the 2019 General Elections and therefore serves as an effective means for influencing voters behaviour particularly in Abuja Nigeria. Furthermore, Twitter provides a dynamic ground to influence voters' behaviour to some extent despite the challenge of it being banned by the federal government lately. The study thus recommends that:

1. More political parties should be encouraged by Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to have a noticeable presence on the internet. A situation where only one or two political parties have a near monopoly of online presence does not augur well for the country's Democracy.

2. The federal government should intensify its ICT drive in the education and other sectors of the country. The more people have easy access to the information superhighway, the more enlightened and empowered they become. The reach of the social media surpasses that of any of the traditional media and is quite popular among the youth.

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