Social Media and Political Participation Among Residents of South-East, Nigeria

ANYANWU, B. J. C., *PhD*
Department of Mass Communication
Imo State University, Owerri
&
ORJI, Uchenna Franklin
Department of Mass Communication
Imo State Polytechnic, Umuagwo

Abstract
This study evaluated the influence of social media on political participation among residents of South East, Nigeria. The study was anchored on Technological Determinism theory while the survey research method was adopted. A sample size of 385 was drawn from the population of 21,297,826 using Australian calculator. Multi-stage sampling technique was also used to select the respondents. The findings of the study show that South-East residents' exposure to social media has influenced their participation in political activities positively at 70%. Based on the findings, it was recommended that Government and Non-Governmental Agencies, INEC, politicians and media professionals should persistently use social media as instruments for social change to mobilise and create awareness before, during and after elections. There is also the need for political stakeholders to raise political consciousness among the people in other to strengthen the democratic process via social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, blogs, and YouTube.

Keywords: Politics, Political Awareness, Political Participation, Social Media, Social Media Use

Introduction
Over the years, Nigeria has been ruled mainly by the military with only a brief civilian hiatus during the Second Republic (1979-83). Although, throughout its turbulent political history, Nigerians have been strident in their call and commitment to democracy as the ideal system of government for the country. This is evident, as nearly every military leader has always expressed the will to restore democracy (Konkwo, 2011). However, on May 29, 1999 Nigeria returned to democracy after many years of military rule with a renewed determination not only to deepen democracy, but to promote the culture of rule-keeping, protection of the citizen rights in any part of the world, confront corruption and reform various state institutions for better performance and deliver the citizen's expectation of

democracy (Madueke, 2008).

This current political dispensation is not only a challenge for the consolidation of democracy and democratic governance but also a potential avenue for the country's economic revitalisation. Therefore, the mass media need to play a crucial role in achieving these objectives. Kadiri, Muhammed, & Sulaiman (2015) conclude that the mass media have significant role to play in establishing stability and security as well as a necessary environment for sustainable democracy in Nigeria. The mass media can be useful in building a pleasant atmosphere were growth and development can take place, particularly in the elimination of ignorance which often leads to conflicts, especially in politics.

The media are robust and efficacious instruments at the disposal of politicians, political parties, political activists, policymakers, bureaucrats, non-governmental organisations, volunteers and numerous others for conveying political messages to the electorate and the general public (Aliede & Afam, 2015). This is in line with the submission of Madueke, Nwosu, Ogbonnaya, Anumadu and Okeke (2017) that following the use of social media by Barack Obama during the 2008 US presidential election, many nations and politicians across the globe have continued to embrace the platform to mobilise their citizens and electorate towards active participation in the political activities.

Today, individuals, organisations, groups and even nations are taking advantage of the opportunities that are available on social media and other e-media platforms to mobilise millions of people to support and advance their cause. In the political sphere, the social media have become a comprehensive tool to interact and mobilise citizens towards active involvement in the political process and democratic projects. This mirrors the thoughts of Okoro and Diri (2009) that it is through the media that people can participate freely in discussions relevant to the public good. Politicians appeal to citizens via the social media: this makes them seem more personable and gives them the advantage of staying in constant contact with their followers.

Social media avail many people the chance to partake actively and get involved entirely in the political discourse by including their voices on issues of interest posted on social media sites. Thus, advancing the tenets of participatory democracy that sees media as a platform for debate and aids enormously in actualising public-sphere journalism. It affords the electorate a friendlier avenue of assessing candidates for political offices and promoting transparency in governance (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013). It is to this end that this study seeks to ascertain if the social media play any role in Nigeria's political development in respect to political stability via political participation.

Statement of the Problem

It is believed that social media influence how people experience their political life. These media, comprising Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube, blogs among others are relevant sources of information and education. However, the most potent weapon against political apathy among residents is information. It appears that most residents in South-East seem not to be adequately exposed to social media for awareness on the importance of participating in political activities. It is, therefore, necessary to ascertain the level of knowledge on political activities among residents and whether exposure to social media messages on political participation influences residents' engagement and participation in the political process.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study were to:
1. find out the level of exposure to social media messages among residents of South-East, Nigeria;
2. ascertain the extent to which residents of South-East, Nigeria use the social media political messages;
3. examine the perception of South-East residents on the political messages on social media;
4. find out the influence of social media on the political participation of South-East residents; and
5. identify other factors that influence South-East residents' participation in political activities.

