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## Social media and political participation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Evidence from 2015–2023

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### Abstract

*This study explores the transformative impact of social media on political participation in Nigeria during the Fourth Republic (2015–2023). Amidst the widespread adoption of digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram, Nigeria's political communication landscape has undergone a profound transformation. Political engagement, particularly among Nigerian youth, has shifted toward more decentralized, real-time, and interactive forms of civic involvement. Drawing on empirical data and grounded in established democratic theories, this study analyzes how social media influences political knowledge, voting behavior, civic activism, and the broader democratic process in Nigeria. The research focuses on the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), a microcosm of the country's socio-political diversity. The study adopted the agenda setting-theory to explore the nexus between social media and political participation. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study incorporates quantitative survey responses and qualitative interviews to examine the drivers, patterns, and limitations of digital political engagement. Findings reveal that social media serves as a significant enabler of political participation. It offers users access to timely political information, spaces for public discourse, and tools for mobilization. However, the study also uncovers challenges such as misinformation, digital exclusion, and shallow participation that often fails to translate into sustained civic action. The paper concludes that social media is not a substitute for traditional democratic institutions but functions as a complementary mechanism capable of strengthening participatory democracy—if supported by digital literacy and inclusive access.*

**Keywords:** Social media, political participation, Nigeria, Fourth Republic, digital democracy.

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### 1. Introduction

Democracy is predicated on the active participation of citizens in political processes. In democratic systems, participation not only legitimizes governance but ensures representation, accountability, and responsiveness. Over time, communication technologies have played a critical role in enabling or constraining this engagement. The emergence of social media has radically transformed the way people participate in political discourse and civic life. In

contexts such as Nigeria—where traditional media have often been state-controlled or elite-dominated—social media platforms have opened new arenas for public expression, mobilization, and contestation.

Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999 marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic, a period that has since witnessed both progress and regression in political participation. Electoral processes have expanded, but voter apathy, electoral



violence, vote buying, and institutional mistrust remain persistent (Oche, 2020). Against this backdrop, the role of social media in reshaping the democratic experience demands careful scholarly attention.

The 2015 general elections were particularly significant. For the first time, digital platforms were widely used for political communication, campaign organization, and election monitoring. Politicians, parties, civil society organizations, and voters increasingly turned to social media to mobilize support and hold authorities accountable. This trend accelerated during the 2019 and 2023 electoral cycles, further driven by high smartphone penetration, lower internet costs, and the digital-savvy youth population.

Despite the increasing relevance of social media, the literature on its impact in Nigeria remains uneven. Many studies either focus narrowly on electoral campaigns or treat social media as a monolith. There is limited empirical work on how different demographics engage with digital platforms, or how such engagement affects political behavior beyond the ballot box.

This study seeks to fill that gap. It aims to assess the influence of social media on political participation in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. Specifically, it examines:

- i. How does the social media influence the accessibility of political information among Nigerians?
- ii. To what extent does social media shape political decision-making?
- iii. What role does social media play in shaping the political perceptions?
- iv. How do social media influence the level of engagement and political participation?
- v. In what specific ways do political actors utilize social media to mobilize support?

The Federal Capital Territory (FCT) was selected for the study due to its diverse,

urban, and politically engaged population. By drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the study offers a holistic understanding of social media's democratic potential and limitations in Nigeria.

## 2. Literature Review

### Conceptual Review

A widely cited definition for social media by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) summarizes this as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.

**Social Media** Refers to digital platforms and technologies (e.g., Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube) that enable users to create, share, and interact with content, ideas, and information. In the context of this study, social media is measured by the frequency and nature of usage by Nigerian citizens for political engagement, such as sharing political news, participating in online discussions, mobilizing for protests, or advocating for political candidates.

A classic definition from Verba, Nie, and Kim (1978) defines participation as "those legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions that they take. Political Participation defined as the active involvement of citizens in political processes, both online and offline. This includes activities such as voting, attending political rallies, engaging in political debates on social media, signing online petitions, joining political campaigns, and using social media to hold leaders accountable. Political participation is operationalized through measurable actions, such as the number of political posts shared, the volume of political hashtags used, or the level of engagement in online political discussions.



