

Election Participation among Ikwerre Ethnic Group in Nigeria: Do Social Media and Personal Belief Counts?

By

Enyelunekpo R. Roberts,

Department of Psychology, Rivers State University,
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Email: rosemary.roberts@ust.edu.edu

Deborah I. Nwokongbe

Department of Psychology, Rivers State University,
Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

And

Emmanuel E. Uye^{3*}

Department of Psychology,
University of Ibadan, Nigeria

***Corresponding author:** emmanuel.e.uye@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7867-270X>

Abstract

Citizens' participation in the election of public figures into the executive arms of the government has been widely accepted as one of the fundamental rights of every citizen. Studies have investigated several predictors of election participation with varied results. Therefore, this study was aimed to decode social media and personal belief as predictors of election participation among Ikwerre ethnic groups in Nigeria. Social descriptive survey was adopted while purposive sampling technique was used to select the study population. Data were collected from 260 participants using validated scaled and analyzed using multiple regression analysis and independent samples t-test. Two hypotheses were tested and accepted at $p=.001$ level of significance. The result showed that social media and personal belief jointly predicted election participation among Ikwerre ethnic groups in Nigeria [$R^2 = .623$, $F(2, 257) = 130.006$, $p = .001$]. Furthermore, social media ($\beta = .306$, $t = 6.743$, $p = .001$) and personal belief ($\beta = .642$, $t = 14.127$, $p = .001$) independently predicted election participation among study participants. Finally, the result indicated significant gender difference among study participants [$t(258) = [17.308]$, $p = .001$] such that male participants scored higher in election participation ($M= 43.510$, $SD = 6.841$) compared to female counterparts ($M=30.420$, $SD = 2.749$). The novelty of these findings comes as the first time social media and personal belief on election participation among ethnic groups is investigated in Nigeria. It is recommended that social media platform should be used to educate the general public on what are expected of them in order to improve their attitude towards election participation. Also, the electoral body should carry out timely campaign and sensitization programmes on the need for eligible candidates to come forth and participate in election processes.

Keywords: Social Media, Personal Belief, Election Participation, Ikwerre Ethnic Group

Introduction

Political participation is an individual's involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives to select individuals into elective positions or offices for effective administration of human and material resources of the local, state and federal government for a better society (Nwokomgbe, 2023). Also, it has been described as the various mechanisms through which the public express their political views and exercise their influence on the political process (Chatora, 2012). Abubakar (2012) conceives political participation as the involvement of people in any political process before a collective decision is arrived at. In other words, political participation entails citizens' engagement in the discourse of socio-political and economic issues which serve as yardsticks for choosing would be leaders. Nigeria, with over 250 ethnic groups has now experienced 25 years of unbroken democracy having escaped the grip of military government.

The enthusiasm to participate in politicking and electioneering has been fraught with several challenges especially among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. Some factors have been implicated as predictors of election participation in Nigeria. One factor considered in this study is social media which is a computer-based communication platform used to disseminate information, messages, whether audio or visual to a target population to influence participation in elections (Nwokomgbe, 2023). The introduction of social media into political campaigns and the electioneering process has changed the landscape of politicking in Nigeria. The technology is participatory, interactive and cost-effective. This has made it the medium of the day as far as political communication and participation are concerned (Sule et al., 2017). Mano (2023) maintains that social media have become a main source of personal orientation, anonymous inter-activities and social community on a variety of issues that involve politics and political discourse including participation in election. Also, social media capacity to boost participation is due to its connectedness and textual/audio-visual characteristics appeal. For example, the use of social media such as Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, the 2go, GSM-SMS/calls, blackberries services, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc, have made political participation much easier, faster and even more cost effective than before now (Mano, 2023). Social media has been found to be a veritable tool in modern electioneering and individual participation (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020; Muntean, 2015). Nigeria had her first true test of social media use for political participation

during the 2019 and 2023 general elections with the introduction of smartcard readers to capture voters' bio-data and used in voting and transmission of results online to the central servers for the announcement of the results. Studies have shown that individuals who scored high in social media use would score high in election participation (Kurfi, 2015; Shehu, 2014; Sule et al., 2017).