Research Questions

The following research questions, therefore guided this study:
1. What is the level of exposure to social media messages among residents of South-East, Nigeria?
2. To what extent do South-East residents use the social media political messages?
3. What is the perception of South-East residents on the political messages on social media?
4. What influence has the social media on the political participation of South-East residents?
5. What other factors influence South-East residents' participation in political activities?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Social media have and continue to redefine the political landscape around the globe (Ekeanyanwu, 2015). This may have informed Ekeanyanwu and Kalyango (2013, p. 150)'s thinking that social media "could be classified as the ninth Wonder of the world

because such media platforms are becoming increasingly connected, interactive, participatory, integrative, community based, ubiquitous, and digital!" These characteristics of social media make them easily amenable to the political process in any modern democracy.

Political participation includes such activities like political discourse, political campaigns, voter registration, the actual voting, writing and signing of petitions, attending of civil protests, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, political advocacy, monitoring and reporting of case of violation of the electoral process such as frauds, rigging, voter intimidation, violence, monetary inducements, underage voting etc. (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013).

Nwodu and Agbanu (2015, p. 282) observe that "political participation goes beyond involvement or participation in the electoral process; and because of greater awareness; mobilization and better facilities, people are now getting more involved in political activities within and outside their immediate environment". Kur (2005) as cited in Uduodo and Bassey (2011) posits that the practice of democracy usually involves the participation of citizens, directly or indirectly, in public decision making process. The success or failure of any electoral process is heavily dependent on the activities of the mass media in the process. This explains why the society attaches great importance to the mass media coverage or reporting of political issues.

One of the ways of achieving this is through the social media. The emergence of information technologies has in the 21st century, broadened the frontiers of information, knowledge acquisition and political participation and engagement among citizens. The practice of modern democracy and promotion of active citizens via the internet through massive use of the social media has brought about democracy to a more sophisticated level. The political realities in the 21st century require a more robust and actively participatory citizenry in the national polity (Bello & Kolawole-Ismail, 2017).

Social media have become a vital and powerful platform for voter enlightenment, political activism and fastest means of information dissemination. An individual without a social media account appears to be obsolete in the society. In essence, an average smart phone owner cannot do without visiting a social media platform daily. Social media therefore, can be used effectively to target particular voters, encourage people to exercise their franchise and to make information go viral (Paul, 2019). Yahaya (2018) observes that social media have affected political apathy, fostered participation and created a homogenised platform for citizens. Social media as online tools offer communication of information online and make participation and collaboration possible. This is because citizens are not merely consuming information content, but are privileged to become content producers, thereby encouraging participatory democracy which is the hallmark of democracy (Okoro & Tsegyu, 2017).

In corroborating this, Ajajaiye (2014) in a study titled "the impact of social media on citizens' mobilization and participation in Nigeria's 2011 general elections" found that the social media had positively influenced to some extent, on the outcome of the 2011 general elections in Nigeria, considering its usage by various electoral stakeholders.

Similarly, Okoro, and Nwafor (2013), in their study titled "social media and political participation in Nigeria during the 2011 General Elections: The lapses and the lessons", concluded that social media were used for political participation in Nigeria during the 2011 general elections. Also, it was revealed that majority of the respondents used social media wisely to campaign for their various candidates, interact with candidates and the electorates one-on-one, report happenings in their areas/polling centres, share personal views and gauge public opinions on the various candidates whereas others used them to attack opponents, spread false rumours, hate and inciting messages, digitally manipulate images, messages and videos, hack into people's accounts to commit all manner of fraud and launch spam and virus attack on opponents' information, and make users fall prey to online scams that seemed genuine, resulting in several data and identity thefts. The researchers concluded that social media offer participatory democracy at its best; the technology promotes transparency and greater accuracy in the political process; and facilitates speedy release of election results, among others.

In line with this, Ezebuenyi, Ezegwu and Onuigbo (2014) conducted a study on cyber-politics: analysis of new media and political information management interface for electoral participation in Nigeria, and concluded that this emerging trend transcends the old order for bringing political aspirants and electorates into a closer bond without physical contact, leading to a more robust and sophisticated political atmosphere.

In the same vein, Dagona, Karick and Abubakar (2013) in a study on "youth participation in social media and political attitudes in Nigeria" revealed that the there is positive significant relationship between Facebook usage and political participation among the youth in Nigeria. However, the finding showed that the rate of Facebook usage did not influence their political participation. Rather, it affords them the opportunity to write and engage in political discourse.

In relation to this, Bello and Kolawole-Ismail (2017) in a study on "social media and political participation in Nigeria: A theoretical perspective" concluded that through social media, citizens have enjoyed a good degree of political participation, which has impacted positively on political leadership, political policies and political culture. The integration of social media in politics and democratisation process has resulted into a healthy political participation especially among the youths.