## Empirical Review

Social media's rise has prompted extensive debate among scholars about its implications for democracy. Optimists argue that digital platforms empower citizens by providing low-cost tools for information dissemination, collective mobilization, and real-time communication. Pessimists caution that these same platforms enable misinformation, deepen polarization, and foster superficial activism (Morozov, 2011).

Globally, researchers such as Castells (2012), Shirky (2011), and Tufekci (2017) have emphasized how social media allows citizens to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, create their own narratives, and challenge dominant power structures. The Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Black Lives Matter movements all demonstrate the role of social media in amplifying marginalized voices and coordinating grassroots movements.

From a theoretical standpoint, several frameworks are useful for understanding digital political participation. The Civic Voluntarism Model (Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995) identifies resources (time, money, skills), engagement (interest, efficacy), and recruitment (mobilization networks) as key drivers of participation. Social media lowers the cost of all three. Similarly, the Political Efficacy Theory posits that digital tools enhance individuals' belief in their ability to influence politics—an important determinant of political engagement.

In the African context, digital activism is often seen as a response to democratic deficits and restricted civic space. According to Bosch (2017), social media enables alternative narratives in post-colonial democracies, often fostering youth-led activism. In Nigeria, several scholars have examined the role of social media in elections (Madueke et al., 2017; Odoemelam and Adibe, 2011), but more

work is needed to understand the broader participatory ecosystem.

The #EndSARS movement in 2020 represents a watershed moment. Largely coordinated via Twitter and Instagram, the protest demonstrated the capacity of digital platforms to not only mobilize crowds but to shape national conversations, bypassing traditional media filters.

In another study, social media has also made it easier for Nigerians to engage with political actors. In the past, citizens had to rely on traditional media outlets, such as newspapers and television, to communicate with their elected representatives. However, social media has given citizens a direct line of communication with their politicians. Politicians now use social media to share information about their activities, to respond to constituent concerns, and to solicit feedback (Ademilokun, 2020).

Similarly, Adebiyi and Ajibola (2016) found that social media is the primary source of political information for over half of Nigerian youth. The study also found that social media is more trusted than traditional media sources by many Nigerian youth. Social media has also had a significant impact on the nature of political discourse in Nigeria. Social media has made it easier for people to express their political opinions and to engage with other people who have different political views. However, social media has also been used to spread misinformation and hate speech.

Despite its many benefits, social media also presents a number of challenges for Nigerian politics. One challenge is the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Social media platforms are often used to spread fake news and propaganda, which can have a negative impact on the political process (Lawal and Momoh, 2018). Another challenge is the use of social media to incite violence and hate speech. This has been a particular



problem during election periods (Okpala and Emejulu, 2023). Lawal and Momoh (2018) also found that social media was used to spread political propaganda and hate speech during the 2015 Nigerian presidential election. The study also found that social media was used to spread misinformation about the election process. Yet, social media's impact is not uniformly positive. Fake news, echo chambers, and cyberbullying often undermine the quality of discourse. Moreover, the digital divide—driven by infrastructure, education, and gender disparities—limits who participates and how. Studies also show that while social media can raise awareness, it does not always lead to sustained offline action (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020).

Whilst extant studies have addressed various aspects of social media's role in political processes, a significant gap remains in understanding its specific influence on political participation and decision-making among Nigerians in the Fourth Republic (2015-2023). Previous studies often focus on social media's general impact on political discourse and participation globally, yet fail to provide an in-depth analysis of its effects within the unique socio-political context of Nigeria

### 3. Methodology

The population of the study consists of respondents (key stakeholders, including politicians, social media experts, and active social media users) in the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria, which is made up of six Area Councils namely:

### 4. Findings and Discussion

The results are presented in four broad categories reflecting usage, participation, demography, and challenges.

