

**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON YOUTH POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA'S 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS :
A STUDY OF STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF BENIN EDO STATE**

BY

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**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE,
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the project work entitled ‘**THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES ON YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA’S 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS :A CASE STUDY OF STUDENTS OF UNIVERSITY OF BENIN EDO STATE.**’ submitted by **ANTHONY OFUMERE ONAGBOMENA** with matriculation number **SSC2105661** to the department of **POLITICAL SCIENCE** in partial fulfillment of **B.Sc. POLITICAL SCIENCE** is a record of an original work done by me.

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CERTIFICATION

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DEDICATION

It is with my warmest regard that I dedicate this research to Almighty God, without who I wouldn't be here. I also dedicate this project with great affection to my parent and siblings, loved ones, friends and all staff of the Department of Political Science, University of Benin.

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I want to express my profound gratitude to God Almighty for his guidance throughout my life and for directing me towards Political Science as my discipline.

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how *social networking sites* (SNS) influenced youth political participation during Nigeria's 2023 general elections, focusing on students at the University of Benin, Edo State. With young people (ages 18–35) forming the largest voting demographic in Nigeria, understanding their digital political engagement is crucial. The research examines how platforms like Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok shaped students' political awareness, expression, and involvement. Using a *mixed-methods* approach, data were collected from 130 survey respondents, 6 interviewees, and 6 focus groups. Quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS (v28.0), while NVivo 12 supported thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's six-phase model. The study is grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, Political Efficacy Theory, and the Digital Engagement Model. Findings show that social networking sites increased political information access, fostered discussions, and mobilized many students to participate, especially online. However, concerns over misinformation, apathy, and distrust in online content were noted. While social media is not a cure-all for youth disengagement, it offers valuable tools for political participation such as democratized access to political information, real-time electoral updates, direct communication channels with political figures, cost-effective engagement platforms, opportunities for grassroots mobilization, spaces for political discourse and debate, voter education resources, and community building among like-minded citizens.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Study

The rise of digital technology, especially social media, has significantly changed how people engage with politics around the world. In Nigeria, this shift has been especially visible among young people, who increasingly rely on social media platforms as key sources of political information and tools for political participation (*Ogbonnaya & Ogujiuba, 2021*).

During the 2023 general elections, this trend came into full view. Nigerian youths were more politically engaged than ever before, using platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok to express their views, share information, and mobilize support (*Ajayi & Ogunidipe, 2022*). These platforms opened up direct access to political content, allowing young people to bypass traditional media and connect directly with candidates, movements, and fellow citizens. Popular hashtags showcased this surge in youth engagement across various social media platforms (*Bamgbose & Adebayo, 2023*).

According to Nigeria's National Youth Policy, young people (ages 18–35) make up about 60% of the country's population (*Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2019*). Although this group has traditionally been seen as politically disengaged often due to factors like unemployment, corruption, and lack of trust in the system, social media is changing that narrative (*Nwokolo & Ajodo-Adebanjoko, 2020*).

The 2023 elections saw millions of young Nigerians, especially students, participating in digital campaigns and political conversations (*Okafor & Nnamdi, 2023*). University students, who tend to be tech-savvy and digitally connected, played a key role in this transformation. The University of Benin (UNIBEN), located in Edo State, with its diverse student body of approximately 40,000, offers a valuable case study of how social media is reshaping political engagement among youth (*University of Benin, 2022*).

These elections were particularly noteworthy as they marked the end of President Buhari's administration and featured a tight race among the flagbearers of All Progressive Congress (APC), People's Democratic Party (PDP), and Labour Party (LP). The "Obidient" movement driven largely by

young, tech-enabled Nigerians gained major traction online and became a symbol of youth-driven political activism (*Chukwu & Igwe, 2023*).

Social media platforms were used for more than just spreading information. They served as tools for voter education, campaign coordination, and real-time election monitoring. Twitter became a hub for debate, WhatsApp enabled grassroots organizing, Instagram and TikTok carried youth-oriented political content, and Facebook remained a key platform for news sharing (*Adebayo & Ogundimu, 2023*).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

While the 2023 general elections in Nigeria saw an impressive surge in social media activity among young people, especially university students, the actual impact of this digital engagement on political participation remains unclear. Social media platforms like Twitter (now X), Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok were buzzing with political conversations and campaigns but how much of this online enthusiasm translated into real-world actions like registering to vote, campaigning, or casting a ballot is still largely unknown (*Ojo & Adebayo, 2022*).

Previous studies have examined related aspects of this phenomenon, but significant gaps remain. *Asemah et al. (2017)* explored social media and political communication in Nigeria broadly, but did not focus specifically on university students or electoral periods. *Nnanyelugo and Nwafor (2013)* analyzed social media's role in Nigeria's 2011 elections, yet their study pre-dated platforms like TikTok and the technological advancements characterizing the 2023 elections. *Ogbonnaya and Ogujiuba (2021)* investigated youth political participation during the 2019 elections but did not capture the unique dynamics of 2023, including the Obidient movement and new electoral technologies like BVAS and IReV.

Internationally, *Boulianne's (2015)* meta-analysis established positive correlations between social media use and political engagement globally, while *Valenzuela et al. (2012)* demonstrated links between Facebook use and offline participation among young people in Chile. However, these studies were conducted in contexts significantly different from Nigeria's socio-political environment and did not account for challenges facing African democracies, such as digital inequality and infrastructure limitations.

This study distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on University of Benin students during Nigeria's 2023 elections, using a mixed-methods approach to bridge the gap between online activity and offline political behavior. Unlike previous research, it systematically investigates platform-specific influences, demographic factors, and the mechanisms through which social media translates into real-world political participation within a Nigerian university context.

There are several issues that highlight this gap:

1. ***Disconnect Between Online and Offline Engagement:*** High levels of online political activity don't necessarily mean higher voter turnout or campaign participation. There's limited empirical data linking digital activism with actual political behavior among students (*Nwachukwu & Okafor, 2021*).
2. ***Information Quality and Misinformation:*** Social media is flooded with political content, but not all of it is trustworthy. The spread of fake news and propaganda may mislead rather than inform young voters, raising concerns about the quality of political engagement (*Ogbodo et al., 2023*).
3. ***Polarization and Echo Chambers:*** While social media can amplify diverse voices, it can also divide. Echo chambers and algorithm-driven content may reinforce biases and deepen political divisions, especially among impressionable youth (*Adebisi & Okonkwo, 2022*).
4. ***Digital Inequality:*** Not all Nigerian youths have equal access to the internet or the digital literacy to navigate social media effectively. These disparities could skew participation patterns and exclude certain groups (*Okoro & Nwankwo, 2023*).
5. ***Platform-Specific Effects:*** Different social media platforms are used in different ways. Some support debate, others are better for organizing or spreading visuals. Yet, little is known about how each platform influences political behavior differently (*Eze & Chukwu, 2022*).
6. ***Lack of Understanding of Youth Motivation:*** It's also unclear why young people engage politically on social media whether it's to get information, express opinions, feel connected, or actually mobilize. Understanding these motivations is key to developing meaningful civic engagement strategies (*Ugwu & Onyechi, 2023*).

1.3 Research Questions

This study aims to bridge the knowledge gap around how social media shaped youth political participation during Nigeria's 2023 general elections, using students of the University of Benin as a case study.

Main Research Question:

How did social media platforms influence political participation among University of Benin students during the 2023 general elections?

Specific Questions:

1. How did factors like age, gender, academic level, or socioeconomic background affect this relationship?
2. How did University of Benin students use social media for political purposes during the elections?
3. In what ways did social media boost their political awareness and knowledge?
4. How did online engagement influence real-life political actions like voting, campaigning, or attending rallies?
5. What kinds of political content were students consuming and sharing?
6. Did different platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp) play different roles in encouraging participation?
7. What benefits and challenges did students associate with using social media for political engagement?
8. Did social media contribute to organizing or mobilizing collective political action among students?

1.4 Aims and Objectives of the Study

The main aim of the study is to explore how social media influenced youth political participation among University of Benin students during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The objectives are to:

- i. ***Understand usage patterns*** – Examine how often and why students used social media for political purposes during the elections.
- ii. ***Gauge political awareness*** – Assess how platforms helped students stay informed and aware of political issues.

- iii. ***Explore forms of participation*** – Analyze how social media impacted actions like voting, campaigning, or political discussions.
- iv. ***Review content shared and consumed*** – Identify the types of political content students engaged with, such as news, memes, or opinions.
- v. ***Compare platforms*** – Look at how different platforms (e.g., Twitter, WhatsApp, TikTok) influenced political engagement in distinct ways.
- vi. ***Capture student perceptions*** – Explore what students see as the benefits and downsides of using social media for politics.
- vii. ***Examine demographic factors*** – Investigate how age, gender, academic level, or background affected students' political activity online.
- viii. ***Assess mobilization efforts*** – Study how social media supported political organizing, group action, and community involvement.
- ix. ***Offer practical recommendations*** – Provide suggestions for educators, policymakers, and political groups on leveraging social media for positive youth political engagement.

1.5 Justification and Significance of the Study

This study is important for several reasons theoretically, empirically, and practically as it helps us understand how digital technology is reshaping democratic participation in Nigeria.

Theoretically, it builds on existing ideas like the *Civic Voluntarism Model* and *Social Capital Theory* to explore how social media creates new opportunities for political engagement among youth (*Verba et al., 1995; Putnam, 2000*). It also draws from the *Uses and Gratifications Theory* to explain why young Nigerians turn to social media for political information and expression (*Katz et al., 1973*). The research highlights issues from the *Digital Divide Theory*, showing how unequal access to social media affects political involvement (*Norris, 2001*), and connects with *Network Society Theory* by examining how digital networks support youth activism (*Castells, 2015*).

Empirically, this study fills a gap by focusing specifically on university students during Nigeria's 2023 elections a group and period that has not been deeply studied before (*Asemah et al., 2017; Nnanyelugo & Nwafor, 2013*). Using both surveys and interviews, it offers fresh data on how social media influences political participation, providing valuable insight into digital democracy in Africa's largest democracy.

Practically, the findings have wide relevance. Universities can use them to improve digital literacy and civic education. Political parties can learn which platforms and content engage young voters best. Social media companies may refine their policies to encourage positive political participation while combating misinformation. Policymakers can use the insights to shape digital democracy and youth development strategies. Civil society groups will find useful guidance for voter education and advocacy. Internationally, the study contributes to understanding democratic development in emerging economies with similar youth demographics.

Finally, academically, the research enriches discussions on digital democracy and youth political behavior, laying groundwork for future studies on the long-term impact of social media on politics in Nigeria and other developing countries.

1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study

Scope of the Study:

- a. ***Geographical Scope:*** The study focuses on the University of Benin in Edo State, Nigeria, allowing an in-depth look at one institution while keeping data collection manageable.
- b. ***Temporal Scope:*** It covers the period around the 2023 general elections from January to April 2023 capturing pre-election, election, and immediate post-election activities.
- c. ***Population Scope:*** The participants are registered University of Benin students aged 18 and above, including undergraduates and postgraduates across all faculties.
- d. ***Conceptual Scope:*** The research examines five key social media platforms, Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok and their influence on various political participation forms like voting, discussions, campaigning, and civic engagement.
- e. ***Methodological Scope:*** A diverse approach is used, combining surveys with interviews to gather both broad and deep insights from students.

Limitations of the Study:

While this study offers valuable insights into the relationship between social media use and youth political participation during Nigeria's 2023 general elections, several limitations should be acknowledged. Geographically, the research focuses solely on the University of Benin, which may

limit the generalizability of the findings to other institutions or regions in Nigeria. Temporally, concentrating on the election period captures behavior within a specific timeframe, potentially overlooking long-term trends in social media use and political engagement.

Only five major social media platforms were included, which may exclude other digital tools that influence political participation. The study also relies on self-reported data, which can be prone to bias as participants may exaggerate their political activity or underreport exposure to sensitive content. Additionally, students with better internet access and digital literacy are more likely to participate, inadvertently marginalizing those with limited access, a reflection of the broader digital divide.

Methodologically, the cross-sectional design allows for identifying associations but does not establish causality between social media use and political behavior. Ethical considerations also limited access to actual online behavior, relying instead on what participants were willing to disclose. Furthermore, resource constraints such as limited time, funding, and manpower restricted the study's scale and depth. Language was another factor, as the research was conducted primarily in English, which may not fully capture the perspectives of students who are more comfortable with indigenous languages. Lastly, the fast-changing nature of social media platforms means that some findings may quickly become outdated as new features or platforms emerge.

1.7 Description of the Study Area

University of Benin: Study Context

The University of Benin (UNIBEN), the focus of this study, is one of Nigeria's leading federal universities. Established in 1970 as an affiliate of the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University), it became fully autonomous in 1971 (*Omodia, 2009*). Located in Benin City, the capital of Edo State in Nigeria's South-South region, UNIBEN is known for its academic reputation and diverse student population.

Geographical and Cultural Setting

Edo State, where UNIBEN is situated, holds political and cultural significance in Nigeria. Covering over 17,800 square kilometers, the state borders Kogi, Ondo, Delta, and Anambra States. Benin City, its capital, has a rich cultural heritage as the former center of the ancient Benin Empire and now serves as a major educational and commercial hub (*Igbafe, 1979*). Its central location and ethnic diversity are

mirrored in UNIBEN's student body, which includes individuals from across Nigeria and neighboring West African countries.

University Demographics and Structure

UNIBEN operates two main campuses: the Ugbowo (main) campus, which hosts most faculties and administrative offices, and the Ekenwan campus, which houses other faculties and institutions. As of the 2022/2023 academic year, the university had around 45,000 students enrolled in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs (*University of Benin, 2023*). It comprises 15 faculties offering over 100 academic programs.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The rise of social media has become a major turning point in how democratic participation is understood and practiced, especially among young people. This literature review explores the growing body of research on how social media influences youth political engagement, with a special focus on Nigeria and the 2023 general elections.

Existing studies show that the relationship between social media use and political participation is both dynamic and complex. On one hand, digital platforms have expanded access to political information and opened new spaces for civic involvement. On the other, they raise concerns about misinformation, echo chambers, and the limitations of digital activism (*Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012*).

Previous studies have examined related aspects of this phenomenon, but significant gaps remain. *Asemah et al. (2017)* explored social media and political communication in Nigeria broadly, but did not focus specifically on university students or electoral periods. *Nnanyelugo and Nwafor (2013)* analyzed social media's role in Nigeria's 2011 elections, yet their study predated platforms like TikTok and the technological advancements characterizing the 2023 elections. *Ogbonnaya and Ogujiuba (2021)* investigated youth political participation during the 2019 elections but did not capture the unique dynamics of 2023, including the Obidient movement and new electoral technologies like BVAS and IReV.

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This study distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on University of Benin students during Nigeria's 2023 elections, using a mixed-methods approach to bridge the gap between online activity and offline political behavior. Unlike previous research, it systematically investigates platform-specific influences,

demographic factors, and the mechanisms through which social media translates into real-world political participation within a Nigerian university context.

This chapter begins with key conceptual and theoretical frameworks used to understand social media's role in political participation. It then examines literature on youth political engagement in Nigeria, the use of digital platforms during elections, and the specific role of university students as politically active users. The chapter ends by reviewing scholarship related to Nigeria's 2023 elections, which provide the core context for this study.

The review draws from a wide range of academic fields including political science, media studies, and sociology highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of research on digital democracy. Special emphasis is placed on African and developing country contexts, alongside insights from global studies on youth and online political engagement.

2.2 Conceptual Framework: Social Media and Political Participation

Defining Social Media in a Political Context

Social media, often defined as internet-based platforms built on Web 2.0 technology that enable users to create and share content (*Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010*), has reshaped how people engage in political communication and participation. In political settings, these platforms serve multiple roles spreading information, shaping opinions, mobilizing supporters, and encouraging civic involvement (*Howard & Hussain, 2013*).

Fuchs (2014) highlights the double-edged nature of social media, describing them as spaces that allow democratic engagement while also being shaped by corporate interests. This tension is especially important when considering how young people use these platforms experiencing both empowerment and manipulation.

Different platforms serve different purposes. *Boyd and Ellison (2007)* make a distinction between social network sites that strengthen existing ties and networking sites that connect strangers.

Understanding these differences helps clarify how each platform supports various forms of political participation.

Empirical evidence supports the multifunctionality of social media in political contexts. Howard and Hussain's (2013) analysis of the Arab Spring demonstrated how platforms like Twitter and Facebook

facilitated rapid information dissemination and protest coordination across multiple countries. Similarly, *Ojebode et al.'s (2021)* study of Nigeria's #EndSARS protests found that social media enabled decentralized organization and real-time mobilization that traditional communication channels could not achieve.