In the same vein, Mustapha, Gbonegun and Mustapha (2016) studied "social use, social capital and political participation among Nigerian University students". It was found that social media enhanced the social capital and political participation of the youths,

particularly during the period of national elections. Similarly, Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) examined "social media as a political platform in Nigeria: A focus on electorate's in South-East Nigeria" and concluded that the political campaigns through the new media had significant effect on the electorate's decision-making and participation in Nigeria elections.

This study was anchored on the Technological Determinism theory. The theory was propounded by Marshall McLuhan (1964), a Canadian communication scholar, who observed that the new media technologies in communication would soon determine social and cultural changes and end up turning the world into a global village. He believed that the socio-political, economic and cultural changes are inevitably based on development and diffusion of technology. McLuhan argued that technology undoubtedly causes specific changes on how people think, how society is structured and the form of culture created.

In his attempt to further explain McLuhan's Technological Determinism theory, Ekeanyanwu (2009, p. 132) argues that:

> McLuhan, in his analysis of technological determinism theory, believes that all social, economic, political and cultural changes are innately based on the development and diffusion of technology. In essence, this theory regards our present cultural challenges to be a direct result of the information explosion fostered by television, the computer and the Internet. This theory, therefore, suggests that the historical, economic, and cultural changes in the world are traceable to the invention, development and diffusion of ICTs.

This theory portends that, given the emergence of the internet and its adoption and relevance in mobilising people for political activities, there is bound to be an impact on the electoral process and overall political environment. According to the arguments of this theory, media technology shapes how we as individuals in a society think, feel, act, and how our society operates as we move from one technological age to another (Tribal-Literate-Print-Electronic-ICT) (Morah, 2012). In essence, most societies have evolved from tribal societies to literate, print, electronic and now we are in the ICT Age or society. Some scholars like Ekeanyanwu (2015) have successfully argued that we even in the Social Media Age, smartly separately this New Age from the ICT Age (See Ekeanyanwu, 2015).

The basic idea behind this theory is that changes in the way humans communicate are what shape our existence. This theory tries to explain that individuals have left the Print Age for the New Age which has brought about digital communication. Modern technology has made communication easier and this has brought a lot of innovations in the society. Technology has brought about changes in the society and the way we behave is affected by technology. These changes have also reflected on how information on political activities are gathered and processed among the electorates, including the South-East residents.

Today social media have offered most political stakeholders and the electorates in South-East an ample opportunity to engage in political discussions, debates, awareness

creation, mobilisations and decisions which appear to enhance political participation in the long run. This is because what we read, listen and or even view on social media especially about political activities directly or indirectly shape and mould the thoughts, attitudes and behaviours of South-East residents either positively or negatively towards their potential engagement or participation in political activities.

Research Method

The survey research method was apt and suitable for this study considering the fact that the opinions, views, feelings and thoughts of residents of South-East residents were sought for concerning social media and political participation in the South-East part of Nigeria. It also gives the researcher the leverage to study a valid sample from the total population of the study and generalisation for the entire population through data generated from the sample.

A survey is a type of quantitative approach in research where participants are asked to answer certain questions to generate numerical data which are analysed to determine a pattern (Ojiakor, 2017). Survey was carried out in some selected wards in the selected South-East States of Nigeria. The projected population of South-East using the UNDP's population extrapolation index of 2.28% per annum was used to reach the population figure of 21,297,826. By this calculation, 385 was determined to be the basic sample size using Australian online calculator formula.

Multi-stage sampling technique was used to select three States and the eventual respondents that were administered the copies of the questionnaire. At the first stage of the sampling process, three states out of the five South-East States were selected using the simple random sampling technique. The States selected were Abia, Anambra and Imo. At the second stage, one Local Government Area (LGA) was purposively selected for this study. The idea of using purposive sampling was to make sure only LGAs within the capital cities were selected because of the character of the investigation that requires persons with some kind of active exposure to social media platforms. Based on this argument, Aba South, Onitsha North and Owerri Municipal LGAs were selected for Abia, Anambra and Imo States respectively.

At the third stage of the selection process, four Wards were selected from each of the three States also using the purposive sampling technique based on our earlier argument. The selected LGAs and Wards are: **For Aba South**: Enyimba, Asa, Ekeoha, Aba River; **Onitsha North**: Inland Town I, Inland Town V, Inland Town VIII, and Trans Nkisi; and **Owerri Municipal**: Aladinma I, Azuzi II GRA, Ikenegbu I and New Owerri II.

