



E-ISSN: 2708-4469
P-ISSN: 2708-4450
IJAMCJ 2021; 2(2): 32-36
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www.masscomjournal.com
Received: 15-05-2021
Accepted: 22-06-2021

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Activism in the era of the social media: a study of the use of social media by young people in AMUO ODUFIN LGA, Lagos State Nigeria

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Abstract

Social Media is everything in this age and time. It is no longer that “sophisticated toy” created for the pleasure of the younger generation. Institutions of learning, financial institutions, governments, and every serious organisation now has a social media presence. It has not just brought everybody together in a global village, it has equally given everybody a voice and provided a platform for a lot of vibrant young men and women who would have never had the opportunity to air their views anywhere else. But in the midst of all these is a particular concern which is if the social media translates its online impact on activism offline as well. Findings showed that it does. It doesn't only give a voice to the voiceless, it not only mobilizes like minds online, it persuades them to act offline. Questionnaires served as primary source of data for this study while scholarly articles and books relevant to the study served as secondary source of data.

Keywords: Activism, era, global village, social media, issues, users, young people

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, there has been activism, people always found the need to demand for a change or improvement or total abolition of whatever they feel is against the common good.

From the barricade at the Paris Commune of 1871, to the Aba women's riot in Eastern Nigeria of 1929, to the march in Washington DC for Jobs and Freedom during the civil rights movement in 1963, to the women's liberation march in Washington DC in 1970. There has always been activism and there will be activism in years to come. But it is evolving, taking the shape of each era it meets, following the modes of engagement prevalent in whichever time it finds itself. This is the era of the social media.

The social media which is made up of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, YouTube, Wechat and many others is often used in activism because of its interactive nature and wide spread adoption. Kessler (2010) ^[5], states that “platforms like Facebook and Twitter can reach a much larger audience than traditional media. Although often, only a small percentage of people who express interest in a cause commit to offline action.”

The social media took advantage of the power of the internet, its wide reach and speed and in the blink of an eye, it destroyed distance, destroyed time and the universe was united into a global village and dragged everyone into it with no exception, thereby bringing the “Global Village” prophesy of Professor Marshall McLuhan to fulfilment.

With this exceptional unity in shrinking of time and space, activism was emboldened. It created an avenue through which everybody could air their views with no fear of victimization. Since then, many activists have been raised while the already existing ones have become more equipped to continue their struggle.

From the Tunisian revolution in the year 2010, to the Egyptian revolution of 2011, to the Libyan revolution in 2011, to the Tent Protest in Israel in 2011, to Occupy Wall Street protest in 2011, to the uprising that led to the removal of Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe by the military in 2017, to the Black Lives Matter protests in America that started in 2013, to the Hong Kung protests in 2019, to the EndSars protests in Nigeria in 2020. The social media has been instrumental in both the start of these agitations to the mobilization of the masses and the protests that was the end result.

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The social media gave everyone a voice and to crown it all, these agitations arrive at the table of the authorities against whom the agitation is channelled towards with no gatekeeper able to control or diffuse the message.

It gave everyone a kind of protection which has led to many, especially African governments to continually agitate for its control. But, advocates of “a free internet” believes that the anonymity of social media users provides their expression great protection and gave a voice to those who would have been silenced.

This was well documented by Reuters (2013). It captured the opinion of Victor Damaso, a Brazilian protester who stated that “social media has helped organise us without having leaders, demonstrating on the streets of Sao Paulo’s main Paulista Avenue on Thursday night. Our ideas, our demands are discussed on Facebook, there are no meetings, no rules.”

According to Ghobadi and Stewart (2015) ^[4], “dominant elites or those challenged by social media activism have tried to push back by filtering the internet, blocking specific websites and decreasing the connection speeds.”

Governments across the world such as Nigeria, China, Venezuela, North Korea and many more have tried to curtail the social media through various ways.

According to Beina, Xiu and Eleanor (2017) ^[1], “the Chinese government engages in social media censorship in the name of national harmony.” While Boynton (2011) ^[2], states that “In North Korea, the State curtails virtually all forms of digital communication, but a few transnational citizen journalists have used technologies like cell phones and thumb drives to communicate accurate news to citizens.”

Dissenting Views

Many have argued that social media activism is all but noise and no action because people are not motivated by messages on the screen of a computer or smart phone which may endanger their lives.

Furthermore, Glen (2015) ^[3], states that “although social media activism is a form of activism, it is not a form of high risk activism, but more, a form of organisation through communication.” Critics believe that it is not strong enough to be considered as an agent of change, while many relegated it to just a powerful tool of communication used to connect like-minded population.

These critics points at the EndSars protests in Nigeria, Black lives matter protests in United States of America, and the Occupy Wall Street protest as examples of activism that were ignited and organised by the social media which ended with no verifiable evidence that it succeeded in its quest. They equally argue that social media activism always relied on the support of the traditional media in other to gain reasonable attention and sustain its presence online. This view could be why Valenzuela (2013) ^[10], argues that “social media does not craft new forms of protest but reinforces conventional techniques” while Morozov (2009) ^[9] states that open internet access does not translate into political activism.