The second factor considered in this study is individual personal belief which is described as “an individual's core values, morals and ethics as well as personal experiences” (Bobis et al., 2016) that would predict an individual's participation in election. During the 2015 general election, voters were found to vote according to ethnic sentiment, religious bias, personality of the aspirants and perceived gain that would be obtained after the election (Sule et al., 2017). Also, Ibrahim et al. (2015) noted that fear, in-security, expectations and economic situation were some of the personal beliefs and values that affected individual participation in the election. Some studies have found that individuals who scored high in just world scales would score high in election participation scale (Hidayatullah et al., 2023). Specifically, Falola (2019) and Ritzer and Jeffrey (2014) found that personal beliefs and values trigger actions that would ginger participation in elections.

Finally, gender is considered in this study to influence election participation. Politics has been tagged a dirty game which men rather than women participate in. The new affirmation declaration of giving women 10 percent slots into elective positions has been seen as a positive avenue for women to seek political offices in Nigeria including the ethnic minority groups. Studies on the influence of gender in elections tend to give varied results. For example, Ujo (2012) found that more men than women were active participants in elections. However, Ibrahim et al. (2015) found new drives for women to enter into politics have changed their attitudes toward their participation in elections .

Studies have examined several predictors of election participation with varied results. Also, studies linking social media and personal beliefs on election participation in Nigeria are scarce leaving gaps in knowledge to fill. To this end, the study investigated social media and personal beliefs as predictors of election participation among Ikwerre ethnic groups in Rivers State,

Nigeria. The study was guided by the following research questions: Would social media and personal beliefs jointly and independently predict election participation among Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria? And would there be gender differences in election participation among the Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria?

The study would provide seminal information on social media and personal beliefs as factors predicting attitude towards election participation among Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria. In addition, politicians, media consultants, election umpires, general public and researchers would mine data from this study to formulate policies and programmes on how to increase public participation in election matters among ethnic nationalities and in the larger societies in Nigeria.

Theoretical construct

This study was anchored using the social representation theory (SRT) developed by Moscovici (1984) and later improved on by other theorists (Penz, 2006; Moscardo, 2011; Andersén & Andersén, 2014; Becken, 2016). The theory proposes a collective concept of values, ideas, beliefs, cultures and traditions that are shared by the group of members in a community (Moscovici, 1984). SRT consists of a bundle of organized judgments, attitudes and information with a hierarchical structure that a social group creates with respect to a social object or situation. They are constructed in daily life by individuals through communication and behaviour that can serve to create a basis for future reference (Andersén & Andersén, 2014; Becken, 2016). SRT emphasizes the importance of social sharing on individual attitudes and behaviors. Social representation theory is decomposed into three dimensions: Direct experience of an event, social interaction, and the media (Li et al., 2015). These three dimensions influence the individuals' evaluations of the social activities and affect individual perceptions, attitudes and behaviors including that of participating in elections (Ying, 2004). When applied to this study, it means that community thrives when individuals interact and shared information that changes attitudes and behaviour, in this context, election participation.

The following hypotheses were tested:

H1: Social media and personal beliefs would jointly and independently predict election participation among Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria.

H2: Gender would significantly influence election participation among the Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design where data are collected from a large population at a single point in time (Setia, 2016). The design is used when variables are not manipulated by the researcher. The design is appropriate when studying large population. The independent variables were social media and personal beliefs while the dependent variable was election participation.

Setting

The study was carried out in Ikwerre Local Government Area (LGA) in Rivers State, Nigeria. Its headquarters is in the town of Isiokpo. They are the Igbo subgroup in Rivers State. The Ikwerre (natively known as *Iwhuruṣha*) is one of the Igbo subgroups in Rivers State. They are the largest ethnic group in Rivers State. The ethnographic study of the Igbo speaking peoples of South Eastern Nigeria classified Ikwerre into seven groups called "Ikwerre Essa". They are Elele, Isiokpo, Rumuji, Emohua, Choba, Aluu, Igwuruta and Obio group. The study on this ethnic group would bring to light her rich cultural heritage and political relevance both in Rivers State and in the Nigerian nations.