At the fourth stage of the multi-sampling process, non-proportionate sampling was used in the allocation of 32 copies of the questionnaire to each selected Ward while purposive and availability sampling techniques were considered in the selection of the actual respondents who were administered the questionnaire.

A structured questionnaire was used for data collection. A face validity test was done on the instrument and the outcome was good. The data obtained were analysed in percentage and presented using frequency distribution tables.

Results and Discussion

A total of 385 copies of the questionnaire were printed and distributed to the selected respondents. Out of the 385 copies of the questionnaire that were administered only three hundred and fifty-four (354) copies were found usable. Table 1 below shows the return rate of the questionnaire.

Table 1: Return rate of questionnaire		
Incidence	**Freq**	**%**
Return and found usable	354	92
Not usable	10	2.6
Not Returned	21	5.4
Total	**385**	**100**

Table 1 above shows that 92% of the copies of questionnaire were returned and found usable while the rest were either unusable or not returned at all. The return rate is higher than invalid rate. The invalid rate does not affect the study, because it is inconsequential compared to the returned rate of 92%. Thus, the copies were considered adequate enough to represent the population.

As part of our attempt to determine the demographic variables of the respondents, Table 2 below shows that 38% of the respondents were single another 34% were married. It was also revealed that millennia's (that is, those within the age bracket of 18-28 years and 29-39 years) had a combined percentage of 69 and use social media more than the older persons. More so, the table reveals that only 18.36% held qualification at the level of primary six and 81.64% held qualifications above the primary school certificate and therefore the respondents were capable of understanding messages about social media and political participation among women. The table also reveals that students (29%) had more access to social media than people in other occupations. However, the statistics revealed that irrespective of the occupation, there is considerable use of social media among the respondents.

Table 2: Demographics of the respondents

Variables	Freq	%
Marital status		
Single	136	38
Married	119	34
Divorced	48	14
Widowed	51	14
Total	**354**	**100**
Age of respondent (years)		
18-28	144	41
29-39	101	28
40-50	87	25
51 and above	22	6
Total	**354**	**100**
Academic qualification		
Primary/Equivalent	65	18
SSCE/Equivalent	128	36
NCE/Diploma	88	25
Graduate/Equivalent	73	21
Total	**354**	**100**
Occupation		
Students	104	29
Workers	95	27
Traders	72	20
Farmers	30	9
Unemployed	53	15
Total	**354**	**100**

Research Question 1: What is the level of exposure to social media messages among residents of South- East, Nigeria?

In the attempt to answer Research Question 1, Tables 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 were relied upon for data.

Table 3: Respondents ownership of media gadget

Response	Freq	%
Phones	211	60
iPad	99	28
Laptop	12	3
Palmtop	22	6
None	11	3
Total	**354**	**100**

According to Table 3 above, phones are the mostly owned gadget of the various media gadgets' listed. A combined percentage of 97% had phones, iPad, Laptop, Palmtop, while 3% of the respondents were without media gadget. It means that majority of the respondents at 60% had phones as their media gadget. This result shows that phones have become the commonly used media gadget among residents of South-East, Nigeria. This is also the first step in accessing the internet and owning a social media account. We also noted that the phones were basically smart phones. This was a basic assumption when we explained to them about owning a phone.

Table 4: Respondents' access to internet

Response	Freq	%
Yes	315	89
No	39	11
Total	**354**	**100**

With regards to access to the internet, majority of the respondents (89%) had access to internet facilities. It implies that most of the media gadgets, especially the phones, are connected to the internet. See Table 4 above for the details.

Table 5: Respondents' social media account

Response	Freq	%
Yes	298	84
No	56	16
Total	**354**	**100**

On the issue of how many of the respondents have a social media account, Table 5 above shows that majority of the respondents (84%) had social media accounts while another 34% as indicated in Table 6 below shows that the respondents were to a large extent exposed to social media sites or platforms, where they also receive political messages.

Table 6: Respondents' extent of exposure to social media sites for Political Messages

Response	Freq	%
Large extent	151	34
Moderate	107	30
Low extent	46	13
Can‟t say	50	14
Total	**354**	**100**

On the issue of which particular social media they mostly prefer, 34% said Facebook and 30% said WhatsApp. These details are presented in Table 7 below. In essence, we can conclude on the basis of the data presented in Tables 3 to 7 that South-East residents are

exposed to social media and social media political messages. Further analysis will follow on the Discussion section.