Traditional and Digital Political Participation

Political participation is commonly understood as any activity aimed at influencing government decisions or leadership, either directly or indirectly (*Verba et al., 1995*). In the digital age, these activities have expanded to include online forms of engagement like protests, boycotts, and digital activism (*Theocharis & van Deth, 2018*).

Ekman and Amnå (2012) introduce the idea of "latent participation" actions like reading political posts or casually discussing politics online that may not seem overtly political but can foster future engagement. Social media often facilitates these early, low-effort forms of participation that might later develop into more active involvement.

Empirical studies have validated this progression from latent to active participation. *Gil de Zúñiga et al.'s (2012)* longitudinal study found that social media use for news consumption positively predicted various forms of political participation over time, supporting the gateway hypothesis. *Kahne and Bowyer's (2017)* research with young people demonstrated that exposure to political content on social media significantly increased both online and offline civic engagement.

The Participation Paradox

A recurring issue in research is the "participation paradox" the idea that while many people engage in online political activities, it doesn't always lead to action offline (*Morozov, 2011*). Critics like *Gladwell (2010)* refer to this as "slacktivism" or "clicktivism," suggesting that digital activism may create a false sense of involvement.

However, recent studies offer a more optimistic view. *Boulianne's (2015)* meta-analysis found a positive link between social media use and political engagement, challenging the slacktivism narrative. *Valenzuela et al. (2012)* also found that Facebook use among young people was linked to higher offline political participation.

Recent empirical evidence from African contexts adds nuance to this debate. *Nwachukwu and Okafor's (2021)* study of Nigerian university students found that while social media exposure increased political

interest and knowledge, the translation to offline action was mediated by factors such as political efficacy, peer networks, and perceived political opportunity. This suggests that the relationship between online and offline participation is conditional rather than automatic, particularly in developing democracies.

Gap in knowledge: While studies have examined the slacktivism debate in Western contexts, few have investigated the specific mechanisms that facilitate or hinder the online-to-offline transition among African youth, particularly during critical electoral periods. This study addresses this gap by examining the pathway from digital engagement to political action among Nigerian university students.

Digital Natives and Political Engagement

The concept of “digital natives” those who’ve grown up with digital tech helps explain why young people are so active on social media (*Prensky, 2001*). They’re used to multitasking, visual content, and instant feedback, all of which fit the fast-paced nature of social platforms (*Palfrey & Gasser, 2008*).

But growing up online doesn’t automatically lead to political awareness or action. *Hargittai and Shaw (2013)* found that engagement levels vary widely based on digital skills, interest in politics, and socio-economic background. This shows that youth political participation online is shaped by more than just age or tech familiarity.

Empirical research reveals significant variations within the digital native generation. *Hargittai's (2010)* study found substantial differences in Internet skills among young adults, with socioeconomic status, gender, and race predicting digital competence. *Bennett's (2008)* research on "actualizing citizens" demonstrated that digitally engaged youth often possess sophisticated political knowledge and employ strategic use of digital tools for civic purposes, contradicting simplistic characterizations of young people as politically apathetic.

Gap in knowledge: Most research on digital natives and political engagement has been conducted in developed countries with high Internet penetration and relatively stable infrastructure. How digital nativity manifests in contexts marked by intermittent connectivity, data costs, and infrastructure challenges—such as Nigeria—remains underexplored.

Social Capital and Network Theory

Social capital theory helps explain how relationships foster political involvement. *Putnam (2000)* describes two types: bonding social capital (within close-knit groups) and bridging capital (across diverse groups). Social media can promote both, but often leans toward reinforcing existing views.

Ellison et al. (2007) found that Facebook use among college students was linked to greater bridging capital, which could support more diverse political dialogue. Still, there's concern that algorithms can create "echo chambers" where users only encounter views they agree with (*Pariser, 2011*).

Network theory further highlights how social connections drive political mobilization. Social media makes it easier to share ideas quickly and organize action. *Granovetter's (1973)* "strength of weak ties" theory is especially relevant many social media links are casual, but they can be powerful tools for spreading political messages (*Castells, 2015*).

Empirical evidence presents mixed findings on social media's role in bridging or bonding. *Bakshy et al.'s (2015)* large-scale Facebook study found that while algorithms do limit exposure to cross-cutting content, individual choices play a larger role in creating echo chambers. Conversely, *Barberá et al.'s (2015)* Twitter analysis revealed that political discussions often involve interactions across ideological lines, suggesting that platform architecture influences bridging potential.

In the Nigerian context, *Mustapha's (2019)* research indicates that social media interactions often reflect and reinforce ethnic and religious divides, raising questions about whether digital platforms bridge or deepen existing social cleavages. This study investigates whether University of Benin students' social media use during the 2023 elections facilitated bridging across diverse political viewpoints or reinforced existing political identities.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

The influence of social media on youth political participation is complex and cannot be fully explained by just one theory. Different factors such as why individuals use social media, how they learn and make political decisions, and how collective movements and agendas form all interact in different ways. To capture this broad picture, this study combines six related theories, each shedding light on a specific aspect of the issue, together creating a well-rounded framework for analysis.

1. *Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)*

UGT, developed by Katz et al. (1973), offers a foundational lens to understand why individuals turn to social media for political engagement. It views users as active agents who choose media to fulfill needs such as entertainment, information, social connection, and self-expression (Park et al., 2009). This theory is particularly relevant to this study as it explains University of Benin students' motivations for consuming political content across different platforms during the 2023 elections. Ancu and Cozma (2009) found that people engage with political content on social media for both informational and social reasons. For many young users, these platforms offer a more appealing alternative to traditional political media. Recent updates to UGT highlight features specific to social media, such as interactivity and co-creation (Whiting & Williams, 2013), which are especially relevant to political participation in digital spaces.

Application to this study: UGT helps explain students' platform preferences, content consumption patterns, and the gratifications they seek from political engagement online—whether for staying informed, expressing opinions, or connecting with like-minded peers.

Limitation: While UGT effectively explains media selection and usage motivations, it does not account for how exposure translates into actual behavioral change or collective action, necessitating complementary theories.

2. *Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)*

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1991) addresses a gap left by UGT by explaining how behavior changes through observational learning and self-efficacy—people learn by watching others and believing they can act effectively. This applies directly to political behavior online: observing peers' political activities can boost one's belief in their own ability to participate (Bandura, 1997; Morrell, 2003). Social media offers young people both political information and role models, enhancing political self-efficacy and promoting engagement (Jung et al., 2011). It also fosters collective efficacy—a group's shared belief in its power to act—which is vital for online political mobilization (Bandura, 2000).

Application to this study: SCT explains how University of Benin students developed political self-efficacy by observing peers' political activities during the 2023 elections, particularly within movements like the Obidient campaign, and how this influenced their transition from passive observers to active participants.

Limitation: SCT focuses primarily on individual learning and efficacy but does not fully explain the decision-making process that leads to specific political actions, which TPB addresses.

3. *Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)*

Ajzen's (1991) TPB complements SCT by providing a framework for understanding the decision-making process that connects attitudes to behavior. TPB suggests that behavior is shaped by attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control. Applied to politics, it explains how online interactions influence offline actions.

Social media affects attitudes toward participation, sets social expectations through peer influence, and lowers barriers by providing accessible information and support (Hagger et al., 2002; Xenos et al., 2014). The combination of positive attitudes toward political participation, normative pressure from online communities, and increased perceived control through digital tools creates a strong behavioral intention to participate politically.

Application to this study: TPB helps explain how students' social media experiences shaped their intentions and decisions to register to vote, attend rallies, or engage in campaign activities during the 2023 elections, bridging the gap between online exposure and offline political behavior.

Limitation: TPB focuses on individual decision-making but does not explain how new forms of political participation diffuse through social networks, which Diffusion of Innovations Theory addresses.

4. *Diffusion of Innovations Theory*

Roger's (2003) Diffusion of Innovations Theory explains how new ideas—like digital political participation—spread through social networks. University students, often early adopters due to their digital literacy and openness to innovation, play a key role in spreading online political practices to wider youth populations. Key traits of innovations like ease of use, compatibility with existing habits, and visibility make social media especially appealing for political action. Peer networks and opinion leaders further accelerate adoption, creating cascading effects of political engagement.

Application to this study: This theory illuminates how digital political practices spread among University of Benin students during the 2023 elections, with early adopters influencing peers and contributing to the viral nature of political movements and hashtag campaigns.

Limitation: While this theory explains individual and network-level adoption, it does not fully capture the dynamics of collective mobilization and organized political movements, which Social Movement Theory addresses.

5. *Social Movement Theory*

Social Movement Theory helps explain how social media supports organized political activism and collective action. Resource Mobilization Theory sees social media as a tool for organizing, communicating, and mobilizing support (McCarthy & Zald, 1977). Political Process Theory adds that online spaces offer new political opportunities, organizational structures, and framing mechanisms for collective action (McAdam et al., 1996). Castells' (2015) Network Society Theory synthesizes these perspectives: social media thrives on information flows and networked connections, allowing movements to spread ideas and coordinate actions across geographic boundaries. This is particularly relevant for understanding youth-led movements like the Obidient campaign that characterized Nigeria's 2023 elections.

Application to this study: Social Movement Theory explains how University of Benin students participated in collective political mobilization, coordinated actions through social media platforms, and contributed to broader youth political movements during the 2023 elections.

Limitation: While Social Movement Theory explains collective mobilization, it does not fully address how social media shapes the broader political discourse and public priorities, which Agenda-Setting Theory addresses.

6. *Agenda-Setting Theory*

Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) explains how media shape public priorities by highlighting certain issues. In the age of social media, this process is more decentralized and interactive. Users can influence agendas by creating, sharing, and discussing content, challenging traditional media's monopoly on agenda formation. Meraz (2009) found that social media users can challenge traditional media's dominance in setting political agendas. Guo (2012) extended the theory to include attribute agenda-setting (shaping how people think about issues) and network agenda-setting (connecting related issues), both of which are amplified by the interactive nature of social media.

Application to this study: This theory helps explain how University of Benin students not only consumed political content but also contributed to shaping political discourse during the 2023 elections by sharing, amplifying, and creating content that influenced what issues gained prominence in their networks.

Theoretical Integration and Justification

Each theory addresses specific inadequacies in the others, creating a comprehensive framework that captures the full complexity of social media's role in youth political participation. This multi-theoretical approach provides a robust theoretical grounding for analyzing both individual experiences (qualitative data) and broader patterns (quantitative data) of political engagement among University of Benin students during Nigeria's 2023 general elections.

The integration of these six theories is necessary because social media's influence on political participation operates simultaneously at multiple levels:

- a. Individual motivation (UGT) explains why students seek political content
- b. Behavioral learning (SCT) explains how they develop political efficacy through observation
- c. Decision-making (TPB) explains how attitudes and norms translate into intentions and actions
- d. Innovation diffusion (Diffusion Theory) explains how digital political practices spread through networks
- e. Collective mobilization (Social Movement Theory) explains organized political activism
- f. Discourse shaping (Agenda-Setting Theory) explains how students influence political priorities

2.4 Empirical Review: Youth Political Engagement in Nigeria

Youth political engagement in Nigeria has fluctuated between active participation and apathy, shaped by the country's shifting political climate. In the post-independence and military eras, young people especially students were active in protests and democratic advocacy (*Omeje, 2005*). With the return to democracy in 1999, new avenues opened, yet challenges such as distrust in institutions, economic hardship, and political cynicism have led to low electoral participation (*Ibrahim & Kazah-Toure, 2003*).

The #EndSARS movement in 2020 marked a turning point, showing that when issues directly affect them, Nigerian youths can mobilize powerfully especially via social media (*Onuoha et al., 2021*). Empirical analysis of the movement revealed that 78% of participants learned about protest locations through social media, and 65% were first-time political activists (*Ojebode et al., 2021*), demonstrating social media's capacity to transform previously disengaged youth into active political participants.

Youth (ages 15–35) make up about 70% of Nigeria’s 200+ million population (National Population Commission, 2018). Yet, their vast numbers haven’t translated into political power. Despite being better educated and more politically aware, university students and other youth remain underrepresented in political leadership (*Omotola, 2009*).

According to the National Youth Policy, youth include individuals aged 18–35 from diverse backgrounds (*Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, 2019*). Their potential for influence is immense, but remains largely untapped in formal political arenas.

Recent electoral data reveals changing patterns. *INEC (2023)* reported that 12.3 million new voters registered for the 2023 elections, with 76.8% aged 18–34, representing the highest youth registration rate in Nigeria's democratic history. However, actual voter turnout among registered youth voters stood at only 29%, revealing a persistent gap between registration and participation that this study seeks to understand.

Several elements shape youth political behavior in Nigeria and they include:

i. **Economic:** Unemployment among youth stands above 40%, contributing to disillusionment and, at times, political activism (*National Bureau of Statistics, 2020*). Empirical research by *Ikelegbe (2013)* found that economic marginalization creates a paradoxical effect while it reduces trust in political institutions, it simultaneously motivates some youth toward protest politics and alternative political movements.

ii. **Education:** While higher education boosts awareness, it can also lead to cynicism toward political systems (*Ikelegbe, 2013*). *Hillygus' (2005)* research demonstrates that exposure to political science and social science education specifically increases political knowledge and engagement, suggesting that disciplinary differences matter within university populations.

iii. **Social/Cultural:** Family, peers, and community norms play key roles. Traditional structures may suppress youth voices, while peer networks often encourage participation (*Ukoha, 2019*). *Ukoha's (2019)* empirical study found that family political socialization remained the strongest predictor of youth political interest in Nigeria, even exceeding peer influence and media exposure.

iv. **Technology:** Mobile phones and social media have revolutionized youth engagement, enabling access to political content and organizing tools (*Nwagwu & Oni, 2015*). *Nwagwu and Oni's (2015)* analysis of the 2015 elections found that 54% of youth voters used social media for political information, compared to only 23% in 2011, indicating rapid digital adoption in political contexts.

Youth political behavior varies across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Northern youths often engage through religious and traditional systems, while their southern counterparts are more active in civil society and protests (*Lewis, 2007; Adebani & Obadare, 2010*).

Ethnic identity also shapes engagement. Youths from minority groups may face different challenges and motivations compared to majority groups particularly in terms of cross-ethnic engagement on social media (*Suberu, 2001*).

Young Nigerian women participate in politics less than men due to cultural, educational, and structural barriers (*Mama, 1995*). However, social media is helping bridge the gap. Platforms offer accessible spaces for political discussion, allowing more young women to engage, though disparities in political efficacy persist (*Okoro & Nwankwo, 2017; Adetula, 2008*).

Civil society groups have been vital in mobilizing youth, offering education, advocacy platforms, and campaigns. Organizations like YIAGA Africa, Enough is Enough Nigeria, and the Centre for Citizens with Disabilities have used both traditional outreach and digital platforms to drive youth engagement (*Orji, 2013*). Social media has enhanced these efforts, amplifying campaigns like voter registration drives and electoral reforms (*Adejumobi, 2017*). Importantly, informal online networks now complement formal organizations in pushing political mobilization (*Okoye, 2018*).

Empirical evidence demonstrates civil society's effectiveness in digital mobilization. *Orji's (2013)* study found that youth exposed to civil society voter education campaigns via social media were 2.3 times more likely to register to vote compared to those reached through traditional methods. YIAGA Africa's 2023 election report documented that their social media campaigns reached 15 million young Nigerians, with 42% reporting that the content influenced their decision to participate in the elections.

Gap in knowledge: While civil society's role in youth mobilization is documented, how university students specifically interact with formal civil society campaigns versus informal peer-driven mobilization on social media remains unclear. This study examines both formal and informal digital mobilization among University of Benin students.

2.5 Role of Social Media in Political Communication and Electoral Processes

The digital age has reshaped political communication, moving from top-down messaging via traditional media to interactive, two-way exchanges on social platforms (*Bennett & Segerberg, 2012*). *Chadwick (2013)* describes this transformation as a "hybrid media system," where old and new media coexist and influence each other in complex ways, creating a dynamic information ecosystem that fundamentally alters how political messages are created, distributed, and consumed. Social media's unique features like persistence, scalability, and searchability enable broader and more participatory forms of political engagement (*Boyd, 2010*). These tools allow citizens not just to consume but to create and share political content, reshaping how democracy functions in real time and challenging the traditional gatekeeping role of mainstream media institutions.

Globally, more people especially the youth now turn to social media for political news. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, 30% of respondents globally use social media as their primary news source, with even higher usage among younger users (*Newman et al., 2023*). In Nigeria, university students often prefer social media over traditional outlets for political news due to its accessibility, immediacy, and perceived relevance to their concerns (*Salman & Hasim, 2021*). This shift represents not merely a change in medium but a fundamental transformation in how young people conceptualize news consumption from passive reception of professionally curated content to active seeking and sharing of information within peer networks. However, concerns persist about the reliability of information, with misinformation and disinformation especially prevalent during elections (*Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017*), raising critical questions about the quality of political knowledge that informs democratic participation.