Statement of the Problem

Activism in the era of the social media has been of great interest since its inception. It has in no doubt enforced many gigantic changes in many countries and cities, pulled down many strong men and have brought many burning issues to

the attention of those concerned and made significant effort in pressuring them into taking action.

This is not so different from the activism of pre-social media era, in fact many critics have labelled social media activism a noise maker with no ability to enforce its demands. They insist that it doesn’t have the ability to translate its online impact offline because not all who supported an agitation online will have the guts to follow it up offline. But if that is the case, then why have governments, especially governments of developing countries made it their business to ensure that the social media is extremely regulated?

Following the global nature of the social media and the mixed reactions that trail its abilities, it becomes extremely pertinent to examine this phenomenon and find valid answers to these questions begging for answers. This researcher ensured that it was done.

Research Questions

1. How effective has social media activism been in translating its online impact offline?
2. How has the social media aided the popularity of activism?
3. How effective has activism been in the era of the social media?
4. How essential is the role of the social media in activism?

Objectives of the Study

1. To measure how effective social media activism has been in translating its online impact offline.
2. To measure how the social media aid the popularity of activism
3. To measure how effective activism has been in the era of the social media
4. To measure the role of the social media in activism

Significance of the Study

This research will be a very important tool for scholars that shall delve into studies relating to this in the future. They will no longer have to start from the scratch because this study must have done that for them. All that they would then need is to improve on it based on current events at the time.

It will also be very important for countries, States and individuals that may want to understand how social media activism works, its strengths and weaknesses as well as how to put it to good use.

Finally, it is going to be handy for academic institutions that may desire to conduct further research on the topic, and for private individuals that are curious about understanding activism in the era of the social media.

Methodology

This study made use of survey research method. The reason for the adoption is because it helps in collecting standardized information from a specific population and it is a method which provides materials for measurement of public opinion, attitudes and orientations.

This research will make use questionnaires. It is going to be structured in a simple and direct way so that there will be no room for confusion or ambiguity.

Uses and gratification theory propounded by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970’s will serve as

the theoretical framework of this research. It is an approach to understanding why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy specific needs.

Population of the Study

Population in this study refers to all those persons or things that fall under the ambit of this research or that can be examined to address the research problem or meet the research objectives.

The research population for this study consist of young people in Amuwo Odofin Local Government Area, Lagos State who are exposed constantly to social media and those who have witnessed social media activism at least once.

This Local Government which is located in Lagos mainland, according to www.wikipedia.org is made up of over 318,576 people. Among them are young people who have not only witnessed online activism in the past but have participated in it and also are active users of social media. So they fall under the ambit of this research.

Determination of Sample Size

Taro Yamani was used in determining the sample size that was studied.

Formula for Taro Yamani:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = Sample size

N = Research population

I = The constant

E = Error margin (level of significance).

Thus:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{318,576}{1+318,576(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{318,576}{1+318,576 \times 0.0025}$$

$$n = \frac{318,576}{797.44} = 399$$

Total respondents to be sampled = 399.

Sampling Technique

Simple random sampling technique was adopted for this research. It is based on the principle of randomization which is a process of giving every member in a population equal opportunity of being selected.

Method of Data Analysis

Data collected was analysed using simple frequency and percentage method. This is a method that involves presenting raw scores and percentages of respondents who choose a particular response as against the other. The table presentation of data made use of title to indicate the material presented.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Sex Distribution of Respondents

Response category	Distribution	Percentage
Male	240	60.15%
Female	159	39.84%
Total	399	100%

Table 1 above shows that 250 (60.15%) of the respondents were males while 150(39.84%) of the respondents were females.

Table 2: Age Distribution of Respondents

Response category	Distribution	Percentage
18-25	204	51.12%
26-30	195	48.87%
Total	399	100%

Table 2 above indicates that 204(51.12%) of the respondents were 18-25 years, 195(48.87%) of the respondents were between the ages of 26-30.

Table 3: Educational Qualification

Response category	Distribution	Percentage
Graduates	300	75.18%
Secondary School Graduates	90	22.55%
Total	399	100%

Table 3 above shows that 300(75.18%) of the respondents are graduates while 90(22.55%) are secondary school graduates.

Table 4: Do you have a social Media Account?

Response category	Distribution	Percentage
Male	240	60.15%
Female	159	39.84%
Total	399	100%

All the male respondents 240(60.15%) have social media accounts while all the female respondents 159(39.84%) have a social media account.

Table 5: Are you active on social media and have you ever participated in social media activism.

Response category	Distribution	Percentage
Male	240	60.15%
Female	159	39.84%
Total	399	100%

All the male respondents 240(60.15%) said they are active on social media and have participated in social media activism while all the female, 159 (39.84) agreed that they are active on social media and has participated in social media activism.

Table 6: Which of the social media platforms do you make use of.