Table 7: Respondents' view on which social media sites they use mostly

Response	Freq	%
Facebook	151	34
WhatsApp	107	30
Blog	46	13
YouTube	18	5
Can‟t say	32	9
Total	**354**	**100**

Research Question 2: To what extent do South-East residents use the social media political messages?
In an attempt to answer Research Question 2, Tables 8, 9, and 10 were relied upon for data. Table 8 shows that majority (36% + 34%) of the respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed that social media cover political activities while Table 9 also shows that a good majority (29% + 41%) of the respondents Strongly Agreed or Agreed they access political messages on social media. Table 10 summarises the views of the respondents on how much time they spent accessing political messages/information on social media.

Table 8: Respondents' view on whether social media cover political activities

Response	Freq	%
Strongly Agree	126	36
Agree	119	34
Not sure	64	18
Disagree	30	8
Strongly Disagree	15	4
Total	**354**	**100**

Table 9: Respondents' view on whether they use social media to read messages concerning political development

Response	Freq	%
Strongly Agree	102	29
Agree	145	41
Not sure	77	22
Disagree	19	5
Strongly Disagree	11	3
Total	**354**	**100**

Table 10: Respondents' extent of browsing social media messages concerning political participation

Response	Freq	%
Below 1hr	86	24
2-3hrs	119	34
4-5hrs	91	26
6hrs and above	31	9
Can"t say	27	7
Total	**354**	**100**

Research Question 3: What is the perception of South-East residents on the political messages on social media?

To answer Research Question 3, data from Table 11 were used. Table 11 below shows that, at various degrees, social media encourage political participation, persuade people to register and collect their PVCs, give information on which political party and candidate to support in an election, and most significantly, they give opportunities for people to express their views on political discussion or subjects.

Table 11: Respondents' view on how they perceive social media political messages

Response	Freq	%
They encourage political participation	79	22
Give opportunities for people to express their view on political discussion and debate	166	47
Persuade people to register and collect their PVCs	64	18
Give information on which political party and candidate to support in an election	30	9
Can"t say	15	4
Total	**354**	**100**

Research Question 4: What influence has the social media on the political participation of South-East residents?

The data as presented in Tables 12 and 13 below were used to answer Research Question 4. Table 12 shows that majority of the respondents (29% + 41%) Strongly Agreed or Agreed that social media messages influence their participation in political activities while Table 12 also shows that another majority (22% + 47%) Strongly Agreed or Agreed that social media have increased their participation in the political process.

Table 12: Respondents' view on whether social media messages influence their participation in political activities

Response	Freq	%
Strongly Agree	102	29
Agree	145	41
Not sure	77	22
Disagree	19	5
Strongly disagree	11	3
Total	**354**	**100**

Table 13: Respondents' view on whether social media have increased their participation in political process

Response	Freq	%
Strongly Agree	79	22
Agree	166	47
Not sure	64	18
Disagree	30	9
Strongly Disagree	15	4
Total	**354**	**100**

Research Question 5: What other factors influence South-East residents' participation in political activities?

To answer Research Question 5, data from Table 14 were used. The data as analysed show that majority of the respondents (41% + 34%) claimed that friends, relatives and opinion leaders were other factors of influence in making them participate in political activities. This implies that these unconventional media or channels of communication are equally viable avenues of promoting political participation among the residents of South-East.

Table 14: Respondents view on other factors that influence their participation in the political activities

Response	Freq	%
Friends/relatives	146	41
Opinion leaders	121	34
Political rallies	55	16
Social groups	22	6
Can"t say	10	3
Total	**354**	**100**

Discussion
The Level of Exposure to Social Media Messages Among Residents of South-East, Nigeria

The findings indicate that 43% of the respondents get access to social media to a large extent; 89% representing majority of the respondents' had access to internet facilities while 84% of the respondents had social media accounts. These figures are suggestive of the fact that South-East residents, like most other residents in any cosmopolitan or modern city have also got the internet and social bug. This conclusion finds supports in Ekeanyanwu (2015). It is therefore unimaginable to see any modern city that is yet to penetrate the internet and be on social media for the virtual community culture it offers.

With the benefit of hindsight from engaging in this investigation, we could reach the conclusion that most South-East residents that own media gadgets especially, the smartphones, do actually have access to internet facilities and use such phones and access to the internet to create social media accounts, which eventually allows them to engage in online or virtual interactions. This point out to the fact that cell phones are not only being used for calls among residents' in South-East but for online interactions. It also implies that social have been adopted by many as sources of information for all kinds of issues including politics.

The interactive nature of social media platforms has made them interesting and appetising for people to interface on various issues. This could be as result of the uniqueness of social media in allowing the people to freely ventilate their views without fear and at no direct cost to them. This opportunity would never have been possible through the mainstream media. The popularity of social media in our contemporary society is so glaring that an individual without social media account seems to be obsolete or better, living in a different realm. Thus, a good number of politicians and political stakeholders have made an in-road into using social media for political activities.