Beyond information dissemination, social media has become a key tool for political organizing and mobilization. From the Arab Spring (*Howard & Hussain, 2013*) to Nigeria's #EndSARS protests in 2020, platforms like Twitter and Facebook have enabled real-time coordination and outreach that would have been impossible through traditional communication channels (*Ojebode et al., 2021*). During Nigeria's 2023 elections, political campaigns leveraged these platforms to mobilize supporters, coordinate rallies, and promote voter registration with unprecedented efficiency and reach. The "Obidient Movement" supporting Labour Party's flagbearer particularly exemplified how social media can drive grassroots activism, creating decentralized networks of supporters who organized independently yet coordinated effectively (*Nwosu & Udechukwu, 2023*). This bottom-up mobilization

challenged traditional campaign structures that relied on hierarchical organization and financial resources, demonstrating that digital tools could partially democratize political organizing itself.

Social media also fundamentally changed the nature of campaign communication by allowing politicians to engage directly with voters, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers who had historically filtered and framed political messages. Through posts, live videos, and interactive features, candidates can build personal connections with supporters, respond immediately to criticisms, and shape narratives without mediation (*Enli & Skogerbø, 2013*). This direct communication also encourages participatory campaigning where supporters can share content and contribute to campaign narratives, effectively becoming volunteer campaign workers in digital space (*Kreiss, 2012*). However, the same features that enhance engagement also make it difficult to control misinformation, which can quickly go viral and spread faster than corrections or fact-checks (*Bimber, 2014*). This double-edged nature of social media's communicative power presents ongoing challenges for democratic discourse, requiring new approaches to information verification and accountability.

Increasingly, social media is also used for election monitoring and transparency promotion. Citizens and civil society groups post real-time updates about voting processes, helping expose irregularities and promoting transparency in ways that complement formal election observation (*Cantijoch et al., 2016; Ake, 2019*). This crowdsourced monitoring creates multiple eyes on electoral processes, making manipulation more difficult and increasing public confidence. However, verifying such reports remains a challenge, and unverified claims can heighten tensions or spread panic about electoral integrity. Balancing the transparency benefits of citizen reporting with the need for verified information and social stability remains a key tension in digital election monitoring (*Norris, 2014*).

Beyond these functional roles, social media creates entirely new forums for political conversation, offering spaces where citizens especially youth can discuss politics outside of traditional structures and hierarchies. These platforms often allow for thoughtful, asynchronous dialogue where participants can reflect before responding, potentially enabling more deliberative exchanges than face-to-face confrontations (*Wojcieszak & Mutz, 2009*). The accessibility of these spaces means that young people who might feel intimidated by formal political settings can engage in political discussions on their own terms and develop their political voice. While some research suggests social media fosters inclusive debate and exposes users to diverse perspectives (*Jackson & Lilleker, 2011*), other studies point to significant issues like incivility, polarization, and echo chambers where users primarily encounter views similar to their own (*Sobieraj & Berry, 2011*). Platform design features including character

limits, engagement algorithms, and content recommendation systems significantly shape the nature of political discourse, sometimes prioritizing emotional or controversial content that generates engagement over substantive policy discussion (*Gillespie, 2014*). Understanding these platform-specific dynamics is essential for comprehending how social media both enables and constrains democratic political communication.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite its promise, social media's role in political communication faces significant hurdles. Misinformation and fake news threaten election integrity and public trust (*Lazer et al., 2018*). Echo chambers may reinforce existing beliefs and limit exposure to diverse views (*Pariser, 2011*), though findings on this are mixed (*Brundidge, 2010*).

Additionally, social media's profit-driven model may prioritize engagement over democratic values, amplifying sensational or misleading content (*Zuboff, 2019*).

2.6 Social Media Influence on Voter Behavior and Decision-Making

Social media significantly influences how people process political information and form attitudes, creating new cognitive and behavioral pathways that shape electoral decision-making. While it offers access to diverse viewpoints and unprecedented amounts of political information, it also presents challenges particularly in managing the volume and credibility of content (*Tewksbury & Riles, 2015*). "Information overload" is common in online environments and can lead users to rely on mental shortcuts or simple cues instead of fully evaluating political messages and candidate positions (*Eppler & Mengis, 2004*). Algorithms also shape what users see, filtering content based on past behavior and often reinforcing existing views rather than challenging them (*Gillespie, 2014*). Interestingly, research suggests that user choices about what content to engage with affect exposure patterns even more than algorithmic filtering, indicating that selective exposure is both algorithmically and individually driven (*Bakshy et al., 2015*).

Social cues embedded in social media platforms such as likes, shares, comments, and follower counts signal the popularity of political content and can powerfully sway individual attitudes through mechanisms of social influence (*Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955*). This "social proof" effect can shape political behavior, including decisions about whether and how to participate in politics (*Bond et al., 2012*). However, the impact of these social signals depends on contextual factors such as the strength of

personal relationships with those sharing content, perceived expertise of sources, and alignment with existing political identities (*Weeks et al., 2017*). The visibility of peer political engagement on social media can create cascades of participation, where observing others' political activity motivates similar behavior, or conversely, can create social pressure that discourages dissenting voices.

Social media theoretically can connect users with politically diverse networks, potentially broadening political understanding and tolerance across ideological divides (*Mutz, 2006*). Yet, empirical findings on this possibility are decidedly mixed. While some evidence shows users interact mostly with like-minded individuals, creating homogeneous political networks (*Barberá et al., 2015*), other research suggests online spaces can expose users to more diverse viewpoints than their offline social circles (*Brundidge, 2010*). Platform design features such as algorithmic filtering, trending topics, and content recommendation systems significantly affect the extent of diverse exposure, with some platforms architectures more conducive to cross-cutting political encounters than others (*Bakshy et al., 2015*). Understanding these platform-specific differences is crucial for assessing social media's net impact on political tolerance and understanding.

Especially for youth, social media can serve as an accessible and engaging source of political learning, offering informal civic education outside traditional classroom settings (*Jenkins et al., 2016*). However, the informal nature of social media content raises significant concerns about the quality of political knowledge acquisition. False content often spreads faster and more widely than accurate information, with emotionally charged misinformation having particular virality advantages (*Vosoughi et al., 2018*). Additionally, fragmented, bite-sized exposure to political information a characteristic of social media consumption patterns can limit deep understanding of complex policy issues, potentially producing citizens who are aware of political controversies but lack substantive knowledge of policy details (*Prior, 2007*). This creates a paradox where social media simultaneously increases political awareness while potentially undermining the depth of political understanding.

Emotions play a powerful and increasingly recognized role in shaping political engagement, and social media platforms are particularly effective at triggering and amplifying emotional reactions. Through compelling visuals, instant feedback mechanisms, and easy sharing tools, social media intensifies emotional responses to political content (*Marcus et al., 2000; Berger & Milkman, 2012*). While this emotional engagement can energize political participation and motivate civic action, it may also lead to impulsive or poorly informed decisions, as users react emotionally to provocative content rather than engaging in reflective deliberation (*Sunstein, 2017*). The emotional architecture of social media with its

emphasis on immediate reactions and viral spread may fundamentally shape the character of democratic citizenship, privileging emotional authenticity over reasoned argumentation.

In the absence of traditional editorial gatekeepers, social media users must judge the credibility of content and sources independently, a task for which many lack adequate skills or motivation (*Metzger & Flanagin, 2013*). Social endorsements from friends and trusted contacts often guide these credibility judgments, but such endorsements don't always correlate with content accuracy, as trusted friends may unknowingly share false information (*Westerman et al., 2014*). Social media can also foster "false consensus" effects, where the visibility of like-minded views in one's social network reinforces the illusion that one's political positions are more widely shared than they actually are (*Fields & Meyers, 2020*). This misperception of consensus can affect political behavior, potentially making individuals more confident in their views while underestimating the legitimacy of opposing perspectives.

The relationship between social media and political polarization remains one of the most debated questions in research on digital democracy. Some research links social media use to increased political polarization and greater exposure to extreme views, suggesting that platform dynamics exacerbate political divisions (*Barberá, 2015*). However, other studies find minimal direct effects of social media on polarization, with some evidence suggesting that offline factors and traditional media contribute more substantially to political division (*Boxell et al., 2017*). The distinction between different types of polarization is important here: social media may intensify user's existing beliefs (attitude polarization) without necessarily increasing hostility or negative feelings toward political opponents (affective polarization) (*Druckman et al., 2013; Sunstein, 2017*).

2.7 Challenges and Limitations of Social Media in Political Participation

Despite its promise to democratize political engagement, social media presents several challenges that can hinder informed participation especially in developing democracies like Nigeria.

1. Misinformation and Disinformation

The rapid spread of fake news is one of the biggest threats to political participation on social media. Fake news intentionally false content meant to mislead is widespread during elections (*Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017*). In Nigeria, the 2019 and 2023 elections saw significant misinformation, especially on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter (*Apuke & Omar, 2021*). Alarming, 78% of users in 2019 encountered false election-related content.

Social media algorithms worsen this by promoting emotionally charged and sensational content, regardless of accuracy. False news spreads faster than the truth up to six times faster on Twitter (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Bradshaw and Howard (2019) categorize misleading content as misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and computational propaganda.

Exposure to such content can reduce political knowledge and increase distrust in democratic institutions (Guess et al., 2019), especially among young users who rely heavily on social media.

2. Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles

Algorithms that tailor content to users' preferences can isolate people within "filter bubbles," limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Pariser, 2011). This often leads to echo chambers and group polarization where opinions become more extreme (Sunstein, 2017).

On Facebook, users were less likely to see opposing views, largely due to their own choices rather than algorithms alone (Bakshy et al., 2015). In Nigeria, such echo chambers often mirror ethnic and religious divides, deepening polarization and undermining democratic discourse (Mustapha, 2019).

3. Political Polarization and Extremism

Social media tends to amplify divisive content, rewarding messages that spark strong emotions over reasoned debate (Tucker et al., 2017). Exposure to opposing views may actually heighten polarization instead of reducing it (Bail et al., 2018).

Extremist groups also exploit platforms for propaganda and recruitment (Berger & Morgan, 2015). In Nigeria, hate speech and incitement to violence have been rampant during elections (Chiluwa & Adegoke, 2013).

4. Digital Divide and Inequality

Access to social media is not equal. Internet access, devices, and digital literacy vary widely across socioeconomic, geographic, and gender lines (Norris, 2001). In Nigeria:

Only 51.9% have internet access (NCC, 2023)

28% of rural Nigerians are connected vs. 72% in urban areas (ITU, 2022)

Those with more education are likelier to engage politically online (Ojo & Heravi, 2018)

Women are 23% less likely than men to own phones and 13% less likely to use mobile internet (Web Foundation, 2020)

5. *Privacy and Surveillance*

Social media platforms collect vast amounts of personal data, raising fears of surveillance and manipulation. The Cambridge Analytica scandal highlighted how data could be used to sway elections (*Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018*).

In authoritarian contexts, governments may monitor or suppress dissent online. Nigeria has seen arrests tied to social media activity, especially during and after the *#EndSARS* protests (*Amnesty International, 2021; Freedom House, 2021*).

6. *Manipulation and Inauthentic Behavior*

Social media can be manipulated through:

- a. Bots: Automated accounts that inflate messages (*Howard & Kollanyi, 2016*)
- b. Trolling: Harassment aimed at silencing opponents (*Amnesty International, 2018*)
- c. Astroturfing: Fake grassroots campaigns

During Nigeria's 2019 elections, bot networks were used to amplify pro-government messages and discredit opponents (*Adegbola, 2019*).

7. *Information Overload and Attention Fragmentation*

The overwhelming volume of content can impair users' ability to evaluate political information effectively. The information-processing capacity of users hasn't kept pace with content growth (*Hilbert & López, 2011*). Social media encourages rapid, shallow engagement that may hinder critical thinking (*Carr, 2010*).

8. *Platform Dependency and Corporate Control*

Political discourse increasingly depends on private platforms whose policies and algorithms determine what content is seen. This raises concerns about transparency, bias, and accountability (*Gillespie, 2018*). Content moderation and promotion decisions often opaque can shape political narratives (*Klonick, 2018*).

Implications for Democratic Participation

These challenges have real implications for democracy:

Informed Consent: Misinformation weakens voters' ability to make informed choices.

Equal Participation: Digital divides exclude marginalized voices.

Deliberative Quality: Echo chambers reduce exposure to alternative views.

Trust and Legitimacy: Surveillance and manipulation undermine democratic trust.

Freedom and Autonomy: Privacy concerns and online harassment discourage participation.

2.8 University Students as Political Participants

University students occupy a key space in political life. As young adults developing their identities in environments that promote critical thinking and civic involvement, they are often at the forefront of political engagement especially in today's digitally connected world. Students have historically played leading roles in political movements worldwide, from the 1968 Paris uprisings to South Africa's anti-apartheid protests (*Fraser, 1988*). In Nigeria, university students have long engaged with national politics through platforms like the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS), established in 1956, organizing protests, demanding education reforms, and fighting for democratic governance (*Jega, 2007; Omano, 2018*). This historical legacy of student activism provides contemporary Nigerian students with both organizational frameworks and cultural narratives that position university campuses as legitimate sites of political action.

University students possess several distinctive characteristics that support and facilitate political engagement. Developmentally, being in late adolescence or early adulthood means they are often more open to new political ideas and social change, as this life stage is characterized by identity exploration and ideological formation (*Arnett, 2000*). The educational environment itself fosters political awareness, particularly through exposure to diverse ideas in social sciences and humanities courses that explicitly engage with questions of power, justice, and governance (*Hillygus, 2005*). Campus communities create concentrated peer networks that offer natural spaces for political organizing and mobilization, with student organizations, dormitories, and common spaces facilitating the formation of political discussion groups and activist networks (*Putnam, 2000*). While students may lack financial resources, they often possess abundant time, access to information through university libraries and internet connections, and organizational tools that support political participation. Additionally, youthful idealism and a characteristic optimism about the possibility of social change can fuel activism and sustained civic involvement in ways that more cynical or pragmatic orientations might not (*Zukin et al., 2006*).

Multiple intersecting factors drive student political engagement, operating at individual, social, and institutional levels. Individual factors include political interest, political efficacy (the belief that one's participation matters), political knowledge, and internalized civic values that emphasize democratic participation as a responsibility (*Verba et al., 1995; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Dalton, 2008*). These individual predispositions are shaped by the social environment, including family political socialization, peer influence within campus communities, and the overall campus climate regarding political engagement (*Jennings & Niemi, 1974; Klofstad, 2007*). Institutional factors also matter

significantly, with curriculum content explicitly addressing citizenship and politics, involvement in student clubs or government providing organizational experience, and service-learning programs connecting classroom knowledge to community engagement and political awareness (*Nie et al., 1996; Sax, 2004; Eyster & Giles, 1999*). The interaction of these individual, social, and institutional factors creates varying patterns of political engagement across different student populations and campus contexts.

Students engage in both traditional and modern forms of political participation, often moving fluidly between different modes of civic action. Traditional forms include voting in elections, attending political rallies, joining political parties, and volunteering for campaigns activities that have characterized democratic participation for generations. However, contemporary students increasingly engage in non-traditional forms of politics including street protests, online activism, consumer boycotts, and creative political expression through art, music, or digital media (*Dalton, 2008*). This expansion of political repertoires reflects both changing technological possibilities and evolving conceptions of what constitutes meaningful political action, with many students viewing cultural and lifestyle choices as politically significant alongside formal electoral participation.

Today's students are digital natives who engage politically in distinctively new ways enabled by social media technologies. They use platforms to share political content and opinions, reaching audiences far beyond their immediate social circles. They organize campaigns and political events through Facebook groups, WhatsApp chats, and Twitter hashtags, coordinating action with speed and scale impossible in pre-digital eras. They join digital advocacy networks that transcend geographic boundaries, participating in transnational movements and connecting local concerns to global political conversations (*Bennett, 2008; Kahne & Bowyer, 2017*). This digital citizenship represents not merely a new medium for existing political activities but potentially a transformation in how young people conceptualize political community, political action, and political identity.

Several factors make Nigerian students particularly active on social media for political purposes. They generally possess high digital literacy, having grown up with mobile phones and internet access that older generations adopted later in life (*Hargittai, 2010*). They tend to be early adopters of new platforms and features, quickly incorporating emerging technologies into their communication practices (*Smith & Anderson, 2018*). Strong peer influence and dense social networks on campus mean that political content and activism spread rapidly through student communities, creating cascades of engagement (*Bond et al., 2012*). Additionally, motivation for identity expression and activism drives

Nigerian students to use social media as platforms for articulating political views and asserting their voice in national conversations from which youth have historically been marginalized (*Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012*). These factors combine to make university students among the most politically engaged demographic groups on Nigerian social media.

