

Citizens' Perception and Interest in Democratic Practices: Evaluation of the X Platform

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Abstract

The study investigates the use of social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter) and the political participation of Youths of Rivers State. The central objective of the study was to ascertain the influence of X on the voting decisions of Youths in Rivers State. A sample size of 400 was used; Chohen and Manion's formula and cluster-sampling technique was used to select the sample size of the study. The data collected was analyzed using frequency distribution, percentages and mean scores. Findings from the study showed that majority of the respondents were between the ages of 18 to 40 years. The findings also reveal that X is a platform for political debates, an avenue for the free expression of divergent views and the rare opportunity to quiz political actors. Social media platforms such as X have become an important source of information for Nigerian youngsters who want to get active in politics or learn more about the country's political activities. The study recommends that political parties, political candidates and government agencies should create a robust and effective social media presence especially on X to accelerate political participation especially of the youthful demographic and put in place policies to reduce the spread of fake news especially in democratic processes during elections.

Keywords: Engagement, Influence, Political Participation, Political Parties, X Platform, Youths

Introduction

Citizens' perception and interest in democratic practices and political participation are crucial to democratic governance (Dalton, 2017). While this is true for all democracies, it carries greater consequence for young democracies such as Nigeria. This is due to the facts that political involvement, knowledge, and engagement not only ensure the health of democracies but also enhance the legitimacy of popular rule in developing democracies. A fundamental tenet of democracy, political engagement includes both active and passive participation by citizens in the decision-making processes that affect their daily lives. Such involvement manifests in an array of activities performed by the citizens of a country with the primary purpose of influencing the structures, policies, and/or programs of government (Castertrione & Pieczka, 2018).

According to Madueke, Nwosu, Ogbonnaya, Anumadu and Okeke (2017), they promote greater political engagement between the populace and the government; increasing political awareness and gathering political ideas, facts, and attitudes regarding any issue that are crucial tasks for the media, especially social media. The media has a tremendous impact on society and is essential in shaping how the public views topics. The media serve many purposes to shape public opinion in various ways. The main objective of the media is to keep the public informed with the most recent news and information; therefore, need news for a variety of social and decision-making activities. The Microblogging platform X is one of the most frequently used social medium in contemporary times. The platform previously known as Twitter and was founded by Jack Dorsey in 2006. With the acquisition of the Microblogging site by American Billionaire, Elon Musk in October 2022, the medium was renamed X on July 23, 2023 and the blue bird logo was replaced with a stylized 'X'. The platform allows users to share short messages referred to as "tweets" with their followers and usually displayed on the Timeline of followers. Tweets can be up to 280 characters long and users may include text, images, videos, and links to other contents on the World Wide Web. Users can follow other Twitter users to see their tweets in their timelines, and they interact with tweets by liking, retweeting, and replying to them. Individuals, businesses, and organizations have used X to share information, promote ideas, products or services, and engage with followers and non-followers.

In Nigeria, social Media platforms have been used to mobilize young people and promote political participation. During the last general elections, one of the most used social media platform, X, was a major platform for political awareness and discussions among candidates, supporters, and the public. One social media platform that has gained traction as a tool for political communication and election campaigns among Nigerian youths, who constitute a significant proportion of the population is social media platform X; usage is high, and it is possible that the platform can be harnessed to increase election awareness and political participation. In Nigeria, the youth population constitutes a significant percentage of the electorate, with about 60% of the population below the age of 30 (World Bank, 2021). X is also widely used by Nigerian youth, making it a potential tool for election awareness and participation. In many countries, including Nigeria, young people are increasingly turning to social media particularly X to discuss political issues and participate in political campaigns. It appears that the proficiency and frequency of use of social media for political discourse and engagements does not ultimately translate to actual physical voting on election. The question then is: do young people engaged in political discourse on social media do so just to gain political knowledge, voice their opinions on political issues and not necessarily to gain enough information to participate in the voting process. Although social media platforms like X has become important channel for political communication and election campaigns, its impact on election awareness and participation amongst Nigerian youth remains underexplored.