This conclusion is supported by the theoretical framework used for this study. The basic idea behind this theory is that changes in the way humans communicate are what shapes our existence. This theory tries to explain that individuals have left the print age for the new ear which has brought about the current effort at digital communication. Modern technology has also made communication easier and this has brought a lot of innovations in the society. Technology has also brought about changes in the society and the way we behave is also affected by technology. This has reflected in how information are gathered and processed among citizens.

This finding therefore, supports the earlier submission by Okoro *et al* (2013) that social media were used for political participation in Nigeria during the 2011 general elections. This, according to them, is because the use of social media as a formidable force for social engineering and political electioneering has continued to grow as a result of the participatory, interactive and cost-effective nature of the technology. This has also made it

the medium of the moment as far as political communication and participation are concerned (Okoro *et al*, 2013). Similarly, Ezebuenyi *et al* (2015) noted that these digital objects that include interactivity (social media platforms) facilitate easy mobilising of the electorate and could be used in ensuring free, fair and credible elections in Nigeria.

Extent to Which Residents of South-East, Nigeria Use Political Messages on Social Media

Data gathered and analysed in this study show that 70% or majority of the respondents 'use social media to read messages concerning political participation; 34% also agreed that the extent to which they browse social media messages on political participation is between 2-3hours daily; 91% of the respondents use Facebook, WhatsApp, Blogs and YouTube channels as social media sites; while another 70% or majority believe that social media cover political activities. These figures imply that South-East residents access political messages through the above-mentioned social media platforms.

Considering the fact that social media cover or report political activities (See Ekeanyanwu & Kalyango, 2013; Ekeanyanwu, 2015), it then means that residents of South-East, Nigeria do have access to social media political messages. This will go a long way in broadening their knowledge about political developments in their communities, States, the nation and the world in general.

This conclusion is supported by a recent study conducted by Paul (2019). He noted that an individual without a social media account appears to be obsolete in the society. This is because an average smartphone owner cannot do without visiting a social media platform daily. Social media therefore, can be used effectively to target particular voters, encourage people to exercise their franchise and to make controversial political information go viral. According to Okoro *et al* (2013), stakeholders in the electoral process use social media wisely to campaign for their various candidates, interact with candidates and electorates one-on-one, report happenings in their areas/polling centres, share personal views, and gauge public opinions on the various candidates during the 2011 General Elections in Nigeria.

The Perception of South-East Residents On the Political Messages Shared On Social Media Networks

The data gathered and analysed in this study show that 96% or huge majority of the respondents believe that social media encourage political participation; give them opportunities to express their views on political discussions and debates; persuade them to register and collect their PVCs; give them information on which political party or candidate to support in an election; and aid them make the right or at least, informed political decision.

The implication of this conclusion is that social media are vital in accelerating and

enhancing political discussions, debates, mobilisations and decisions of Government and the electorate. Social media has also become the avenue to raise the political consciousness of the people on matters that are related to political development in the country with the intent of persuading them convincingly to be supportive of government policies and programmes as well as to make the right political call. The political apathy witnessed over the years has been reduced drastically as people now fully participate in political activities especially during 2019 electioneering period were they electorate registered and collected their PVCs as well as voted for candidates of their choice. This implies that social media if prudently utilised can encourage the respondents to exercise their franchise during the electoral process. It also means that social media portend to have contributed positively in shaping the political future of the nation.

This finding is in tandem with an earlier study conducted by Dagona, Karick and Abubakar (2013), which argued that social media afforded the citizens the opportunity to write and engage in political discourse. Similarly, Okoro, *et al* (2013), in their study found that social media offer participatory democracy at its best, that the technology promotes transparency and greater accuracy in the political process, and that the platform facilities speedy release of election results, among others. In agreement with this finding, Paul (2019) concludes that social media when carefully utilised can be used effectively to target particular voters, encourage people to exercise their franchise, make the right or informed political call, and to make controversial political information go viral.

Influence of Social Media On the Political Participation of South-East Residents
Data gathered and analysed in this paper indicate that majority of the respondents or 70% Strongly Agreed and Agreed respectively that exposure to social media messages influence their participation in political activities while 69% Strongly Agreed and Agreed that exposure to social media messages has increased their participation in the political process.

These conclusions imply that the political successes recorded in our democratic process could be attributed to the level of political awareness created by the social media. Again, exposure to social media messages on political activities has tremendously reduced political apathy in the South-East geo-political zone to the barest minimal as well as fostered political participation among the people. The positive change in the political behaviour and attitudes of most South-East residents towards political activities could be said to have been induced via exposure to social media political messages. This no doubt must have rekindled and re-awakened the political consciousness of the people in diverse ways like political activism, PVCs registration and collection, voting for candidates, belonging to political parties, among others. It means that the use of social media had inadvertently encouraged citizens' participation in politics.