However, Nigerian students face significant challenges that constrain their political participation. Financial hardship affects many students from families struggling with Nigeria's economic difficulties, limiting their ability to travel to political events or sustain extended activism. Unstable internet connectivity and unreliable electricity supply create infrastructure barriers to consistent social media engagement, with data costs representing significant expenses for students on limited budgets. Students also face risks of repression or violence, as Nigerian security forces have historically responded harshly to student protests, creating real dangers for those engaging in contentious politics. Administrative restrictions from university authorities, who sometimes ban political activities on campus or threaten sanctions against student activists, further constrain political expression. Despite these obstacles, Nigerian students also enjoy unique opportunities that support political engagement. They live in a growing democracy where electoral competition is genuine and political change remains possible. They are part of a massive youth population that could reshape political outcomes if effectively mobilized. They experience expanding mobile and digital access as telecommunications infrastructure gradually improves across Nigeria. They can connect with active civil society networks that provide organizational support, resources, and amplification for student political initiatives (*Adejumobi, 2004*). These opportunities mean that despite very real constraints, Nigerian university students remain important political actors with potential to influence democratic development.

Gender dimensions significantly shape patterns of student political participation. Traditionally, male students have been more active in formal politics, dominating student government positions and visible protest leadership (*Burns et al., 2001*). However, more recent research shows that female students are increasingly involved in issue-based activism and social movements, particularly around concerns like gender equality, sexual violence, and educational access (*Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010*). In Nigeria, women have long played political roles despite facing substantial social and cultural barriers including patriarchal family structures, religious constraints, and cultural norms that discourage female political assertiveness (*Mama, 1995*). Social media may now offer more inclusive opportunities for female political expression, as online platforms can provide some insulation from the physical intimidation and social sanctions that women face in offline political spaces. However, online harassment and gender-based trolling represent new barriers that disproportionately affect women's political participation on

social media, suggesting that digital platforms both enable and constrain female students' political engagement in complex ways. Understanding how gender intersects with social media use to shape political participation is essential for comprehending the full picture of student political behavior and for developing strategies that support inclusive democratic engagement among Nigeria's university population.

Implications for Democracy

Student political involvement matters for democracy:

- i. Democratic Renewal: Students bring fresh ideas and challenge the status quo.
- ii. Leadership Pipeline: Engaged students often grow into future political leaders.
- iii. Catalysts for Change: Student activism can lead to broader societal reform.
- iv. Democratic Norms: Their participation helps strengthen democratic values and culture.
- v. Innovation: Their use of new tech expands political engagement possibilities.

2.9 Overview of Nigeria's 2023 General Elections

Nigeria's 2023 general elections marked a key milestone in the country's democratic journey. With President Muhammadu Buhari completing his second term, the election ushered in a new political era, shaped by strong youth participation, extensive use of social media, and a shift in traditional voting patterns.

The elections were governed by the Electoral Act 2022, which introduced significant reforms including the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) to enhance transparency and credibility (*INEC, 2022*). These technological innovations represented a watershed moment in Nigerian electoral administration. The BVAS system improved voter accreditation processes by using biometric verification to reduce identity fraud, while the IReV portal enabled real-time result transmission and public viewing, enhancing transparency and reducing opportunities for result manipulation. The legal reforms also addressed critical issues of campaign financing and clarified the role of technology in electoral processes. Most significantly, the elections saw unprecedented youth registration, with 12.3 million new voters registered, 76.8% of them aged 18–34 (*INEC, 2023*). This demographic shift fundamentally altered the electoral landscape and signaled growing youth interest in formal political participation.

Three major candidates dominated the presidential race, each representing distinct political visions and constituencies. Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressive Congress (APC), a former Lagos State Governor, positioned himself as a continuity candidate building on the outgoing administration's policies. Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), a former Vice President making his sixth presidential bid, campaigned on themes of national restructuring and unity. Peter Obi of the Labour Party, backed predominantly by young voters, centered his campaign on transparency, economic reform, and breaking from traditional political practices (*Akinola, 2023*). Obi's emergence as a formidable third-force candidate disrupted the traditional APC–PDP political duopoly that had characterized Nigerian politics since the return to democracy in 1999. His appeal to youth voters and urban middle-class citizens represented a significant departure from ethnic and regional voting patterns that had historically dominated Nigerian electoral behavior.

The Obidient movement emerged as a defining feature of the 2023 elections, representing a youth-led, grassroots campaign supporting Peter Obi. This movement was primarily driven by social media platforms and civil society organizations (*Omotola, 2023*), marking a shift from traditional top-down political mobilization to horizontal, peer-driven activism. The movement comprised largely first-time voters and young urban professionals, characterized by innovative campaign strategies including crowdfunding, digital activism, and deliberately cross-ethnic appeal that challenged Nigeria's ethnic political calculus. Empirical research by *Adebayo and Ojo (2023)* revealed the movement's unique demographic composition: 73% of self-identified Obidients were first-time voters, and 68% obtained most of their political information from social media platforms rather than traditional media sources. This data underscores the fundamental transformation in how young Nigerians engage with political information and organize collective action.

Social media platforms played a transformative and multifaceted role throughout the electoral cycle. As an information hub, social media became the primary news source for younger voters, with 67% of voters under 35 relying on these platforms for political information (*Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023*). All major political parties utilized platforms including Twitter/X, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok for campaign outreach, candidate communication, and voter mobilization. The interactive nature of social media enabled real-time feedback loops between candidates and voters, fundamentally changing campaign dynamics. Politicians could gauge immediate public reaction to policy announcements, while voters could directly question and challenge candidates. Additionally, citizens and civil society organizations used social media for election monitoring,

reporting voting irregularities, sharing updates from polling units, and creating crowdsourced oversight that complemented official electoral observation.

The presidential election results reflected both the impact of youth mobilization and the persistence of traditional voting patterns. Bola Ahmed Tinubu (APC) secured 8.8 million votes (36.6%), Atiku Abubakar (PDP) received 7 million votes (29.1%), Peter Obi (Labour Party) garnered 6.1 million votes (25.4%), and Rabiu Kwankwaso (NNPP) obtained 1.5 million votes (6.2%). Youth turnout significantly influenced Peter Obi's strong showing in urban centers and southern regions (*Ibeanu et al., 2023*). His performance in cities like Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt demonstrated the political potential of mobilized youth voters. Despite technical challenges with BVAS implementation in some locations, the system and IReV portal substantially improved electoral credibility compared to previous elections, reducing incidents of result manipulation and increasing public confidence in the process.

Despite technological and procedural improvements, several challenges persisted. BVAS glitches in some polling units caused delays and voter frustration, raising questions about technological readiness and backup systems. Incidents of violence and voter intimidation occurred in several states, particularly in hotly contested areas. The rapid spread of misinformation on social media platforms created confusion about voting procedures, candidate positions, and result announcements. Post-election legal disputes over results led to protracted litigation, with opposition candidates challenging the outcomes in election tribunals.

The 2023 elections produced far-reaching effects on Nigerian democracy. Youth engagement surged to unprecedented levels, with young people not merely voting but actively participating in campaigns, monitoring, and advocacy. The integration of technology into electoral processes demonstrated both possibilities and challenges for future elections. Political competition intensified with the Labour Party's emergence as a viable alternative to the traditional two-party dominance, potentially reshaping Nigeria's political landscape. Civil society organizations played expanded monitoring and voter education roles, with social media amplifying their reach and impact.

Social media's influence manifested in several transformative ways. It democratized political information access, enabling citizens to bypass traditional mainstream media gatekeepers and access diverse information sources. Digital platforms empowered youth through coordinated mobilization, creating networks for political organization that transcended geographic boundaries. Social media fostered participatory democracy by giving ordinary citizens platforms to contribute to political narratives, challenge official accounts, and shape public discourse. Key lessons from the election

include recognition that different platforms serve distinct political functions—Twitter/X for real-time discourse and debate, WhatsApp for private coordination and information sharing, Instagram and TikTok for creative visual content that engages younger demographics. The election demonstrated a generational shift in political engagement patterns, with younger voters demanding transparency, accountability, and direct communication from political leaders. The prevalence of misinformation underscored the critical need for digital and media literacy education. Finally, political institutions, parties, and candidates must adapt to the realities of digital politics or risk disconnection from increasingly tech-savvy electorates.

University students were at the heart of these democratic shifts. They were among the most politically engaged demographic groups, participating actively both online through social media advocacy and offline through voting, rally attendance, and campaign volunteering. As digital natives, students used social media creatively and effectively, producing political content, fact-checking claims, and mobilizing peer networks. Their participation may shape future political leadership and democratic practices, as today's student activists become tomorrow's political leaders, policymakers, and civic influencers. Perhaps most significantly, the 2023 elections offered university students real-world civic education, connecting classroom knowledge of democratic principles with practical experience in electoral politics, providing invaluable lessons about citizenship, political participation, and democratic processes.

2.10 Synthesis of Literature and Knowledge Gaps

This comprehensive review reveals several critical gaps that this study addresses:

- a. **Temporal Gap:** Most Nigerian studies focus on elections before 2023, missing the unique dynamics of technological innovations (BVAS, IReV), platform evolution (TikTok's emergence), and new political movements (Obidient campaign).
- b. **Population Gap:** Few studies focus specifically on university students as a distinct demographic with unique characteristics like higher digital literacy, concentrated peer networks, and developmental openness to political socialization.
- c. **Methodological Gap:** Previous research has relied predominantly on either quantitative surveys or qualitative interviews, but rarely integrated both to capture the complexity of social media's influence.

- d. ***Mechanistic Gap:*** While correlations between social media use and political participation are established, the specific mechanisms platform-specific influences, content types, peer effects—that facilitate this relationship remain underexplored in the Nigerian context.
- e. ***Contextual Gap:*** International theories and findings may not directly apply to Nigeria's unique context of ethnic diversity, infrastructure challenges, digital inequality, and emerging democratic institutions.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to explore how social networking sites influenced youth political participation among University of Benin students during Nigeria’s 2023 general elections. It covers the research design, study setting, target population, sampling methods, data collection techniques, analytical tools, and ethical considerations.

Choosing the right methodology is essential for ensuring valid, reliable, and insightful findings (*Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018*). Given the complex link between social media use and political participation, this study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative strategies to capture a fuller picture of the phenomenon.

The chapter is organized to give a clear overview of each methodological element, from the general research design to specific steps in data gathering, analysis, and quality control. This structure promotes transparency and helps ensure the study is both reproducible and mindful of possible limitations or biases (*Bryman, 2016*).

3.2 Research Design

This study uses a convergent parallel design, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data at the same time to better understand the research problem (*Creswell & Creswell, 2018*). This approach allows for triangulation, strengthening the study’s validity by comparing insights from multiple sources.

Quantitative Component

This study’s quantitative aspect uses a cross-sectional survey design to collect data on student’s social media habits, political participation, and demographics. This method is ideal for capturing behaviors and opinions at a specific time here, during the 2023 general elections (*Bryman, 2016*).

The survey helps:

- i. Measure how frequently and in what ways students use social media

- ii. Quantify their levels of political participation
- iii. Analyze relationships between key variables
- iv. Generalize results to the broader student body
- v. Identify how demographic factors shape these relationships

Qualitative Component

The qualitative component adopts a phenomenological approach, using interviews to explore students' personal experiences with social media and political engagement (*Patton, 2015*). This method complements the survey by offering deeper insights.

It helps to:

- a. Understand students' perceptions and experiences
- b. Explore motivations and challenges around political engagement
- c. Examine how social media content shapes political views
- d. Capture social and cultural influences
- e. Identify themes that may not emerge from survey data

Integration

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously using a convergent parallel design. Each set was analyzed separately and later merged during interpretation (*Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010*).

This design allows for:

- i. *Triangulation*: Comparing findings to boost credibility
- ii. *Complementarity*: Using one method to explain the other
- iii. *Expansion*: Examining different sides of the research question
- iv. *Development*: Insights from one stream inform the other

Justification for Quantitative and Qualitative methods

This design is ideal for this study for several reasons:

1. *Complex Nature of the Topic*: Social media's impact on political participation is layered and involves behavior, attitudes, and context (*Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004*).
2. *Depth and Breadth*: Surveys show patterns, while interviews explain them.
3. *Credibility*: Multiple sources allow cross-checking of results (*Greene et al., 1989*).
4. *Practical Use*: This approach generates data that can guide real-world policies and strategies.

3.3 Description of the Study Location

This study was conducted at the University of Benin (UNIBEN) in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria, a strategic choice due to its diverse student population and active political climate.

Institutional Profile

Founded in 1970, UNIBEN is one of Nigeria's leading federal universities, operating primarily from two campuses Ugbowo (main campus) and Ekenwan (*Omodia, 2009*). The university has 15 faculties, offering a broad range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in fields such as Medicine, Law, Engineering, Arts, Social Sciences, and more.

Student Demographics

UNIBEN hosts around 45,000 students from across Nigeria and neighboring countries. Most students are aged 18–25, aligning well with the study's focus on youth political engagement (*University of Benin, 2023*).

Key demographic highlights:

Gender: 60% male, 40% female

Age: Majority between 18–25 years

Geographic Spread: Representation from all geopolitical zones

Academic Levels: 85% undergraduate, 15% postgraduate

Socioeconomic Backgrounds: Broadly diverse

Digital Infrastructure

The university has a supportive digital environment for social media usage:

- a. *Wi-Fi Access*: Available in some classrooms, libraries, and hostels
- b. *Mobile Coverage*: Strong 3G/4G service from major providers

- c. *Device Ownership*: High smartphone usage among students
- d. *Affordable Data Plans*: Widespread access to social media platforms

Political Context

Edo State, where UNIBEN is located, is known for its vibrant political scene, characterized by:

- i. Competitive elections and civic engagement
- ii. Active student and civil society political groups
- iii. Strong youth participation in the 2023 elections

Rationale for Location Choice

UNIBEN was chosen for several compelling reasons:

- i. *Diverse Student Body*: Reflects Nigeria's youth population across ethnic, regional, and social lines
- ii. *Digital Access*: Ensures wide social media reach
- iii. *Political Engagement*: Offers a dynamic context for examining youth participation
- iv. *Logistical Advantage*: Researcher's familiarity with the institution enhances access and coordination
- v. *Institutional Support*: Cooperation from university authorities facilitated smooth data collection

3.4 Target Population and Sampling Technique

Target Population

This study focuses on registered students of the University of Benin who were eligible to vote in Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The target population includes students who:

- a. Were enrolled during the 2022/2023 academic session
- b. Were 18 years or older (voting age)
- c. Used at least one social media platform (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, or TikTok)
- d. Were present on campus during data collection
- e. Excluded were students under 18, not active on social media, off-campus during data collection, or who declined participation.

According to university records, there are 35,000 students who meet these criteria making up 78% of the total student population.

Sampling Technique

A multi-stage sampling strategy was adopted to balance representativeness with practical data collection.

Stage 1: Stratified Sampling by Faculty

The population was first stratified by faculty to ensure coverage across all 15 faculties. Students were selected proportionally based on enrollment size in each faculty.

Stage 2: Systematic Random Sampling

Within each faculty, systematic random sampling was used:

Student lists were obtained from faculty offices

A sampling interval ($k = N/n$) was calculated

Every k th student was selected after a random start

Stage 3: Purposive Sampling for Qualitative Data

For interviews an, purposive sampling identified students who could offer rich insights based on:

- a. High social media use
- b. Political awareness or engagement
- c. Willingness to share experiences
- d. Diversity in gender, academic level, and political views

Justification for the Approach

This sampling method was chosen for several reasons:

- i. Representativeness: Stratification ensured academic diversity, while systematic sampling added randomness
- ii. Practicality: The multi-stage method made fieldwork feasible without compromising quality

- iii. Accuracy: Stratification helped reduce sampling error (Bryman, 2016)
- iv. Depth and Breadth: The blend of quantitative and qualitative sampling enabled both broad generalization and detailed exploration (Patton, 2015)

3.5 Sample Size

Quantitative Sample Size

The sample size for the quantitative survey was calculated using the standard formula for finite populations:

$$n = (Z^2pqN) / (e^2 (N-1) + Z^2pq)$$

Where:

n = required sample size

Z = confidence level (1.96 for 95% confidence)

p = estimated proportion (0.5 for maximum variability)

q = 1-p (0.5)

N = population size (35,000)

e = margin of error (0.05)

Calculation:

$$n = (1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5 \times 35,000) / (0.05^2(35,000-1) + 1.96^2 \times 0.5 \times 0.5)$$

$$n = (3.84 \times 0.25 \times 35,000) / (0.0025 \times 34,999 + 0.96)$$

$$n = 33,600 / (87.5 + 0.96)$$

$$n = 33,600 / 88.46$$

$$n \approx 380$$

Adding 20% for potential non-response and incomplete questionnaires:

$$\text{Suggested sample size} = 380 + 76 = 456 \text{ students}$$

Due to time and accessibility constraints, only 28% of the proposed sample size will be surveyed using both traditional and digital methods amounting to 130 students to ensure viability.