Literature Review

Social Media and Politics

Social media is a crucial aspect in shaping political growth, alongside socioeconomic position and family considerations. It has a significant impact on the creation of environmental conditions, especially in relation to norms about the private and public realm (Swigger, 2013). The prevalent tendencies observed on these platforms have the potential to exert influence on young people, particularly in relation to political developments. Social media plays a crucial role in the civic development of young individuals. The platform offers several chances for the development and consumption of media, allowing young people from all backgrounds to actively participate in social and political matters (Belle Booth, 2021). This provides young adults with the opportunity to freely express their opinions on various matters and engage in meaningful discussions. The proliferation of fake news has increased in recent years as social media platforms have become prominent news sources. These platforms allow people to create and share material without substantial third-party screening, fact-checking, or editorial oversight (Schleffer, 2021). In general, the widespread use of social media has facilitated the prominence of politics as a highly debated subject across all platforms, owing to the ease with which political information can be disseminated.

Youth, Social Media and Politics

Social media has a vital role in influencing political development, in addition to factors such as socioeconomic status and family dynamics. It greatly influences the establishment of environmental circumstances, particularly with standards for the private and public domain (Swigger, 2013). The dominant trends identified on these platforms have the capacity to exert effect on young individuals, especially on political advancements. Social media is essential for the civic development of young folks. The platform provides several opportunities for the creation and consumption of media, enabling young individuals from diverse backgrounds to actively engage in social and political affairs (Belle, 2021). This platform offers young adults the chance to openly articulate their viewpoints on diverse subjects and participate in significant dialogues. This illustrates that young individuals possess a higher ability to spread political misinformation because

there are less barriers involved, which may lead them to adopt incorrect opinions. The prevalence of false information has escalated in recent years due to the prominence of social media platforms as sources of news. These platforms facilitate the creation and dissemination of content without significant scrutiny from external parties, verification of facts, or editorial supervision (Schleffer, 2021). Overall, the extensive utilization of social media has enabled politics to become a widely discussed topic on several platforms, thanks to the convenient and rapid dissemination of political information.

Empirical review

Akindutire and Aribisala (2023) undertook a study entitled the influence of twitter on youths' participation in 2023 election in nigeria. The study sought to find out the impact of twitter on youth willingness to participate in the Nigerian electioneering process and also to examine the degree to which Twitter influenced youths' decision to support a candidate. It was anchored on the Technological determinism theory and using the survey research design, the study obtained data using the questionnaire. Findings from the study indicated that Twitter, which is common among Nigerians, is an important platform where users get updates about politics, politicians and political parties. Twitter was effective in supporting and influencing the candidates of their choice, with a significant number of respondents depending on Twitter for election updates in Nigeria. Findings also revealed that respondents believed that Twitter was able to persuade and appeal to them to support a candidate during the election period. The nexus between this study and the present study is established within the remit of both examining a social medium and the participation of a youthful demographic in the political process. Segesten and Bossetta (2016) undertook a study entitled a typology of political participation online: How citizens used twitter to mobilize during the 2015 British general elections. This study investigated how and to what extent citizens use twitter as a platform for political mobilization in an electoral context. Deploying content analysis as a research design, results from the study showed that citizens – not political parties – were the primary initiators and sharers of political calls for action leading up to the election. Citizens predominantly expressed political calls for action through Twitter's hashtag feature.

Methodology

The study adopted the survey research design. This is because descriptive survey method is primarily concerned with the collection and analysis of data for the purpose of describing, evaluating or comparing current or prevailing practices, event and occurrences to collect data especially from a large population that cannot be observed directly. The population comprised youths of different age brackets and disciplines currently residing in Port Harcourt Local Government Area. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, there are about 3,435,223 youths in Rivers State (NBC 2006). The projected population of youths in Rivers State therefore would be based on the annual growth rate 2.41% (World Bank data). This would mean that the number of years since the last census given at 17 years.

$$\frac{2.41\%}{100} \times \frac{3,435,223}{1} = 82,788.8743$$

From 2006 to 2023 = 17 years; thus, 82,788.8743 x 17 = 1,407,410.8631

Census population @ 2006 = 3,435,223 + 1,407,410.8631 = 4,842,633

The projected population is therefore = 4,842,633

The sample size of 425 respondents was extracted from the population based on the sampling system of Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2007) at 95% confidence level. The template recommends that the sample size for a population of over 1,000,000 (one million) at 95% confidence level and +5% error margins is 400. The cluster sampling technique was used to

demarcate clusters where respondents were drawn in different parts of the Local Government Area. In achieving the objectives of the study, a structured questionnaire was generated and distributed, of which 400 responses were gotten which formed the sample size of the study. Percentages and Likert type scale was used to analyze data and the results was presented in tables.

Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Age Distribution

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18 – 20	95	24%
21 – 25	231	57.8%
26 -40	73	18.3%

Source: Authors' Computation

Table 1 shows the age distribution of the respondents. Majority of the respondents (57.8%) fall within the age bracket of 21 – 25 years while 24% are between 15 – 20 years and last about 18.3% are 25 years and above.

Table 2: Influence of X on the Voting Decisions of Rivers State Youth

	Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Total	$\bar{X}$	Remark
1	X is responsible for all the political information I have on politics.	720 (45%)	303 (25.25%)	124 (15.5%)	57 (14.25%)	1204 (100%)	3.01	Accepted
2	Most Youths in Rivers State followed the political conversations on X.	760 (47.5%)	330 (27.5%)	122 (15.25%)	39 (9.75%)	1251 (100%)	3.13	Accepted
3	These conversations on X gave me a better perspective on how I should vote.	764 (47.75%)	324 (27%)	94 (11.75%)	54 (13.5%)	1236 (100%)	3.09	Accepted
4	The Information I got from on X greatly influenced my voting decisions	688 (43%)	303 (25.25%)	140 (17.5%)	67 (16.75%)	1090 (100%)	2.73	Accepted

Source: Authors' Computation

With a Four-point Likert scale, which ranged from strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree with a weighted mean score of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. Data showed an evaluation of influence that X possessed over Rivers State youth, statements 1, 2, 3 and 4 are with weighted mean scores above 2.5, this is indicative of the influence of X on the voting decisions of Rivers State youth.

Table 3: Engagement of Youths in Rivers State in Political Debates on X

	Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Total	$\bar{x}$	Remark
5	X provided me with an opportunity to engage freely in political debates.	644 (40.25%)	330 (27.5%)	136 (17%)	61 (15.25%)	1171 (100%)	2.93	Accepted
6	X created opportunity for divergent views on political issues.	636 (39.75%)	336 (28%)	144 (18%)	57 (14.25%)	1173 (100%)	2.93	Accepted
7	X made it possible to engage one on one with political voters.	644 (40.25%)	300 (25%)	102 (12.75%)	52 (13%)	1098 (100%)	2.75	Accepted
8	I engaged in vigorous debates on X with Political aspirants	652 (40.79%)	363 (30.25%)	126 (15.75%)	53 (13.25%)	1194 (100%)	2.99	Accepted

Source: Authors' Computation

With a Four-point Likert scale, which ranged from strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree with a weighted mean score of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively? Data shows the manner in which youths in Rivers State engage in Political debates on X. Statements 9, 10, 11, and 12 yielded weighted mean scores is 2.5, this is indicative of the manner of engagements in political debates.

Table 4: Challenges Youths in Rivers State Encounter on X

	Statements	SA	A	D	SD	Total	$\bar{x}$	Remark
9	There is the prevalence of false information and hate speech can mare political participation on X.	720 (45%)	303 (25.25%)	124 (15.5%)	57 (14.25%)	1204 (100%)	3.01	Accepted
10	Political participation on x may result in cyber bullying	760 (47.5%)	330 (27.5%)	122 (15.25%)	39 (9.75%)	1251 (100%)	3.13	Accepted
11	X can be used by political parties to foster propaganda.	764 (47.75%)	324 (27%)	94 (11.75%)	54 (13.5%)	1236 (100%)	3.09	Accepted
12	It can be challenging to filter credible political news on X.	648 (40.5%)	303 (25.25%)	140 (17.5%)	67 (16.75%)	1090 (100%)	2.73	Accepted

Source: Authors' Computation

With a four-point Likert scale, this ranged from strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree with a weighted mean score of 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively. Data show the manner in

which Youths in Rivers State engage in Political debates on X. Statements 13, 14, 15, and 16. The yielded weighted mean scores above 2.5, this is indicative of the challenges youth of Rivers State encounter during political participation and engagements on X. Results show that there is the prevalence of false information and hate speech that can mar political participation on X and propaganda.

Discussion of Findings

Research questions that guided the study were found in the introductory part of this paper are hereby addressed based on the data presented above: The Table 4.1 used employed, the finding is indicative of the influence that X as a social media platform has on the political participation of the youths of Rivers State. It indicates that they obtain information about political events via X. They also monitor these chats that are heavily influenced by X. The political involvement of the youth in Rivers is a testament to the growing and evolving use of social media. Social media platforms, particularly platform x, function as a space where individuals engage in discourse about their diverse political ideologies, participate in discussions, and remain informed about the most recent political news and advancements. This component pertains to political engagement and participation. This aligns with the principles of democracy, which states Civic engagement is demonstrated through a variety of activities carried out by the residents of a nation with the main objective of influencing the structures, policies, and/or programs of the government (Castertrione & Pieczka, 2018).