In relation to this, Ajajaiye (2014) in an earlier study found that the social media had positively influenced the outcome of the 2011 general elections in Nigeria, considering its usage by various electoral stakeholders. Ezebuenyi *et al* (2015) also concluded that this emerging trend transcends the old order for bringing political aspirants and electorate into a closer bond without physical contact, leading to a more robust and sophisticated political atmosphere and discourse.

In agreement with this finding, Mustapha, Gbonegun and Mustapha (2016) concluded that social media enhanced the social capital and political participation, particularly during the period of national elections. Similarly, Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) revealed that the political campaigns through the new media had significant effect on the electorate's decision-making and participation in Nigeria elections. In corroborating this, Bello and Kolawole-Ismail (2017) concluded that integration of social media in politics and the democratisation process has led to a healthy political participation especially among the youths who are mostly social media users.

Factors that Influence South-East Residents Participation in Political Activities

This particular aspect of the data gathered and analysed show that friends, relatives, opinion leaders, political rallies, and social groups have enormous influence on the South-East residents' participation in the political process. In essence, this result simply means that friends/relatives, opinion leaders, social groups, and political rallies are the major factors that influence South-East residents' participation in political activities.

The implication of this particular finding is that these unconventional channels of interaction are also influential in creating awareness and mobilising the electorate to participate in the political process. This is because opinion leaders, friends/relatives, social groups and political rallies tend to be effective ways of mobilising people for political participation based on the fact that they reach out to all and sundry irrespective of whether one owns a cell phone and social media account or not. This means that there is a synergy between the social media and unconventional channels especially in grass-root political mobilisation. It also implies that opinion leaders, friends/relatives, social groups and political rallies play complementary roles in influencing South-East residents' participation in political activities.

Conclusion

The advent of new technologies has been felt in the political lives of South-East residents, as this has provided room or avenues for the residents to share their ideas on the political process, using media gadgets like cell phones, IPads, laptops, palmtops among others. It is believed that people with these modern gadgets that have internet connectivity use them to create social media accounts that allow them to interact online.

Social media like other media of communication play significant roles in encouraging, educating, persuading, and mobilising the citizens to participate fully in their nation's political process by providing them with adequate political information to make the participation engaging. It means that the constant reportage of the political developments in the country and the constant exposure to these messages significantly influenced residents' participation in political activities which in the long run could bring about political stability. However, it is important to note, that outside the social media, relative, friends, opinion leaders, social groups and political parties are all vital avenues for the dissemination of political information that could influence citizens' participation in the political process.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

First, the Federal Government of Nigeria and the other major political stakeholders should make social media gadgets and facilities available and affordable for the people, as they have become major channels of information, especially political information for the public. This is because social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Blogs, Twitter and YouTube channels have come to stay as media of communication and as such, they are saddled with responsibility of informing, educating, entertaining, persuading and mobilising the people on issues that concern them.

Second, special social media accounts should be created for people to freely and openly express their view on political discussions and debates, as this would help in satisfying the information needs and desire of most social media users who spend much of their time in perusing issues concerning the day to day political activities within their locality.

Third, Governments at all levels in Nigeria, Non-Governmental Agencies, INEC, politicians and media professionals should persistently use social media as instruments for social change to mobilise and create awareness before, during and after elections. Their media content should be tailored in such a way that they will encourage political participation among the people.

Fourth, to influence the participation, especially of youths in the political process, there is need for political stakeholders to raise political consciousness among the people in other to strengthen the democratic process via social media platforms. Also politicians and candidates standing for an election should use social media during their electioneering campaigns to mobilise for votes and support.

Fifth, there is need to encourage the use of bottom-top approach like opinion leaders, social groups, friends, and relatives who are more educated and knowledgeable about politicking to inform the citizens on the need to participate in the political process of their nation.

Finally, we also think major political stakeholders and Governments at all the levels in the electoral process should go beyond the social media to use other unconventional channels of communication in their efforts to make sure no one is left behind in the political process. It is our conviction that when majority of the qualified electorates or citizens participate freely in the electoral process, the chances of making grave political errors or decisions are eliminated or at least, reduced. It could also lead to making the right political calls, which ultimately leads to electing the right kind of leadership that will turn the fortunes of the nation around.

References

Abubakar, A. A. (2011). Political participation and discourse in social media during the 2011 presidential electioneering. Paper presented at the ACCE Annual National Conference held at Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria from September 20-23, 2011.