Qualitative Sample Size

Unlike the quantitative sample, the qualitative sample size was guided by data saturation rather than statistical formulas.

In-depth Interviews: 6 participants

Sample Distribution Overview

| <i>Component</i> | <i>Sample size</i> |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Quantitative Survey | 130 students |
| In-depth Interviews | 6 students |
| Total Unique Participants | 124 students (allowing for overlap) |

This distribution ensured both breadth and depth in exploring the role of social media in youth political participation.

3.6 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Quantitative Data Collection

1. Survey Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was used to gather data from students, divided into four sections:

Section A – Demographics: Age, gender, faculty, academic level, socioeconomic status, and access to internet/digital devices.

Section B – Social Media Usage: Platforms used, frequency, time spent, types of political content consumed/shared, and sources of political info.

Section C – Political Participation: Voter registration, campaign involvement, political discussions, civic actions, and awareness.

Section D – Perceived Impact: Influence of social media on political attitudes/behavior, perceived benefits and risks, and trust in political content online.

2. Measurement Scales

Well-established scales were adapted for the Nigerian context:

Social Media Usage Scale (*Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2013*): 15 items, 5-point Likert (1 = Never, 5 = Always).

Political Participation Scale (*Verba et al., 1995*): 20 items on various political actions.

Political Efficacy Scale (*Niemi et al., 1991*): 10 items on internal/external efficacy (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree).

Qualitative Data Collection

In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured interviews explored students' personal experiences with political engagement via social media.

- *Topics covered:* Political content exposure, attitude shifts, comparison with traditional media, benefits and downsides of social media.
- *Duration:* 45–60 minutes.
- *Format:* In person or virtual, recorded with consent, conducted in English (with local expressions allowed).

Data Collection Process

- *Pilot Study*
A pilot test with 30 students (excluded from the main study) helped refine instruments, clarify questions, and estimate timing.
- *Research Assistant Training*
Four assistants will be trained in research ethics, administering surveys, guiding interview, and ensuring data quality.
- *Timeline*
Data collection took place over six weeks (August - September 2025):
Weeks 1–2: Survey distribution
Weeks 3–4: In-depth interviews
Weeks 5–6: Focus group discussions

3.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (v28). Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used to explore how social media use relates to political participation.

- i. Descriptive Analysis: Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarized responses.
- ii. Bivariate Analysis: Cross-tabulations, correlations, and chi-square tests examined relationships between variables.
- iii. Inferential Analysis:
 - a. Correlation: Pearson and Spearman tests assessed links between social media use and political participation.
 - b. Regression: Linear and logistic regressions identified predictors of political behavior. Hierarchical regression analyzed effects in stages.
 - c. ANOVA: One-way and two-way ANOVAs tested group differences, with post-hoc (Tukey's) tests for further comparisons.
- iv. Advanced Techniques:
 - a. Factor Analysis: Exploratory (EFA) and confirmatory (CFA) analyses validated scales; PCA supported data reduction.
 - b. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM): Used for analyzing complex relationships, including mediation, moderation, and overall model fit.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted in NVivo 12 following *Braun and Clarke's (2006)* six steps:

- i. Familiarization: Reading transcripts to spot patterns.
- ii. Coding: Labeling key ideas line-by-line.
- iii. Theme Development: Grouping codes into broader themes.
- iv. Reviewing Themes: Refining and clarifying themes.
- v. Defining Themes: Naming themes and identifying sub-themes.
- vi. Reporting: Selecting quotes to illustrate key points.

A hybrid coding method was used; deductive (based on research questions) and inductive (emerging directly from participant input).

3.8 Validity, Reliability, and Trustworthiness

Quantitative Component

- i. Validity:
 - Content Validity: Experts reviewed the questionnaire; pilot testing ensured clarity.
 - Construct Validity: Factor analysis confirmed structure and alignment with existing scales.
 - External Validity: Stratified sampling reflected the broader student population.
- ii. Reliability:
 - Internal Consistency: Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.70) confirmed scale reliability.
 - Test-Retest: A subsample completed the survey twice (2-week gap) to check consistency over time.

Qualitative Component

- a. Credibility: Ensured through interviews, member checking, pfeedback, and extended engagement.
- b. Transferability: Detailed descriptions and purposive sampling allowed findings to apply to similar contexts.
- c. Dependability: Standardized procedures and inter-coder reliability maintained consistency.
- d. Confirmability: Reflexive practices, clear documentation, and use of raw data supported objectivity.

3.9 Ethical Consideration

This study complies with ethical standards set by the University of Benin Research Ethics Committee and international guidelines for research involving human participants.

Ethical Approval

Formal approval was obtained from the University's Research Ethics Committee, ensuring the study meets institutional, national, and international ethical requirements.

Informed Consent

Participants received clear, written information about the study's purpose, procedures, confidentiality measures, and their rights including the right to withdraw at any time. Written consent was obtained before participation, including consent for audio recordings where applicable.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

All data were handled confidentially. Identifiers were removed, pseudonyms used in qualitative reports, and data securely stored on password-protected systems. Only the research team had access. Reports present data in aggregate form to protect participant identity.

Risk Management

The study posed minimal risk. No sensitive personal data were collected, and questions were framed neutrally to avoid discomfort. Participation was voluntary, and all political views were respected.

Beneficence and Justice

The research aims to benefit society by enhancing understanding of youth political engagement and informing policy. Participants were fairly selected and treated with respect, regardless of background or beliefs.

Data Management

Data were securely stored digitally (on encrypted devices) and physically (in locked cabinets). Identifiable information will be destroyed after use, while anonymized datasets may be preserved for future academic research.

Dissemination Ethics

Findings will be reported transparently, with full acknowledgment of limitations and contributors. Participant privacy will be safeguarded in all publications, and results will be shared with both academic and policy audiences, as well as the participant community.

CHAPTER FOUR

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of data collected on the impact of social networking sites on youth political participation among University of Benin students during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The analysis examines the relationship between social media usage and political engagement, assessing how digital platforms influenced student's political awareness, participation patterns, and civic behavior. The research utilized surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions, as outlined in the previous chapter. The study focused on University of Benin students as a representative case study for evaluating the role of social media in shaping youth political participation in Nigeria's democratic processes.

The chapter addresses the dynamics between digital engagement and real-world political action, exploring both the opportunities and challenges that social media platforms presented during this critical electoral period. Through comprehensive data analysis, the study reveals patterns of social media usage, platform preferences, information consumption habits, and their subsequent impact on various forms of political participation among university students.

Before presenting the data analysis, these are the research questions this study approached, as referenced from Chapter 1:

1. How did factors like age, gender, academic level, or socioeconomic background affect this relationship?
2. How did University of Benin students use social media for political purposes during the elections?
3. In what ways did social media boost their political awareness and knowledge?
4. How did online engagement influence real-life political actions like voting, campaigning, or attending rallies?
5. What kinds of political content were students consuming and sharing?
6. Did different platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp) play different roles in encouraging participation?

7. What benefits and challenges did students associate with using social media for political engagement?
8. Did social media contribute to organizing or mobilizing collective political action among students?

4.2 Quantitative Analysis

Survey Overview: This section presents the findings from a survey investigating the impact of social networking sites on youth political participation among University of Benin students during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The data collected has been analyzed to explore respondents' social media usage patterns, political engagement behaviors, and perceptions regarding their digital political experiences. A total of 130 participants took part in the survey, and the following analysis breaks down the responses and provides insights based on the data collected from students across various faculties and academic levels at the University of Benin.

Section A : How did factors like age, gender, academic level, or socioeconomic background affect this relationship?

1. What is your age?
130 responses

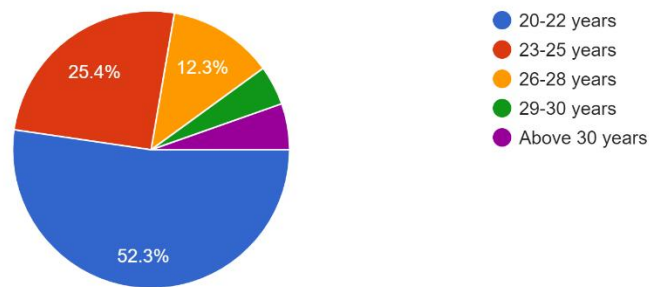


Figure 1 Pie chart showing age of respondents

The visualization above illustrates the distribution of respondents based on their age. A significant majority, about 52.3%, are between 20 and 22 years old. The second largest group, representing 25.4% of respondents, are between 23 and 25 years old. Those aged 26-28 years make up 12.3%, while the remaining respondents are distributed among the 29-30 years and above 30 years age groups and make up 4.8% and 5.4% of the total distribution respectively.

2. What is your gender?

130 responses

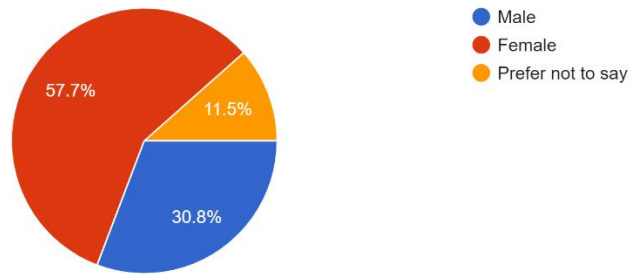


Figure 2 Pie chart showing gender of respondents

This survey result show an uneven distribution among the 130 respondents based on their gender. Female students comprised the largest group, making up 57.7% of the participants. Male students accounted for 30.8%, while the remaining 11.5% decided not to disclose the information

3. What is your current academic level?

130 responses

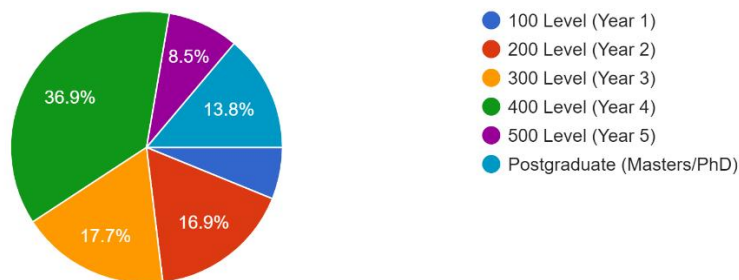


Figure 3 Pie chart showing academic level of respondents

The survey found that 6.2% of the respondents are in their first year of study (100 level/Year 1), while 16.9% and 17.7% are in their second year (200 level/Year 2) and third year (300 level/Year 3) of study respectively. Majority of the respondents which make up 38.9% of the responses are in their fourth year (400 level/Year 4) while fifth year students and postgraduate students made up 8.5% and 13.8% of the total respondents respectively.

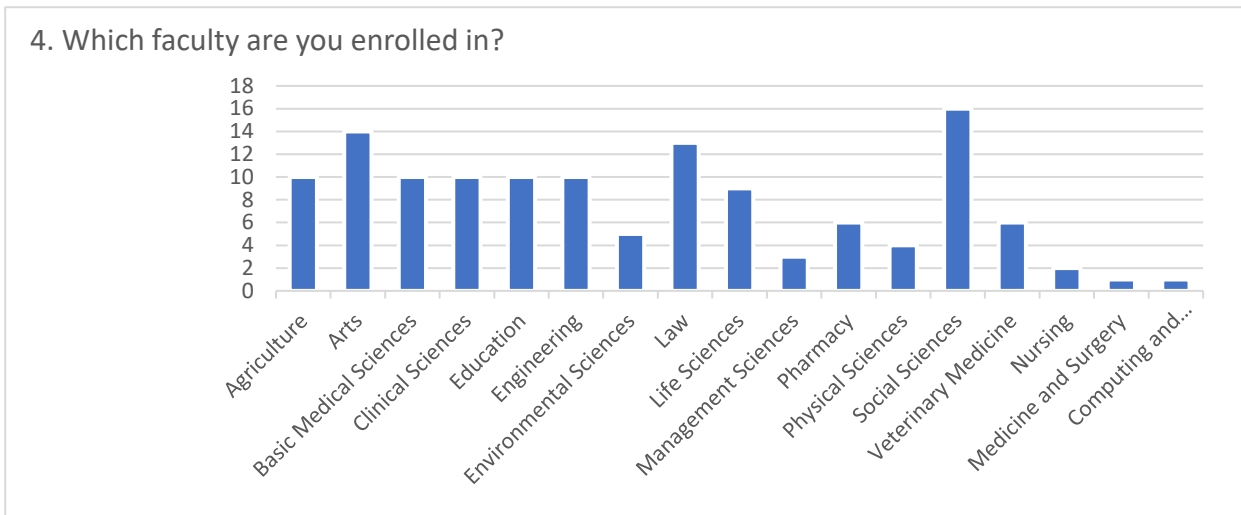


Figure 4 Column chart showing faculty of respondents

This survey shows the distribution of the total respondents across the various faculty in university

Agriculture, Basic Medical Sciences, Clinical Sciences, Education and Engineering faculties had a total of 10 respondents each, make up a combined total of 38.5% of the total respondents.

Arts, Environmental Sciences, Law, Life Sciences, Management Sciences, Pharmacy, Social Sciences, Veterinary Medicine and Nursing faculties all had 14(10.8%), 5(3.8%), 13(10%), 9(6.9%), 3(2.3%), 6(4.6%), 16(12.3%), 6(4.6%), 2(1.5%) of the total respondents respectively.

Medicine and Surgery faculty and Computing/Informatics had the lowest turnout of respondents with only 1(0.8%) each.

Section B : How did University of Benin students use social media for political purposes during the elections?

5. Which social media platforms do you actively use? (Select all that apply)

130 responses

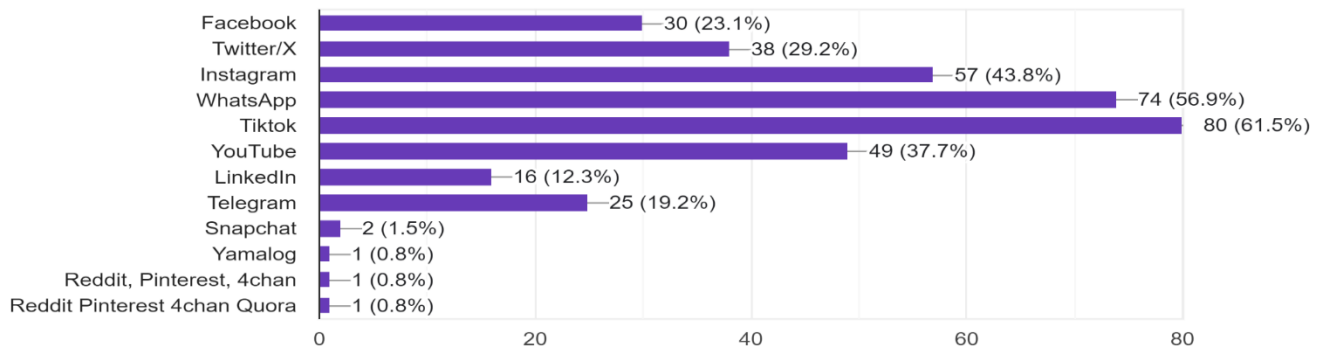


Figure 5 Bar chart showing social media platforms used by respondents

The survey evaluated the social media platforms used actively by the respondents with the results being;

Facebook - 30 respondents, representing 23.1% of the total respondents

Twitter - 38 respondents, representing 29.2% of the total respondents

Instagram - 57 respondents, representing 43.8% of the total respondents

WhatsApp - 74 respondents, representing 56.9% of the total respondents

Tiktok - 80 respondents, representing 61.5% of the total respondents

Youtube - 49 respondents, representing 37.7% of the total respondents

LinkedIn - 16 respondents, representing 12.3% of the total respondents

Telegram - 25 respondents, representing 19.2% of the total respondents

Snapchat - 2 respondents, representing 1.5% of the total respondents

Yamalogs - 1 respondent, representing 0.8% of the total respondents

Reddit, Pinterest, 4Chan, Quora - 1 respondent, representing 0.8% of the total respondents

6. On average, how many hours per day do you spend on social media?

130 responses

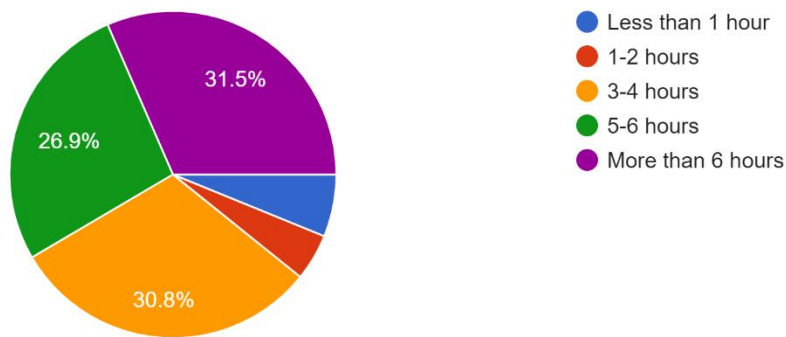


Figure 6 Pie chart showing period of social media use per day

The chart above represents the average time spent by respondents across on social media platforms per day. 8(6.2%) of respondents indicated that they spent less than an hour a day on social media platforms. 6(4.6%) and 40(30.8%) indicated they spent between 1-2 hours and 3-4 hours respectively per day on social media. The remaining respondents that they spent 5-6 hours and more than 6 hours per day on social media with the distribution of 35(26.9%) and 41(31.5%) respectively.