Response Category	Distribution	Percentage
Twitter	200	50.12%
Facebook	100	25.6%
Whatsapp	80	20.5%
YouTube	19	4.76%
Total	399	100%

200 (50.12%) said that they use Twitter, 100 (25.6%) said that they use Facebook, 80(20.5%) make use of whatsapp while 19(4.76%) make use of YouTube.

Table 7: How effective has social media activism been in translating its online impact offline?

Response Category	Distribution	Percentage
Very Effective	200	50.12%
Effective	81	20.30%
Not so Effective	100	25.06%
Not Effective	18	4.51%
Total	399	100%

200(50.12%) of the respondents believe that social me is very effective in translating its online impact offline,

Table 10: How essential is the role of the social media in activism?

Response Category	Distribution	Percentage
Very Essential	290	72.68%
Essential	80	20.05%
Not so Essential	20	5.01%
Not Essential	9	2.25%
Total	399	100%

290(72.68%) of the respondents agree that the role of the social media in activism is very essential while 80(20.05) said it's essential. But 20(5.01%) said it's not so essential while 9(2.25%) agreed that it is not essential.

Findings

Findings show that activism has gathered an overwhelming support in the era of the social media, more than it did in pre social media era because of the wider reach and ease of use which the new media gave it and its users. This, according to respondents attracted more young people and brought about a kind of universal acceptance of the viability and visibility the social media has given activism in the contemporary time. An overwhelming 370(92.73%) of the respondents are of the same view, only 29 (7.26%) insisted that it did not do much for activism.

Responses from the respondents tilted towards the fact that activism in the era of the social media is more effective than it was before because of the global statues it has conferred on activism and the speed at which the message being canvassed reach the table of those concerned. 250(62.65%) of the respondents agreed that activism has been very effective in the era of the social media with only 9(2.25%) insisting that it has not been effective.

If the findings in this study is anything to go by, it is crystal clear that the social media has been very instrumental in the

189(47.26%) of the respondents says its effective while 10(2.50%) of the respondents said it's not so effective. 0(0%) said it's not effective.

Table 8: How has the social media aided the popularity of activism?

Response Category	Distribution	Percentage
Very Much	370	92.73%
Not Very Much	29	7.26%
Not at all	0	0%
Total	399	100%

370(92.73%) of the respondents believe that the social media has aided the popularity of activism, 29(7.26%) said it did but not very much while 0(0%) said not at all.

Table 9: How effective has activism been in the era of the social media?

Response Category	Distribution	Percentage
Very Effective	250	62.65%
Effective	120	30.07%
Not so Effective	20	5.01%
Not Effective	9	2.25%
Total	399	100%

250(62.65%) agreed that activism in the era of the social media is very effective, 120(30.07%) said its effective, 20(5.01%) said it's not so effective while 9(2.25%) said it's not effective.

revitalisation of activism in the modern era and has played an important role in getting it to the desired destination through the keyboard of a computer system or the screens of a smart phone.

The issue of ascertaining if social media activism has been able to translate its online impact offline was dealt with by the respondents with 200(50.12%) of the respondents stating in the affirmative while 100(25.06%) stood on the fact that it has not been so effective in its translation of online success offline. Only 18(4.51%) said in clear terms that it has not been effective in doing that.

Finally, from the findings above, it is obvious that the social media has greatly improved activism and how it is carried out and has given it reach, more credibility and international acceptance and to an extent, protection from government and critics.

Recommendations

The following recommendations will be useful in improving activism in the era of the social media.

- Online activism must not be allowed to fall into the hands of charlatans who might abuse the privileges it currently enjoy. This could be done by everyone ensuring that he or she investigates any cause he or she might be invited to join before joining.
- Social media must not be allowed by its users to be

used in pursuit of irrelevancies so as to maintain its credibility and viability as a medium for activism.

- When protesting for a just course, activists must ensure that they do not yield to fraudsters who might use the opportunity to hack into unsuspecting victims accounts for motives that are unjust. This could be done by ensuring that no unnecessary links shared in group whatsapps and other platforms is clicked without verifying actually what the link is all about.
- Online protesters must also endeavour to participate offline so as to give credibility to the course they are agitating for.
- Activists who are mostly young people must ensure that they do not get misled by people with bad intentions so that the credibility that has been built through this new media can be sustained.

Conclusion

Studies have shown that activism in the era of the social media is viable and very important. A view that was not shared by dissidents who felt otherwise.

Respondents in the study have proven that online activism is worth the noise and applause it receives with the overwhelming verdicts received in the data collected from them. This is a clear indication that the social media as a vehicle for activism in the contemporary time should not be taken with a wave of the hand because it's a great tool that is still in evolution. If with all these noise and impact and it's still evolving, then we are in for something great.

Finally, if guided properly by parties involved, social media activism will be a tool we will be proud of globally in years to come but if allowed to fall into the control of charlatans, then the world is in for a dangerous ride. So we must all work together especially young people to ensure that this golden tool do not turn to a disappointment by ensuring it remains within our reach and unleashed only for the good of all.

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