#### Social Media and Political Participation in Nigeria (2015–2023)

RQ / Focus Area	Key Findings	Quantitative Data	Respondent Insights	Supporting Literature &	Null Proposition (NP)	Refutation of NP
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Abaji, Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC), Bwari, Gwagwalada, Kuje, and Kwali. The total population of these councils, according to United Nations World Population Census (2022), is 4,026,000. This study adopted a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design to explore the relationship between social media and political participation in the FCT. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used simultaneously to ensure data complementarity and enhance validity. The population consisted of residents of the six area councils of the FCT who were 18 years and older and had access to at least one social media platform. A sample size of 400 respondents was determined using Taro Yamane's formula, and stratified random sampling ensured representation across age, gender, and socio-economic status. A structured survey was developed to capture demographic data, frequency of social media use, type of political content accessed, and forms of political engagement (e.g., voting, protesting, and advocacy). Interviews: 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth activists, journalists, civil society members, and ordinary citizens. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 25), with descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and chi-square tests employed to examine associations. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and their consent was obtained. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and participation was voluntary.



				Views		
RQ1: Accessibi lity & Consump tion	Social media democratiz ed access to political info, replacing traditional media.	82.5% say social media eased access to info. 75% use it as primary source.	Constant use by 62.5% of respondent s. 40% neutral on influence on understand ing.	Hon. Gambo, Mr. Isiaka; Johansso n (2019); Effing et al. (2011)	NP1: Accessibility doesn't influence behavior.	Thesis shows increased access does influence behavior.
RQ2: Political Decision- Making	Social media influenc ed by political decisions but varies across users.	47.5% influenc ed by social media. 37.5% neutral. 25% agree influenc ers affect decision s.	Neutrality suggests cautious or critical evaluation.	Mrs. Jibril, Mr. Ahmad; Bode & Dalrymple (2016); Valenzue la et al. (2012)	NP2: High usage doesn't affect decision- making.	Study shows notable influence through real-time updates and varied perspective s.
RQ3: Attitudes & Perceptio ns	Platforms shape user attitudes and reinforce beliefs via algorithms and echo chambers.	50% strongly agree it shapes attitudes. 79.25% agree it affects candidat e percepti on.	Echo chamber & reinforcem ent effect. Some users remain neutral.	Mrs. Onawo, Mrs. Samuel; Stromer- Galley (2014); Adebiyi & Ajibola (2016)	NP3: Social media doesn't shape attitudes/percep tions.	Findings confirm strong influence on attitudes, opinions, and perceptions .
RQ4: Engagem ent & Participat ion	Mixed outcomes: high info access, moderate motivation for participatio n.	41.5% neutral on staying informed via social media. 48% agree it motivate s	Neutrality and disagreem ent on offline participati on noted.	Mr. Akinbob oye, Hon. Gambo; Howard et al. (2011); Kaplan & Haenlein (2010)	NP4: Social media doesn't enhance engagement.	The thesis documents online and offline activism, disproving the NP.



		discussion. Only 12% strongly agreed it led to action.				
RQ5: Use by Political Actors	Social media vital for party communication, youth engagement & campaign reach.	54% say parties use it effectively. 60% say campaigns influence decision s. 64% say interest groups use it well.	36% skeptical about meaningful leader-citizen engagement.	Mr. Nevaluz, Mr. Aliyu; Smith & Rainie (2008); Madueke et al. (2017)	NP5: Political actors don't use it effectively.	Clear documentation of effective usage in mobilization and communication.

Composed by the Author, 2025

## Discussion

### Accessibility and Consumption (RQ1)

**Key Finding:** Social media has largely replaced traditional media as the primary source of political information for most Nigerians. This shift reflects a democratization of information flow, granting users greater autonomy and bypassing traditional media gatekeepers. An overwhelming 82.5% of respondents reported easier access to political content via platforms like X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, and Facebook, with 75% considering them their main source. This finding aligns with the work of Johansson (2019) and Effing et al. (2011), which highlight how digital platforms disrupt conventional information hierarchies.

**Researcher's Position:** The data confirms that social media is a powerful tool for political awareness, but this newfound accessibility also raises concerns about the quality and veracity of information.

### Political Decision-Making (RQ2)

**Key Finding:** Social media significantly influences political decisions, but this impact is moderated by users' critical evaluation. While 47.5% of respondents noted that social media influences their political choices, a significant 37.5% remained neutral, indicating a level of skepticism and media literacy. The low influence attributed to social media influencers (25% agreement) suggests Nigerians value content authenticity over personality-driven persuasion. This is consistent with findings from Bode & Dalrymple (2016) and Valenzuela et al. (2012), which show that real-time updates and diverse perspectives found on social media can notably affect decision-making.