7. How frequently did you encounter political content on social media during the 2023 election period (January-April 2023)?

130 responses

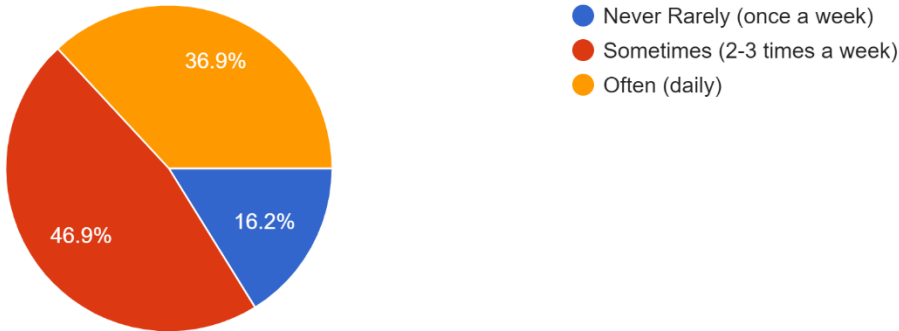


Figure 7 Pie chart showing frequency of political content encountered on social media

The chart above shows the frequency at which respondents encountered political content on social media during the 2023 election period with 48(36.9%) of respondents affirming that they saw political content often(daily), 21(16.2%) indicating that they never/rarely saw political content and the largest distribution of respondents (61 respondents) indicated that they sometimes saw political content 2-3 times a week.

8. How do you typically engage with political content on social media? (Select all that apply)

130 responses

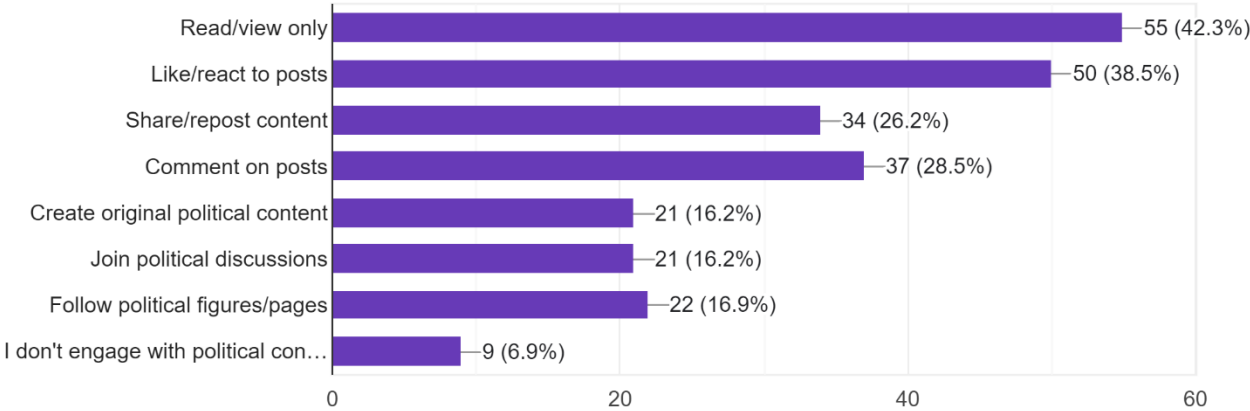


Figure 8 Bar chart showing means of political content engagement

The survey shows the ways by which respondents engaged with political content on social media with the results being;

Read/view only - 55 respondents, representing 42.3% of the total respondents

Like/react to posts - 50 respondents, representing 38.5% of the total respondents

Share/repost content - 34 respondents, representing 26.2% of the total respondents

Comment on posts - 37 respondents, representing 28.6% of the total respondents

Create original political content - 21 respondents, representing 16.2% of the total respondents

Join political discussions - 21 respondents, representing 16.2% of the total respondents

Follow political figures/pages - 22 respondents, representing 16.9% of the total respondents

I don't engage with political content - 9 respondents, representing 6.9% of the total respondents

Section C : In what ways did social media boost their political awareness and knowledge

9. How would you rate your level of political awareness during the 2023 elections?

130 responses

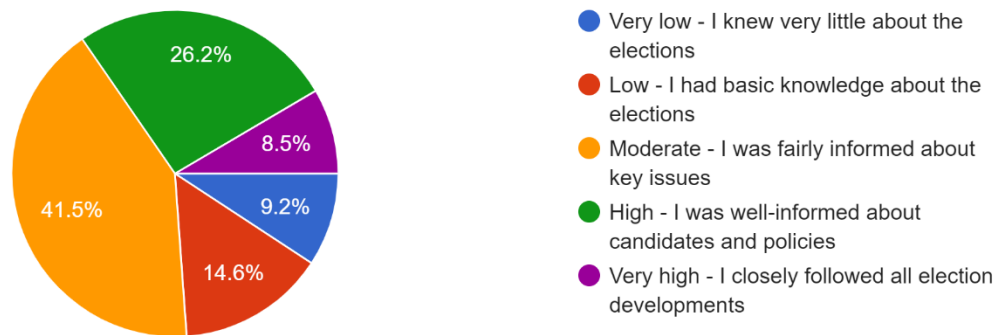


Figure 9 Pie chart showing the rate of political awareness

The visualization above illustrates the distribution of respondents based on how they rate their level of political awareness during the 2023 elections. A significant majority, about 41.5%, rated their awareness level very low stating they wer fairly informed about key issues. 9.2% rated their level of awareness very low, 14.6% indicated a low level of awareness and 26.2% of respondents rated their's high. The rest of the respondents, about 8.5% indicated their level of awareness very high stating that they followed all election developments.

10. To what extent did social media influence your political opinions during the 2023 elections?

130 responses

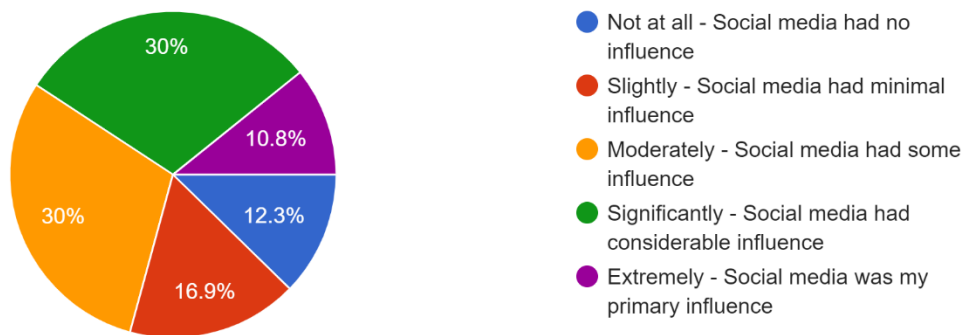


Figure 20 Pie chart showing the extent of social media's influence

The survey results above show an uneven distribution among the respondents based on the influence of social media on their political opinions during the 2023 elections. 60% of the respondents indicated social media influenced their political opinions moderately and significantly while the rest of the respondents making up 16.9%, 12.3% and 10.8% affirmed that social media influenced their political opinions slightly, not at all and extremely respectively.

11. How did social media affect your understanding of political issues compared to traditional media sources?

130 responses

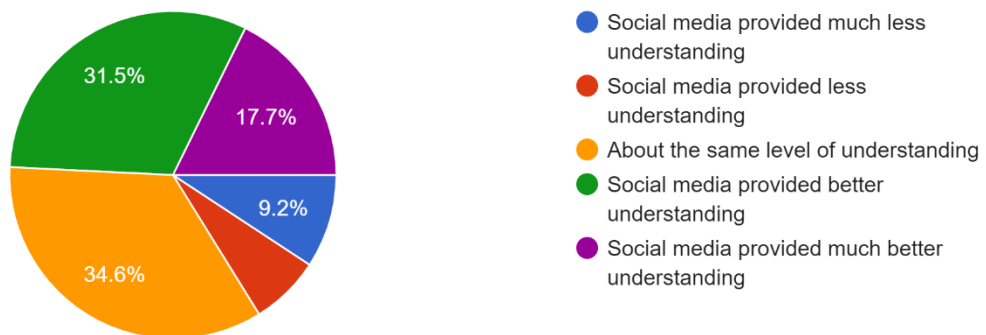


Figure 31 Pie chart showing social media's influence on political issues

The survey revealed 34.6% of respondents were provided with the same level of understanding on political issues compared to traditional media sources, 31.5% were provided better understanding,

17.7% were provided with much better understanding, 9.2% were provided with much less understanding and 6.9% were provided with less understanding.

Section D : How did online engagement influence real-life political actions like voting, campaigning, or attending rallies?

12. Were you registered to vote in the 2023 general elections?

130 responses

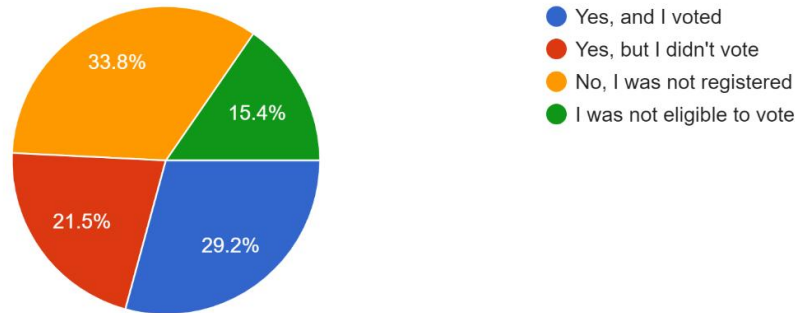


Figure 42 Pie chart showing rate of registered voters

The survey found that 29.2% of voters registered and voted in the 2023 elections, 21.5% registered but didn't vote, 33.8% didn't register thereby could not vote and 15.4% were ineligible to vote.

13. During the 2023 election period, which of the following political activities did you participate in? (Select all that apply)

130 responses

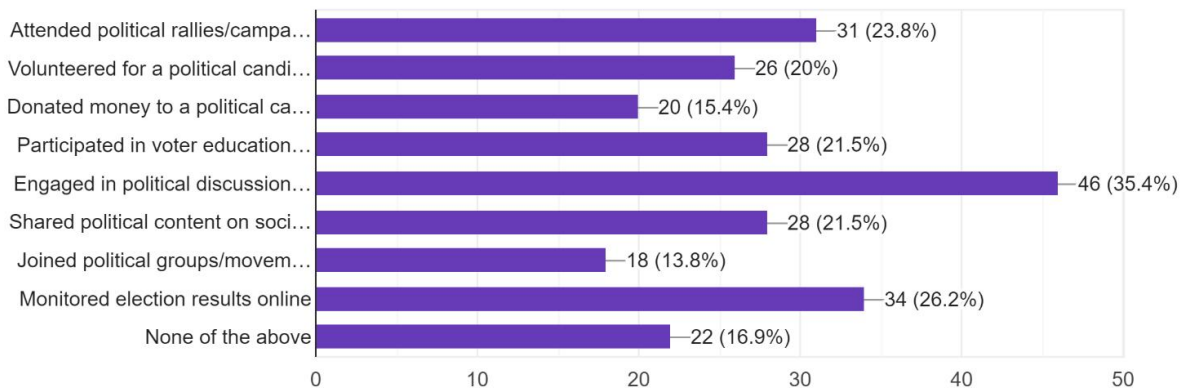


Figure 53 Bar chart showing political activities respondents participated in

The survey show the political activities respondents participate in during the 2023 election period with the results being;

Attended political rallies/campaigns- 31 respondents, representing 23.8% of the total respondents

Volunteered for a political candidate/party- 26 respondents, representing 20% of the total respondents

Donated money to a political cause - 20 respondents, representing 15.4% of the total respondents

Participated in voter education programs - 28 respondents, representing 21.5% of the total respondents

Engaged in political discussions online - 46 respondents, representing 35.4% of the total respondents

Shared political content on social media - 28 respondents, representing 21.5% of the total respondents

Joined political groups/movements online - 18 respondents, representing 13.8% of the total respondents

Monitored election results online - 34 respondents, representing 26.2% of the total respondents

None of the above - 22 respondents, representing 16.9% of the total respondents

14. Did social media exposure motivate you to take any offline political actions? (Select all that apply)

130 responses

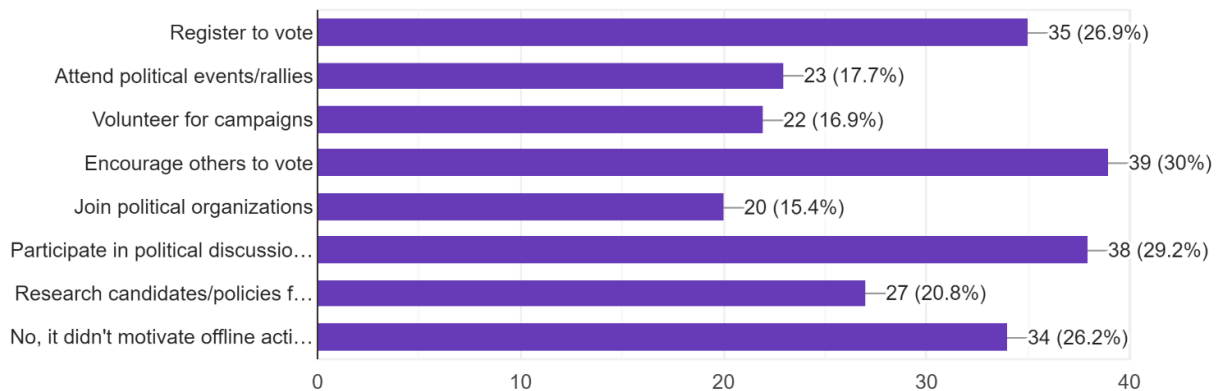


Figure 64 Bar chart showing respondents actions influenced by social media's exposure

The chart above represents the actions social media exposure influenced respondents to participate in with the results being:

Register to vote - 35 respondents, representing 26.9% of the total respondents

Attend political events/rallies - 23 respondents, representing 17.7% of the total respondents

Volunteer for campaigns - 22 respondents, representing 16.9% of the total respondents

Encourage others to vote - 39 respondents, representing 30% of the total respondents

Join political organizations - 20 respondents, representing 15.4% of the total respondents

Participate in political discussions offline - 38 respondents, representing 29.2% of the total respondents

Research candidates/policies further - 27 respondents, representing 20.8% of the total respondents

No, it didn't motivate offline actions - 34 respondents, representing 26.2% of the total respondents

Section E : What kinds of political content were students consuming and sharing?

15. Which political movement/candidate did you primarily support during the 2023 elections?

130 responses

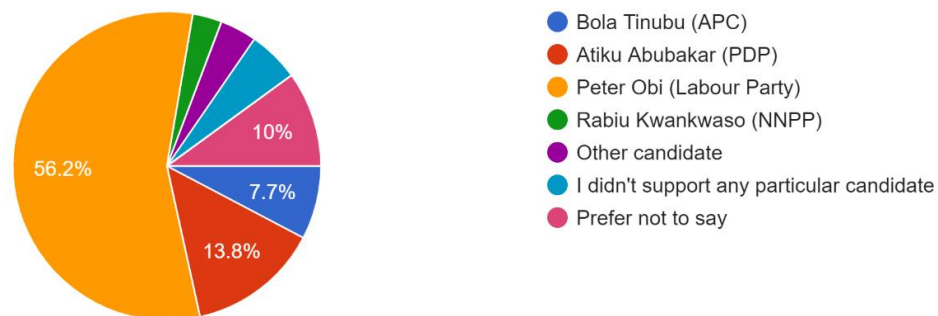


Figure 75 Pie chart showing political movement/candidate students supported

The survey found that 56.2% of respondents supported Labour Party(LP), 13.8% supported People's Democratic Party(PDP), 7.7% voted supported All Progressive Congress(APC), 3.1% supported New Nigeria People's Party(NNPP), 3.8% supported other candidates, 5.4% didn't support any particular candidate and 10% preferred not to say.