Population of the Study

The total population for this study consisted of all the 112, 126 registered voters in Ikwerre Local Government Area (LGA) for the 2023 general election as presented by the Independent National Electoral Commission.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling technique is used to select respondents that are most likely to yield appropriate and useful information' (Kelly, 2010). This was used to select the LGA while simple random sampling technique was used to 10 from 23 electoral wards from the LGA. Convenience

sampling technique was used to distribute questionnaires to potential participants in the study. Bukhari (2020) sample size calculator was used to calculate sample size based on the total population of 112,126 registered voters in the 2023 general election which was 264 (384).

Instruments for Data Collection

The following instruments were used for data collection:

Facebook Intensity Questionnaire (FBIQ, Rosen et al., 2013) was used to measure social media usage. It is a 15-item, using a 5-point Likert's response format ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample items include: "I check my social media accounts frequently throughout the day" and "I feel anxious if I am unable to access my social media accounts". Authors obtained Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 and in this study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.79 was obtained.

Personal Belief in a Just World Questionnaire (PBJWQ, Gorsuch & Mcpherson (1989) was used to assess personal belief and value. It is a 20-item scale using a 5-point Likert's response format ranging from strongly disagrees to strongly agree. Sample items include: "People generally get what they deserve in life" and "I believe that good things happen to good people". Authors obtained Cronbach's alpha of 0.76 and in this study, Cronbach's alpha of 0.78 was obtained.

Election Participation Questionnaire (EPQ, Blais, et al., 2015) was used to evaluate election participation among study participants. The scale contained 15 items presented on a 5-point Likert's format with responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Sample items include: "I believe it is important to vote in elections" and "I have voted in previous elections". Authors obtained Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 while in this study Cronbach's alpha of 0.81 was obtained.

Procedure for Data Collection

A letter of introduction was obtained from the Department of Psychology, Rivers State University, Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Nigeria in which the researchers presented to the local electoral authority in the LGA for the permission to conduct the study. Potential participants in the study were met at homes, recreational centers, group meetings, and a few in their election constituency offices across different political parties. They were invited to participate in the study by explaining the voluntary nature of the study and assurance of confidentiality of their responses. No incentive was offered to any participant. Questionnaires distributed were collected on the spot. A total of 267 questionnaires were distributed and during

screening and coding, seven questionnaires were found to be half-completed and were removed thus leaving 260 used for the analysis.

Data Analysis

IBM SPSS version 26 was used for data analysis. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were computed. Hypothesis was tested using multiple regression analysis while hypothesis 2 was tested using independent samples t-test. All the hypotheses were accepted at $p = .001$ level of significance.

Results

Table 1 presents participants' demographic variables collected and analyzed in this study.

Table1. Demographic data

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	146	56.0
Female	114	44.0
Age		
Below 30yrs	96	37.0
31-40yrs	65	25.0
41-50yrs	52	20.0
Above 51yrs	47	18.0
Marital Status		
Single	55	21.0
Married	112	43.0
Separated	36	14.0
Divorced	31	12.0
Widowed	26	10.0
Religious Affiliation		
Christian	198	76.0
Muslim	34	13.0
Traditionalist	28	11.0
Educational Qualification		
FSLC	21	8.0
OND/NCE	62	24.0
HND/BSc	141	54.0
MSc/MA	26	10.0
PhD	10	4.0

Source: Field Study, 2024

Table 1 presents demographic variables of the study participants. Descriptive statistics revealed that more of the participants were males (56%), 37% of the participants were below 30 years of age and 43% of the participants were married. In terms of religious faiths, 76% were Christians while more participants (68%) were degree holders.

Testing of Hypotheses

H1: Social media and personal beliefs would jointly and independently predict election participation among Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria. The hypothesis was tested using multiple regression and the result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis of Social Media and Personal Beliefs as Predictors of Election Participation among Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria

Predictors	β	t	p	R	R ²	F	p
Social media	.306	6.743	.001	.789	.623	130.006	.001*
Personal belief	.642	14.127	.001				

*Significant at $p=.001$, Dependent variable: Election participation

Table 2 shows the multiple regression analysis of social media and personal beliefs as predictors of attitude towards election participation among adults in Rivers State. The result showed that social media and personal beliefs jointly predicted election participation among study participants [$R^2 = .623$, $F(2, 257) = 130.006$, $p = .001$]. Furthermore, social media ($\beta = .306$, $t = 6.743$, $p = .001$) and personal beliefs ($\beta = .642$, $t = 14.127$, $p = .001$) independently predicted attitudes toward election participation among study participants.