**Researcher's Position:** The notable neutrality underscores the need for media literacy campaigns to help citizens navigate the complexities of online political discourse and make informed decisions.



### Shaping Political Perceptions (RQ3)

**Key Finding:** Social media platforms are effective at shaping user attitudes and reinforcing beliefs, often through algorithmic curation and the creation of echo chambers. Nearly 80% of respondents agreed that social media shapes their political perceptions. This suggests platforms are not just a source of information but active agents in attitude formation. However, this reinforcement can lead to filter bubbles and ideological polarization, and a concerning number of respondents agreed that this affects their perception of political candidates. This finding resonates with the work of Stromer-Galley (2014) and Adebiyi & Ajibola (2016), which emphasize the role of algorithms in creating biased information environments.

**Researcher's Position:** This confirms that social media's power to shape perceptions is a double-edged sword, capable of both raising awareness and amplifying misinformation.

### Engagement and Participation (RQ4)

**Key Finding:** While social media fosters high levels of political discussion, it has a mixed and moderate impact on motivating offline political action. A significant portion of respondents (48%) are motivated to engage in online discussions, but this doesn't consistently translate into offline participation. Only 12% reported that social media led them to participate in protests or campaigns. This suggests that while platforms are powerful tools for informational and emotional support, real-world action is influenced by other factors such as civic motivation and risk perception. This aligns with research by Howard et al. (2011) and Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), which document a gap between online engagement and offline activism, often referred to as "slacktivism."

**Researcher's Position:** This finding highlights a crucial challenge: converting online political discourse into tangible,

real-world participation remains a key hurdle for digital activism in Nigeria.

### Utilization by Political Actors (RQ5)

**Key Finding:** Political parties, candidates, and interest groups are effectively leveraging social media for communication, mobilization, and youth engagement.

The data shows that a majority of respondents (54%) believe parties use social media effectively, and 60% feel that campaigns on these platforms influence their choices. This indicates that political actors have recognized and capitalized on the direct and personalized outreach potential of social media, bypassing traditional media filters. This finding is supported by Smith & Rainie (2008) and Madueke et al. (2017), who documented the growing use of social media as a core component of political communication strategies.

**Researcher's Position:** The effective use of social media by political actors shows its critical role in modern political campaigning in Nigeria, although challenges like digital literacy and trust in online engagement persist.

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendation

The overarching narrative of this study substantiates that social media is a powerful, albeit nuanced, instrument of political participation in Nigeria. It plays a pivotal role in shaping information access, attitudes, and decisions, particularly among the federal capital territory populace. However, its full potential in enhancing democratic engagement is tempered by user caution, trust issues, and socio-political dynamics.

### Recommendations:

1. Media literacy programs should be introduced or expanded to educate users on how to critically evaluate social media content, distinguish between credible and unreliable sources, and recognize misinformation. These programs could be implemented through partnerships



between government agencies, civil society organizations, and educational institutions to foster a more informed electorate capable of making decisions based on verified and balanced information.

2. Political parties and campaigns should prioritize transparency and authenticity in their social media content over personality-driven influence. The study found that while social media influences decisions, users are skeptical of content from influencers. This indicates that direct, verifiable information about a party's stance, policies, and actions will be more effective than celebrity endorsements or personality-driven campaigns.

3. Government institutions, non-governmental organizations, and civil society groups should leverage the power of social media to run civic education campaigns that not only inform citizens about political processes, but also encourage them to participate in offline activities such as voting, town hall meetings, and political rallies. Interactive platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and X can be used to create campaigns that manages and monitors perceptions of individual in Nigeria.

4. Political organizations and civic groups should create clear pathways for converting online interest into offline action. The findings show a disconnect between online discussion and offline participation. To bridge this gap, political parties and other stakeholders can use social media to not only discuss issues but also to directly mobilize people for specific, tangible actions like voter registration drives, town hall meetings, or community service projects.

5. Political actors and public officials should use social media for genuine, two-way engagement, not just for broadcasting messages. The study notes a skepticism about meaningful leader-citizen engagement. To build trust, politicians

must move beyond using social media as a one-way communication channel and instead use it to host Q&A sessions, solicit feedback, and directly address constituent concerns, thereby demonstrating accountability and fostering a more responsive political culture.

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