16. How trustworthy do you consider political information shared on social media?

130 responses

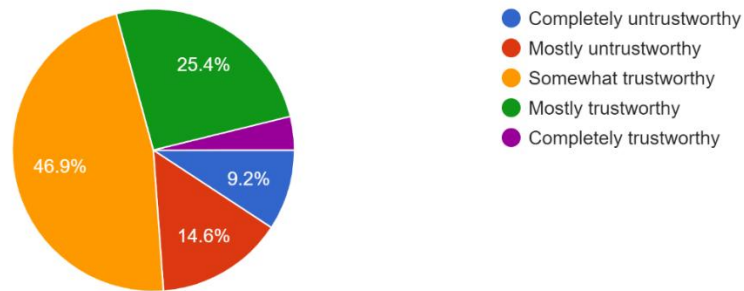


Figure 86 Pie chart showing the trustworthiness of political information shared on social media

The above chart represents the respondent's opinion on the trustworthiness of political information shared on social media with the majority of respondents 46.9% considering the information somewhat trustworthy and 25.4% considering the information mostly trustworthy. 14.6%, 9.2% and 3.8% consider the information mostly untrustworthy, completely untrustworthy and completely trustworthy respectively.

17. During the 2023 elections, did you encounter misinformation (false or misleading information) on social media?

130 responses

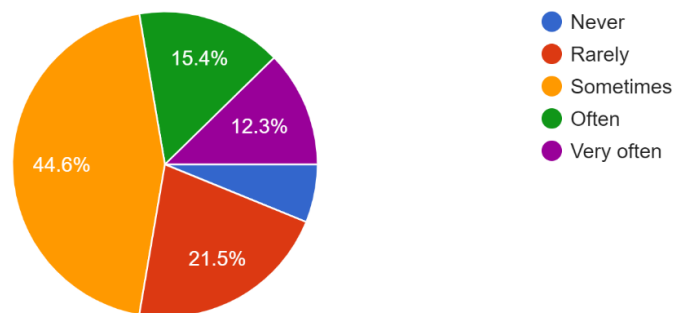


Figure 97 Pie chart showing the rate at which respondents encountered misinformation

The survey shows that during the 2023 elections, 6.2% of respondents never encountered misinformation, 21.5% encountered misinformation rarely, 44.6% sometimes, 15.4% often and 12.3% very often.

Section F : Did different platforms play different roles in encouraging participation?

18. Which platform did you use MOST for political information during the 2023 elections? (Select all that apply)

130 responses

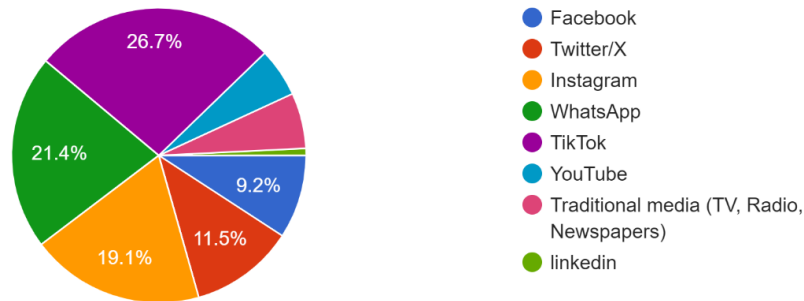


Figure 108 Pie chart showing the platforms used the most for political content during the 2023 elections

The survey shows the social media platform respondents used the most during the 2023 elections with 26.7%(35) respondents choosing TikTok, 21.4%(28) choosing WhatsApp, 19.1%(25) choosing Instagram, 11.5%(15) choosing Twitter/X, 9.2%(12) choosing Facebook, 6.1%(8) choosing traditional media, 5.3%(7) choosing Youtube and 0.8%(1) choosing LinkedIn.

Section G : What benefits and challenges did students associate with using social media for political engagement?

19. What do you consider the main BENEFIT of using social media for political engagement? (Select the most important)

130 responses



Figure 119 Pie chart showing the benefits of using social media for political engagement

The chart above shows the main benefit respondents consider of using social media for political engagement with the results being:

Access to diverse political information - 23 respondents, representing 17.7% of all respondents

Ability to interact directly with political figures – 9 respondents, representing 6.9% of all respondents

Platform to express personal political views - 29 respondents, representing 22.3% of all respondents

Opportunity to organize and mobilize others - 24 respondents, representing 18.5% of all respondents

Real-time updates on political developments - 16 respondents, representing 12.3% of all respondents

Cost-effective way to participate in politics - 9 respondents, representing 6.9% of all respondents

Connection with like-minded individuals - 10 respondents, representing 7.7% of all respondents

No significant benefits- 10 respondents, representing 7.7% of all respondents

20. What do you consider the main CHALLENGE of using social media for political engagement?
(Select the most important)

130 responses

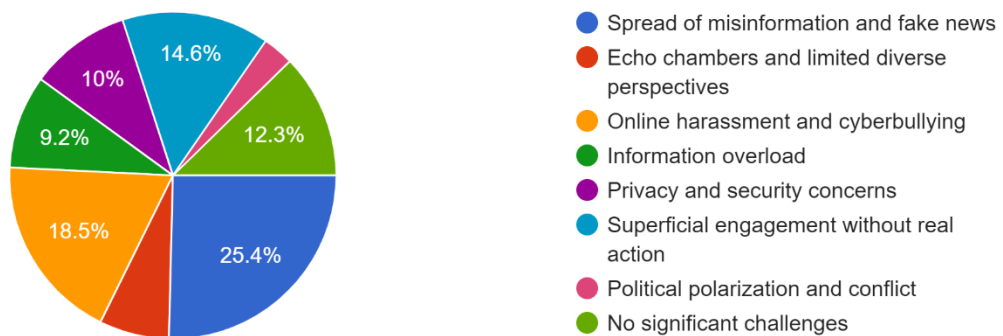


Figure 20 Pie chart showing challenges of using social media for political engagement

The chart above shows the main challenge respondents consider of using social media for political engagement with the results being:

Spread of misinformation and fake news - 33 respondents, representing 25.4% of all respondents

Echo chambers and limited diverse perspectives - 9 respondents, representing 6.9% of all respondents

Online harassment and cyberbullying - 24 respondents, representing 18.5% of all respondents

Information overload - 12 respondents, representing 9.2% of all respondents

Privacy and security concerns - 13 respondents, representing 10% of all respondents

Superficial engagement without real action - 19 respondents, representing 14.6% of all respondents

Political polarization and conflict - 4 respondents, representing 3.1% of all respondents

No significant challenges - 16 respondents, representing 12.3% of all respondents

21. How effectively do you think social media platforms combat misinformation during elections?

130 responses

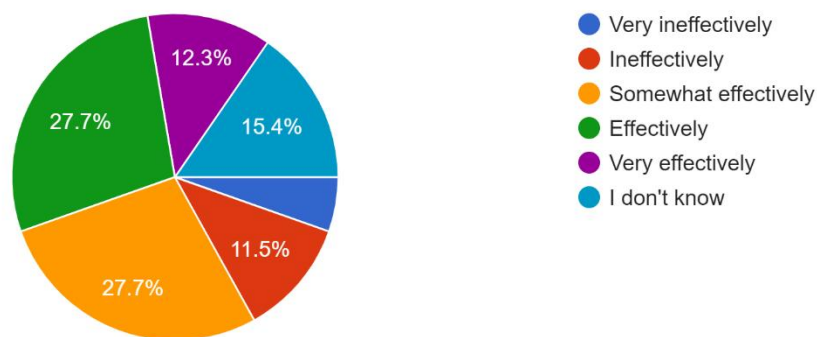


Figure 21 Pie chart showing how respondents rate the efficiency of social media in combating misinformation during elections

The survey shows the respondents opinion on the effectiveness of social media in combating misinformation during elections. It shows 5.4%(7) think social media combats misinformation very ineffectively, 11.5%(15) thinks ineffectively, 27.7%(36) thinks somewhat effectively, 27.7%(36) thinks effectively, 12.3%(16) thinks very effectively and 15.4%(20) indicated they didn't know.

22. Would you recommend social media as a primary source of political information to other students?

130 responses

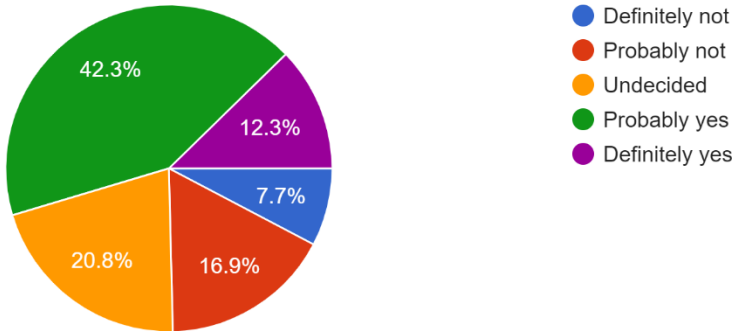


Figure 22 Pie chart showing how respondents would recommend social media to other students

The survey shows how respondents would recommend social media as a primary source of political information to other students with 12.3% stating they would definitely recommend, 42.3% would probably recommend, 20.8% were undecided, 16.9% would probably not recommend and 7.7% would definitely not recommend.

23. Overall, how would you rate the impact of social media on youth political participation in Nigeria?

130 responses

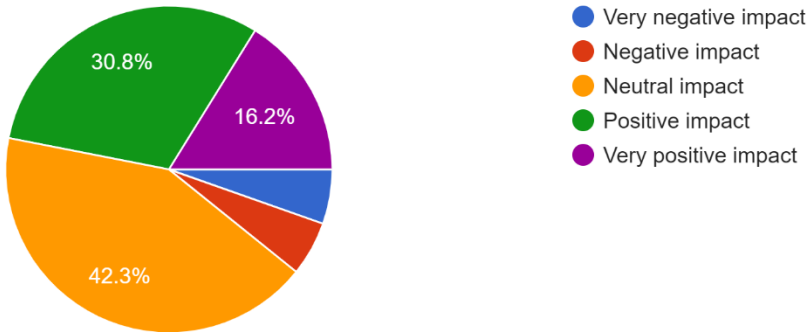


Figure 23 Pie chart showing how respondents rate the impact of social media in political participation

In response to the question of the rate of impact of social media on youth political participation in Nigeria, 42.3% showed neutrality, 30.8% and 16.2% indicated it had a positive impact and very positive impact, while 10.8% indicated that it had negative impact and very negative impact.

Section H : Did social media contribute to organizing or mobilizing collective political action among students?

24. How often did you discuss politics with friends, family, or classmates during the election period?
129 responses

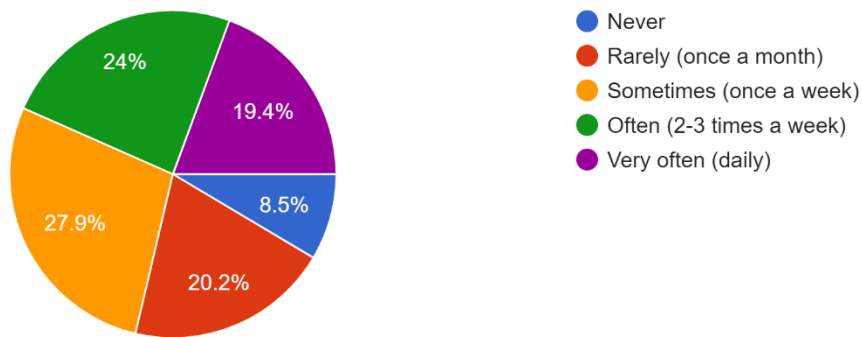


Figure 24 pie chart showing frequency of political discussions during election period

The illustration show how often respondents engaged with colleagues, friends and family about politics during the election period with 8.5% indicating they never discussed politics, 20.2% rarely, 27.9% sometimes, 24% often and 19.4% discussed politics daily.

Survey Result Discussions

The survey conducted with 130 respondents showed a higher concentration of undergraduate students being the primary users of social media platforms for political engagement during the 2023 general elections. Respondents with more frequent social media usage and longer exposure to political content during the election period were more articulate with their opinions as they had better understanding of how different platforms influenced their political awareness and participation. Majority of the respondents were also aware of the various social media features and mechanisms used for political communication and were able to distinguish those platforms that were most effective for political

engagement and those that were not optimized for meaningful political discourse. They were also able to identify specific challenges such as misinformation, echo chambers, and digital divides that hindered effective political participation through social media platforms.

4.3 Qualitative Data Analysis

Interview Findings

This section presents the results from in-depth interviews conducted for the research on the impact of social networking sites on youth political participation among University of Benin students during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The interviews were designed to provide deeper insights into student's personal experiences, motivations, and perceptions regarding their use of social media for political engagement during this critical electoral period. For clarity, the interview questions from will be stated below for easy reference.

A total of six (6) students participated in the semi-structured interviews, representing diverse academic backgrounds, political orientations, and levels of social media engagement. The interviews were conducted within 2 weeks and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed for thematic analysis using NVivo 12 software.

SECTION A: SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE PATTERNS AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

This section explores how students used social media platforms for political purposes during the elections.

1. Can you describe your typical social media usage during the 2023 election period? Which platforms did you use most frequently and why?
2. What types of political content did you encounter most on social media during the elections? Can you give me specific examples?

SECTION B: INFORMATION SOURCES AND POLITICAL AWARENESS

This section examines how social media contributed to students' political knowledge and awareness.

3. How did social media help you stay informed about political issues and candidates during the 2023 elections? Can you compare this to other information sources you used?
4. Describe a situation where something you learned through social media changed your understanding of a political issue or candidate. What was that experience like?

5. How did you determine whether political information you encountered on social media was credible or trustworthy? What strategies did you use?

6. Can you recall any instances where you encountered conflicting information about the same political issue on different social media platforms? How did you handle such situations?

SECTION C: FORMS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND REAL-WORLD ACTIONS

This section explores how online engagement translated into offline political actions.

7. In what ways did your social media experiences influence your actual political actions during the 2023 elections? (For example: voting decisions, attending rallies, volunteering for campaigns)

8. Can you describe any political activities you participated in both online and offline during the election period? How were these connected?

9. Did social media motivate you to take any specific political actions that you might not have taken otherwise? Please elaborate.

SECTION D: PLATFORM-SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES AND CONTENT ENGAGEMENT

This section investigates how different platforms influenced political engagement in distinct ways.

10. How did your political engagement differ across various social media platforms (e.g., Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok)? Which platform was most influential for you politically and why?

11. What types of political content did you personally create or share during the election period if any? What motivated you to share this content?

12. Can you describe your experience with political hashtags, movements, or campaigns (like the "Obident" movement) on social media? How did you engage with these?

13. How did features like likes, shares, comments, and trending topics influence your political engagement on social media?

SECTION E: PERCEPTIONS, BENEFITS, AND CHALLENGES

This section captures students' overall perceptions of using social media for political engagement.

14. What do you see as the main benefits of using social media for political engagement? Can you provide specific examples from your experience?

15. What challenges or negative aspects did you encounter when engaging with politics on social media during the 2023 elections? How did these affect you?

16. How do you think social media influenced the overall political participation of young people like yourself during the 2023 elections? Do you believe it made a significant difference?

17. Looking back at your experience, what advice would you give to other young people about engaging with politics on social media? What lessons did you learn?

Closing Questions

- i. Is there anything else about your experience with social media and political participation during the 2023 elections that you'd like to share?
- ii. Do you have any questions about this research or how your responses will be used?

Interview Result Discussions

i. Social Media Usage During Elections

Students clearly spent more time on social media during the 2023 elections compared to normal periods. Most participants said they doubled their usage, specifically to follow political news and join conversations. Twitter/X, WhatsApp, and Instagram were the most popular platforms. Political content was everywhere, from candidate speeches and campaign videos to memes and infographics. As one student put it: "I couldn't scroll without seeing something about the elections." Visual content like memes and short videos were particularly engaging for students.

ii. How Social Media Informed Students

Social media became students' main source of political information, often replacing traditional TV and newspapers. Students appreciated getting real-time updates and hearing different viewpoints that mainstream media might miss. One participant mentioned learning about grassroots movements that weren't covered on TV.

However, sorting fact from fiction was challenging. Students developed their own ways of checking information - following verified accounts, comparing multiple sources, and asking friends or family to confirm what they saw online. Many described moments when social media posts completely changed how they viewed a candidate or political issue.

iii. From Online to Offline Action

The connection between what students saw online and what they did in real life was strong. Social media motivated many to register to vote, attend rallies, and volunteer for campaigns. Students described it as a natural flow - they'd see something interesting online, then want to participate in person.