Ajajaiye, A. (2014). The impact of social media on citizens' mobilization and participation in Nigeria's 2011 general elections. Retrieved on 10/10/2017 from *googleweblight.com/?/u=http://www.uniloring.edu. nglejournals/index/php/cp/article/views/971&grid/=8LDMES&hi=en-NG*.

Aliede, J. E. & Afam, S. K. (2015). Mass media, political communication and entrenchment of participatory democratic culture in Nigeria. In J. E. Aliede (Eds.) *Studies in communication, mass media and society-discourses and debates (135-148)*. Ikeja: Public Relations Mix.

Bello, S. & Kolawole-Ismail, B. (2017). Social media and political participation in Nigeria: A theoretical perspective. *Ebonyi State University Journal of Mass Communication,* 4(1), 149-164.

Chinedu-Okeke, C.F. & Obi, I. (2016). Social media as a political platform in Nigeria: A focus on electorate in South-East Nigeria. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science,* 21(11), 6-22.

Dogona, Z. K., Karick, H., & Abubakar, F.M. (2013). Youth participation in social media and political attitudes in Nigeria. *Journal of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology in Practice,* 5(1), 1-7.

Ekeanyanwu, N. T. (2015). *International Communication.* (Third Edition). Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers.

Ekeanyanwu, N. T. (2009). Indigenous Cultures in the Era of Globalization: A Case Against Cultural Imperialism Theory. *Communicare: Journal for Communication Sciences in Southern Africa,* 28(1), 126-143.

Ekeanyanwu, N. T. and Kalyango, Y. (2013). Rethinking International News Flow in the Era of Social Media. *The Nigerian Journal of Communication*, 11(1), 139-164.

Ezebuenyi, E. E., Ezegwu, D. T., & Onuigbo, U. U. (2014). Cyber-politics: analysis of new media and political information management interface for electoral participation in Nigeria. *COOU Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 1(1), 47-56.

Kadiri, K. K., Muhammed, A.Y. & Sulaiman, A. A. (2015). Mass media for sustainable democracy and development in Nigeria. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa,* 17(2), 52-61.

Konkwo, D. E. J. (2011). *Issues in broadcasting*: *The Nigerian experience*. Owerri: Unique Books.

Madueke, O., Nwosu, C., Ogbonnaya, C., Anumadu, A. & Okeke, V.O.S. (2017). The role of social media in enhancing political participation in Nigeria. *International Digital Organisation for Scientific Research Journal of Arts and Management,* 2(3), 44-54.

Morah, D. N. (2012). Webs O. and Nigerian press: Opportunities on facebook and twitter. *Journal of Communication and Media Research,* 4(1), 153-167.

Mustapha, L. K., Gbonegun, V. O., & Mustapha, M. L. (2016). Social media use, social capital and political participation among Nigeria university students. *Tripods, numero*, 39, 127-143.

Nwodu, L.C. & Agbanu V. N. (2015). Social media and political transformation in Africa: Bridging the rural-urban information gap? In F.K. Obiora, and S.E. Udeze (Eds). *Emerging Trends in Gender, Health, Political Communication in Africa (279-304).* Enugu: Rhyce Kerex Publishers.

Okoro, N. & Nwafor, K. A. (2013). Social media and political participation in Nigeria during the 2011 general elections. The lapses and the lessons. *Global Journal of Arts. Humanities and Social Sciences,* 1(3), 29-46.

Okoro, N. & Tsegyu, S. (2017). An appraisal of the utilisation of social media for political communication in the 2011 Nigeria presidential election. *African Research Review,* 11(1), 115-135.

Okoro, N. & Diri, C. (2009). Public sphere and civic journalism: A fulcrum for effective political communication in Nigeria. *Journal of Political Economy,* 3(1&2), 296-312.

Ojiakor, I. C. (2017). Responsiveness of Anambra State civil servants to exclusive breastfeeding campaign. *International Journal of Mass Media and Telecommunications,* 1(1), 40-57.

Paul, A.T. (2019). The role of social media in voter sensitisation in Nigeria. *American Journal of Computer Science and Information Technology,* 7(1), 1-3.

Udoudo, A. & Bassey, E. B. (2011). Reporting political campaigns in Nigeria: A study of news coverage of ACN rally in Uyo by the Pioneer and the Sensor Newspapers. *Journal of Communication and Media Research,* 3(1), 41-53.

Yahaya, Y. (2018). The nexus between social media expressions, political participation and nation building in Nigeria's fourth republic. *International Journal of Research and Innovations in Social Sciences,* 11(12), 23-32.