H2: Gender would significantly influence election participation among the Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria. The hypothesis was tested using independent samples t-test and the result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Independent Samples t-test of Election Participation based on Gender among Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria

Gender	N	M	SD	Df	t	Sig
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Male	146	43.510	6.841	258	17.308	.001*
Female	114	30.420	2.749			

***Significant at p=.001, Dependent variable: Election participation**

Table 3 presents independent samples t-test of election participation based on gender among Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State, Nigeria. The result revealed significant gender differences among study participants [$t(258) = [17.308]$, $p = .001$] such that male participants scored higher ($M = 43.510$, $SD = 6.841$) compared to female counterparts ($M = 30.420$, $SD = 2.749$). Therefore, the hypothesis was accepted.

Discussion

The hypothesis that social media and personal beliefs would jointly predict election participation among Ikwerre ethnic groups in Rivers State, Nigeria was supported. This means interaction of social media and personal belief significantly contributed to an individual's participation in an election or not. This accounted for 61.4% of variance explained in dependent variable. In addition, social media and personal beliefs independently predicted election participation. This means that exposure to social media networks through various campaign news and advertisements had significant effects on individuals' willingness to go and vote for candidate of choice during election. The findings of this study corroborated with previous findings that social media serves as a strong medium to persuade individuals to participate in election voting (Kurfi, 2015). Specifically, Shehu (2014) and Sule et al. (2017) results supported the present finding that social media is a strong predictor of participation in elections among several populations and different samples. Also, the study supported the result by Blais (2010) that personal beliefs do influence change in individuals' active participation in elections. Furthermore, the results aligned with Falola's (2019) and Ritzer and Jeffrey (2014) findings that personal beliefs and values trigger actions that would ginger participation in elections.

Finally, the hypothesis that gender would influence individuals' participation in election among study participants was confirmed. The result showed that men were more ready to go and vote in elections than their women counterparts. Even among the study population where election time and period is characterized by violence, due to their concerted efforts to be emancipated, both genders were in the forefront of guarding the integrity of their votes, thereby, the high turn out to

participate in election. This finding lent credence to Ujo (2012) result that more men than women were active participants in the election. However, Ibrahim et al. (2015) found new drives for women to enter into politics have changed their attitudes toward their participation in elections. The 15% affirmation slot for women participation in elected and political appointments has become a strong force for women to seek and be elected into political office and space in Rivers State and Nigeria in general.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate social media and personal beliefs as determinants of attitude towards election participation. Also, the study tested whether gender would influence attitude towards election participation. The findings in this study have empirically supported these objectives.

Recommendations

Based on the findings in this study, the following recommendations are put forward:

That social media platform should be used to educate the general public (both male and female voters) on the necessary details that are expected of them in order to improve their attitude towards election participation. In addition, the electoral body (INEC) should carry out timely campaign and sensitization programmes on the need for eligible candidates to come forth and participate in election processes. Furthermore, the community leaders should educate and inculcate in their people the importance of personal beliefs so as to improve their attitude towards election participation in their domain. Finally, women should be encouraged to change their attitude towards election participation for them to claim the 10 percent seats allocated for them in the political offices both at the state and federal levels.

Limitations of the Study

The study suffered some limitations which need to be addressed in further study. Because of the high level of voting apathy and sensitive nature of the study, the use of self-reported questionnaires for data collection was not free from response bias. Further study should include focus group interviews and collection of documentary evidence from the electoral body to triangulate data collected from questionnaires. Also, the study used only one Local Government

Area (LGA) with a sample size of 206 participants hindering generalization of study findings. Further study should use more than LGAs with increased generalization of study findings. Finally, the independent variables of social media and personal beliefs were not exhaustive. Further study should include personality traits, self-esteem, political education to explore attitude towards election participation.

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