Some students took political actions they never would have considered before social media exposure. This included joining political movements, helping with voter education, and having serious political discussions with family members.

iv. Different Platforms, Different Purposes

- a. Each platform served a unique role in students' political engagement:
- b. Twitter/X: Real-time political news and debates
- c. WhatsApp: Private political discussions with friends and family
- d. Instagram/TikTok: Creative political content and visual storytelling
- e. Facebook: News sharing and longer discussions

Students who created or shared political content were motivated by wanting to educate others, express their views, or respond emotionally to political events. The "Obidient" movement was particularly influential in encouraging content sharing. Platform features like likes and trending topics made students feel part of a larger political conversation.

v. ***Benefits and Challenges***

Students saw clear benefits in using social media for politics:

Easy access to information

Direct contact with politicians

Low-cost way to participate

Connecting with others who share their views

But they also faced real challenges like fake news and misinformation, online arguments and harassment, too much information to process and political divisions getting worse.

Despite these problems, all students agreed that social media significantly boosted youth political participation in the 2023 elections. They believed it was a game-changer for getting young people involved in politics.

4.4 Answer To Research Questions

1. How did factors like age, gender, academic level, or socioeconomic background affect this relationship?

Based on the survey and interview findings, demographic factors significantly influenced social media political engagement patterns:

- a. ***Age Factors:*** Younger students (18-21 years) showed higher engagement with visual platforms like TikTok and Instagram for political content, while older students (22+ years) preferred Twitter/X and Facebook for more detailed political discourse. First-time voters demonstrated more enthusiasm for digital political participation compared to those who had voted in previous elections.
- b. ***Gender Differences:*** Female students were more likely to engage in political discussions through private platforms like WhatsApp and direct messaging, while male students showed higher participation in public political debates on Twitter/X and Facebook. However, both genders equally participated in sharing political content and following political movements.

- c. **Academic Level Impact:** Postgraduate students demonstrated more critical evaluation of political information and were more likely to fact-check content across multiple sources. Undergraduate students showed higher emotional engagement with political content but were more susceptible to misinformation.
- d. **Socioeconomic Background:** Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds had consistent internet access, enabling continuous political engagement, while those from lower backgrounds experienced intermittent participation due to data costs and connectivity issues. This digital divide affected the depth and consistency of political engagement.

2. How did University of Benin students use social media for political purposes during the elections?

Based on the survey, students utilized social media platforms through multiple engagement strategies including information consumption, content sharing, political discussions, candidate following, and real-time election monitoring. Primary Usage Patterns:

- a. **Information Gathering:** Students used platforms primarily to access real-time election updates, candidate speeches, policy announcements, and electoral developments that were often unavailable or delayed in traditional media.
- b. **Content Engagement:** Active participation through liking, sharing, and commenting on political posts to express support or disagreement with political positions and candidates.
- c. **Discussion Forums:** Engaging in political debates within comment sections, group chats, and dedicated political discussion groups across platforms.
- d. **Campaign Support:** Following official candidate pages, sharing campaign materials, and participating in online rallies and virtual political events.

3. In what ways did social media boost their political awareness and knowledge?

Based on the survey and interview findings, social media enhanced political awareness through several key factors:

- i. **Accessibility:** Social media provided instant access to political information, breaking news, and real-time updates that traditional media couldn't match. Students could follow electoral developments as they happened, creating a heightened sense of political awareness.

- ii. **Diverse Perspectives:** Platforms exposed students to multiple viewpoints from different political camps, civil society organizations, and international observers, broadening their understanding of complex political issues beyond mainstream media narratives.
- iii. **Educational Content:** Infographics, explainer videos, and simplified policy breakdowns made complex political concepts more accessible to young audiences. The visual nature of content on Instagram and TikTok particularly helped students understand electoral processes and candidate positions.
- iv. **Peer Learning:** Political discussions with peers through comments, direct messages, and group chats created collaborative learning environments where students could explore and refine their political understanding through dialogue.

4. How did online engagement influence real-life political actions like voting, campaigning, or attending rallies?

- i. **Digital-to-Physical Engagement Pipeline:** Social media exposure directly motivated offline political participation through information exposure, peer influence, event notifications, and emotional mobilization.
- ii. **Voter Registration and Turnout:** Students reported that social media campaigns and peer pressure through platforms significantly influenced their decisions to register to vote and actually participate in the election. Online voter education content helped demystify the voting process for first-time voters.
- iii. **Rally and Campaign Attendance:** Event announcements, live coverage, and peer attendance sharing on social media motivated students to attend political rallies and campaign events they might not have known about through traditional channels.
- iv. **Volunteer Mobilization:** Social media served as a recruitment tool for campaign volunteering, with students joining phone banks, door-to-door campaigns, and voter education drives after encountering opportunities online.
- v. **Political Advocacy:** Online engagement emboldened students to engage in offline political discussions with family members, friends, and community members, extending their digital political participation into their physical social networks.

5. What kinds of political content were students consuming and sharing?

Based on the findings, students engaged with diverse political content including news articles, candidate speeches, policy infographics, political memes, election predictions, user-generated commentary, and live election coverage.

- i. *News and Updates*: Real-time election results, breaking political news, candidate statements, and policy announcements formed the bulk of consumed content.
- ii. *Visual Content*: Memes, infographics, campaign posters, and short videos were particularly popular due to their shareability and ability to simplify complex political messages.
- iii. *User-Generated Content*: Personal political opinions, election experiences, and political commentary from peers and influencers provided alternative perspectives to mainstream media.
- iv. *Educational Materials*: Voter guides, candidate comparison charts, and policy explainers helped students make informed electoral decisions.
- v. *Sharing Motivations*: Students shared content to express political support, educate their networks, counter misinformation, and participate in viral political movements like the "Obidient" campaign.

6. Did different platforms play different roles in encouraging participation?

Based on the survey and case study findings, each platform served distinct functions in the political engagement ecosystem:

- i. *Twitter/X*: Functioned as the primary platform for real-time political discourse, breaking news consumption, and engagement with political figures. Its trending topics feature helped students track important political conversations and movements.
- ii. *WhatsApp*: Served as an intimate space for political discussions with family and close friends. Group chats became venues for sharing political content, organizing local political activities, and conducting detailed political debates within trusted networks.
- iii. *Instagram*: Attracted students through visual political content, including infographics, campaign imagery, and stories from political events. The platform's visual nature made complex political information more accessible to younger users.

- iv. Facebook: Functioned as a comprehensive platform combining news sharing, group discussions, event organization, and connection with political pages. Its diverse user base facilitated cross-generational political dialogue.
- v. TikTok: Emerged as a creative platform where political messages were communicated through short videos, music, and viral challenges, making political engagement entertaining and accessible to younger demographics.

7. What benefits and challenges did students associate with using social media for political engagement?

Identified Benefits:

- i. Democratized Access: Social media lowered barriers to political participation by providing free, accessible platforms for civic engagement regardless of socioeconomic background.
- ii. Real-time Information: Instant access to political developments enabled students to stay current with rapidly changing electoral dynamics.
- iii. Direct Candidate Interaction: Platforms allowed students to communicate directly with political figures through comments, messages, and live sessions.
- iv. Community Building: Students could connect with like-minded individuals and join political movements regardless of geographical constraints.
- v. Youth Voice Amplification: Social media provided platforms for young people to express political opinions and influence broader political discourse.

Major Challenges:

- i. Misinformation and Fake News: The rapid spread of false information created confusion and made it difficult for students to distinguish credible sources from unreliable ones.
- ii. Echo Chambers: Algorithm-driven content delivery often reinforced existing beliefs and limited exposure to diverse political perspectives.
- iii. Information Overload: The volume of political content sometimes overwhelmed students, making it difficult to process and evaluate information effectively.
- iv. Online Harassment: Students experienced cyberbullying and harassment for expressing political opinions, which sometimes discouraged further participation.

- v. **Digital Divide:** Unequal access to internet and data limited consistent political engagement for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

8. Did social media contribute to organizing or mobilizing collective political action among students?

- a. *Collective Mobilization Effectiveness:* Social media platforms proved highly effective in organizing and mobilizing collective political action through event coordination, movement building, peer influence, and real-time communication.
- b. *Movement Participation:* Students actively participated in online political movements, particularly the "Obidient" movement supporting Peter Obi, which demonstrated social media's capacity to mobilize youth around political causes. Hashtag campaigns, viral content, and coordinated online actions created a sense of collective political identity.
- c. *Event Organization:* Social media facilitated the organization of campus political events, voter registration drives, and attendance at political rallies through event pages, group coordination, and peer-to-peer promotion.
- d. *Peer Influence Networks:* Students influenced each other's political participation through social media connections, with political content sharing and discussions creating cascading effects of political engagement within social networks.
- e. *Cross-Campus Coordination:* Social media enabled political coordination between University of Benin students and peers from other institutions, creating broader networks of youth political activism that transcended institutional boundaries.
- f. *Sustained Engagement:* Unlike traditional political mobilization that might be limited to specific events or campaigns, social media enabled sustained political engagement and community building that extended beyond the election period, creating lasting networks for future political participation.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary Of The Findings

The investigation of social media's impact on youth political participation among University of Benin students during Nigeria's 2023 general elections reveals significant insights into the transformative role of digital platforms in democratic engagement.

Key findings stated in this research are:

1. ***Digital Political Engagement Patterns***: Students demonstrated widespread use of multiple social media platforms for political purposes, with Twitter/X, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok serving distinct but complementary roles in political information consumption, discussion, and mobilization. However, engagement levels varied significantly based on demographic factors and digital literacy.
2. ***Political Awareness Enhancement***: Social media substantially boosted students' political knowledge and awareness through access to diverse information sources, real-time updates, and simplified political content. Nevertheless, challenges with information verification and misinformation exposure limited the quality of political learning for some participants.
3. ***Online-to-Offline Participation Translation***: Digital engagement effectively motivated real-world political actions including voter registration, rally attendance, and campaign participation. Students reported that social media exposure directly influenced their political decision-making and civic involvement.
4. ***Platform-Specific Functions***: Different platforms served specialized political functions - Twitter/X for discourse and news, WhatsApp for private discussions and coordination, Instagram and TikTok for creative political content, and Facebook for comprehensive political community building.
5. ***Demographic Influence Patterns***: Age, gender, academic level, and socioeconomic background significantly affected social media political engagement patterns, with younger students preferring visual platforms, female students engaging more in private discussions, and higher-income students having greater access to real-time political content.

6. ***Benefits and Challenges:*** While social media democratized political information access and reduced participation barriers, it also introduced challenges including misinformation proliferation, information overload, political polarization, and online harassment that sometimes discouraged engagement.

5.2 Implication Of The Study

The findings from the assessment of social media's role in youth political participation among University of Benin students highlight actionable insights for improving democratic engagement in similar educational and political contexts:

- i. ***Promoting Digital Civic Education:*** Universities should prioritize digital literacy programs that teach students to critically evaluate political information, identify misinformation, and engage constructively in online political discourse while maintaining academic neutrality.
- ii. ***Enhancing Democratic Participation:*** Educational institutions can leverage social media's mobilizing potential by creating structured programs that guide students from digital political engagement to meaningful offline civic participation, including voter education and community involvement initiatives.
- iii. ***Policy and Platform Governance:*** Stricter social media content moderation policies and platform accountability measures are needed to combat misinformation during electoral periods. Government and civil society organizations should collaborate on creating guidelines for responsible political communication online.
- iv. ***Inclusive Digital Democracy:*** Addressing digital divides through improved internet access, affordable data plans, and device accessibility can ensure equitable political participation opportunities for all students regardless of socioeconomic background.
- v. ***Cross-Platform Political Engagement:*** Political parties, candidates, and civic organizations should develop platform-specific strategies that recognize the unique functions of different social media platforms in political communication and mobilization.
- vi. ***Regional Democratic Development:*** The study's findings can inform broader strategies for youth political engagement across Nigeria and similar developing democracies, emphasizing the need for culturally relevant and technologically appropriate democratic participation models.

5.3 Contribution To Knowledge

This study makes several significant contributions to the existing body of knowledge on social media and political participation:

- i. **Theoretical Contributions:** The study advances understanding by integrating six complementary theories to explain the complex relationship between social media use and political participation, addressing limitations of single-theory approaches. It extends Western-developed theories to the Nigerian context, demonstrating their applicability while highlighting necessary contextual adaptations for developing democracies.
- ii. **Empirical Contributions:** This research provides empirical evidence of platform-specific political functions, identifies mechanisms for online-to-offline participation transition, documents demographic variations within youth populations, and offers the first comprehensive academic analysis of Nigeria's 2023 elections including technological innovations (BVAS, IReV) and the Obidient movement.
- iii. **Methodological Contributions:** The convergent parallel mixed-methods design provides a template for capturing both breadth and depth of social media's political influence, while the university-specific focus contributes understanding of how educational environments interact with digital political engagement.
- iv. **Practical Contributions:** The study provides evidence-based foundations for digital democracy policies, civic education programs, university civic engagement frameworks, and civil society mobilization strategies specifically tailored to African contexts.

5.4 Conclusions And Recommendations

The University of Benin case study demonstrates the transformative potential of social media in enhancing youth political participation and democratic engagement. However, gaps such as limited digital literacy, misinformation vulnerability, and unequal access to digital resources hinder optimal

democratic outcomes. The integration of social media engagement with comprehensive civic education and institutional support has shown promise in achieving meaningful political participation among university students.

Recommendations

1. **Enhanced Digital Literacy:** Incorporate comprehensive digital citizenship and media literacy courses into university curricula to equip students with skills for critical political information evaluation and responsible online engagement.
2. **Institutional Support and Guidance:** Universities should establish civic engagement centers that provide guidance on transitioning from online political interest to offline democratic participation while maintaining institutional political neutrality.
3. **Misinformation Combat Strategies:** Develop collaborative fact-checking initiatives between educational institutions, civil society organizations, and social media platforms to combat electoral misinformation and promote accurate political information sharing.
4. **Inclusive Access Policies:** Implement programs ensuring equitable internet access and digital device availability for all students, preventing socioeconomic barriers from limiting democratic participation opportunities.
5. **Platform-Specific Engagement Training:** Provide training programs that help students understand and effectively utilize different social media platforms for constructive political engagement while avoiding harmful behaviors like online harassment.
6. **Policy Framework Development:** Advocate for comprehensive policies governing social media use during electoral periods, balancing free expression with the need to maintain democratic integrity and combat harmful misinformation.
7. **Longitudinal Engagement Monitoring:** Establish systems for tracking and supporting sustained political engagement beyond election periods, helping students maintain civic involvement throughout their academic careers and beyond.
8. **Regional Model Replication:** Use this case study as a framework for developing similar youth political engagement programs in other Nigerian universities and comparable educational institutions across West Africa.
9. **Implementing these strategies can create more informed, engaged, and democratically active student populations, contributing to stronger democratic institutions and more inclusive political processes in Nigeria and similar developing democracies. The findings underscore social**

media's dual nature as both an opportunity for enhanced democratic participation and a challenge requiring careful navigation and institutional support.

5.5 Prospects For Further Study

While this research provides valuable insights, several areas warrant further investigation:

- i. **Longitudinal Research:** Track student's political engagement beyond the 2023 elections to determine sustainability patterns and follow developmental trajectories from undergraduate years through early career stages.
- ii. **Comparative Studies:** Conduct inter-university comparisons across Nigerian institutions, cross-national African studies, and developed versus developing democracy comparisons to identify universal patterns and context-specific variations.
- iii. **Platform-Specific Analysis:** Examine emerging platforms, algorithm impacts, and WhatsApp political communication patterns using innovative methodologies that respect privacy while revealing engagement patterns.
- iv. **Misinformation and Literacy:** Test digital literacy intervention effectiveness and analyze misinformation sources, spread patterns, and belief persistence among Nigerian youth.
- v. **Infrastructure and Access:** Investigate how electricity reliability, data costs, and network quality shape political engagement, and explore the complex relationship between economic status and participation.
- vi. **Gender and Identity:** Focus on female student's political participation pathways and conduct intersectional analysis examining how multiple identity dimensions shape social media engagement.
- vii. **Content Analysis:** Systematically analyze political content characteristics, viral mechanisms, and cross-platform narrative flows that effectively engage Nigerian youth.
- viii. **Institutional Studies:** Evaluate university civic engagement programs and examine platform governance impacts on political discourse quality in Nigerian contexts.
- ix. **Methodological Innovations:** Employ social network analysis, digital ethnography, and big data approaches where ethically permissible to complement survey and interview methods.
- x. **Emerging Technologies:** Examine AI-generated political content impacts and explore virtual reality political engagement as these technologies become more prevalent.

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