According to Madueke, Nwosu, Ogbonnaya, Anumadu, and Okeke (2017), they promote greater political engagement between the populace and the government. Increasing political awareness and gathering political ideas, facts, and attitudes regarding any issue are crucial tasks for the media, especially social media. It is a potent tool for communication in the developing world, raises awareness of a particular topic, and depicts society as it is in reality. In the knowledge- and awareness-based era, the media now play a bigger role. People use these media, including social media, to obtain information.

The findings from a study by Akindutire and Aribisala (2023) also have a bearing on the above finding. The authors posited that Twitter (now X) was effective in supporting and influencing the candidates of their choice, with a significant number of respondents depending on Twitter for election updates in Nigeria. Findings also revealed that respondents believed that Twitter was able to persuade and appeal to them to support a candidate during the election period.

Table 4 shows how Rivers State use X for political campaign, using a four-point Likert scale, statements 5, 6, 7 and 8 resulted in weighted mean scores above 2.5 and were accepted. This finding gives credence to X as a platform for political debates, an avenue for the free expression of divergent views and the rare opportunity to quiz political actors. Social media platforms such as X have become an important source of information for Nigerian youngsters who want to get active in politics or learn more about the country's political activities. They may readily get news and updates about their candidates and policies on these platforms, as well as engage in debates with other users across the country. It is this openness, connectedness and constant timelessness of this media that promotes political participation through various engagements such as debates. The finding is in concordance with the Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) revealed that social media was highly used by the youths for political participation. Majorly, the youths used social media to participate in political advocacy, political campaigns, communicating with politicians, political discussions, monitoring and reporting electoral malpractices, public consultations, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, blogging about political issues, and writing letters to public officials respectively.

Data on Table 4 reveals that Youth of Rivers State face challenges during political participation on X, these challenges in which there is the prevalence of false information and hate speech can mar political participation on X. This finding is in tangent with Enikolopov, Messing and Adamic, (2020) low gatekeeping and enables of the spread of political information much less effective, allowing new entrants previously sidelined by the political establishment. The propagation of propaganda and false information is prevalent, making it difficult for X participants to news and access credible information. Fake news has gained prevalence in recent years due to the rising role of social media platforms as news outlets, where content can be produced and relayed among users with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment, (Schleffer, 2021). Overall, with the increased usage of social media, politics have been able to become one of the most discussed topics on all platforms, since political information can now be so easily spread. The finding revealed that cyber bullying is encountered by Youths of Rivers State on X, according to Klein and Robison (2020) the increased social media usage may accompany more exposure to political information that only solidifies existing partisan biases, leading to even more polarization between those with differing partisan attitudes. Social media platforms such as X have become an important source of information for Nigerian youngsters who want to get active in politics or learn more about the country's political activities. They may readily get news and updates about their candidates and policies on these platforms, as well as engage in debates with other users across the country. As such, X fostered political participation, voter education and information sharing. As such, X platform that promote participation, openness, and encourages political conversation, debates and connectedness.

Conclusion

The study examines the citizens' perception and interest in democratic practices: evaluation of the x platform. It inferred that X has the capacity to serve as a successful platform for political information and engagement among young people in Rivers State. Nevertheless, the study established that the government policies inappropriate to tackle the issues of cyber bullying and dissemination of false information on the platform, which enable a healthy and safe atmosphere for political speech and engagement on X is of utmost importance. Besides, inadequate rules negated X potential to serve as a potent instrument for the youth in Rivers State, denial citizens to be well-informed about political matters and actively engage in determining the future of their state.

Recommendations

The study has advanced the following recommendations.

1. Political parties, political candidates and government agencies should create a robust and effective social media presence especially on X to accelerate political participation especially of the youthful demographic.
2. The capabilities of social media emphasize the necessity for media literacy, as individuals, including both those in positions of authority and ordinary citizens, must acquire or possess a significant level of proficiency in internet skills in order to reap its advantages and prevent potential negative outcomes resulting from lack of knowledge.
3. The government should put in place policies and programmes targeted at addressing the challenges like spread of false information, hate speech and cyberbullying, encountered by Rivers youths during political participation on the social media X Platform

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