

**Social Media as a Political Resource: Exploring the Nigeria's Scenario**

**by**

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**Abstract**

The significance of the social media in widening Nigeria's democratic space remains a phenomenon that cannot be over-emphasized. However, notwithstanding the viability of the social media in Nigeria's democratic process, its abuses have subjected the medium to be a political resource for overheating the polity. Series of social and political uprisings have been attributed to fake reportage and hate speeches which pose serious threat to Nigeria's national integration and survival of the political system. This makes it imperative in this study to explore the social media as instrument for political resource. The paper is a conceptual study that utilizes secondary data with a view to unraveling the ugly trend of social media abuses. With the adoption of Social Media Political Participation Model, citizens' engagement in the political processes is well captured. The findings of the study indicate several unverified and unguided social media reportage are orchestrated by both government and private media handlers. It further testifies to the hijack of the social media for political propaganda which media ownership influences and encourages the payers of the pipers to dictate of the tunes. Invariably, such makes the owners of different of media outlets to manipulate the platforms for selfish political scores. The paper infers that regulation of the social media is germane to avoid the signal of disintegration in the country which unchecked media handlers can promote willingly and unwillingly. The regulation of social media is key to Nigeria's unity and democratic sustainability.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Politics, Democracy, Election, Integration , Nigeria.

**Introduction**

Recent studies have shown that the social media has proven to be a significant tool of political mobilization and participation (Chen, Chan, & Lee, 2016; De Zúñiga, & Chen, 2019; Gilardi, Gessler, Kubli, & Müller, 2021; Lee & Chan, 2018; Valenzuela, 2013). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provide people with news and allow them exchange

information and opinion on different subject matter with others. De Zúñiga, & Chen, (2019) argue that social media has continued to play a significant role in development of democracy via different means as they influence citizen's participatory behaviors. Social media also provides for a better political communications which is sustained through digitally networked media outside the traditional media. This medium makes it possible to reach voters, influence public agenda and mobilizers supporters without much hindrance especially in the developed countries where internet penetrations is high. In terms of audience behavior, Althaus and Tewksbury (2002) submit that information and news consumed affects once perception of issues and greatly influences once decision and actions. It is important to state that social media are not only used to address political topics, but also influence masses opinions on political matters. Kobayashi and Ichifuji (2015) contend that social media is also used to promote personality traits, state positions on issues and improving name recognition.

Social media has also become a propaganda and misinformation political resources for the political class. Stier, Bleier, & Strohmaier (2018) pinpoint that candidates are likely to use the social media as a tool of negative campaigning strategy. The development of social media and fragmentation of information have intensified the spread of fake news or misinformation. The word "Fake News" gained currency after the 2016 presidential elections in the United States of America (Grinberg, Joseph, Friedland, Swire-Thompson, & Lazer, 2019). Social media has also been used to shy away from core issues that are of interest to the voter, rather it is used by politicians to drive sensational agenda for political advantage. This has been the hall mark of President Donald Trump Twitter campaign during the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections. The former president has been accused of spreading falsehood or manufacture evidence on social media, these fake news and falsehoods are usually amplified by the presidents' conservative base. In Brazil, social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp played a key role in emergence of Jair Bolsonaro as the president of Brazil. In the run up to the October 8 elections, a conservative group funded a massive disinformation campaign on WhatsApp about Bolsonaro's opponent, this included fake news. During his inauguration, a crowd of supporters began chanting "*Facebook, Facebook, Facebook!*" "*WhatsApp, WhatsApp, WhatsApp!*" (Beauchamp, 2019: 1). The problem with social media inspired elections victory is that it is subject to manipulation. Entrenched authoritarian states like Russia and China; and companies such as Cambridge Analytics have been accused of manipulating these platforms to destabilize democracies abroad. Far-right groups within different

nation states have also mastered the art of manipulating the social media by spreading falsehood for election victory.

Despite the negativity associated with the social media. The prevalence of social media in politics has made politicians and political office holders more accountable and accessible. The social media tools allow citizens and politicians to directly communicate, this is different from the traditional media where politicians and political office holders reach citizenry and voters via paid advertising. Political campaigns now tap into wealth of analytics about people to customize their messages based on demographics. Social media has also been used by protest movement to coordinate and drive home their points, notable was the Arab Spring protest in the Middle East and North Africa. Social media allows for rapid share of information and communication thereby giving large group of people or activist new tool for organizing actions.

In Africa, there have been increase in the use of social media for political campaign. Social media has helped amplified the voices of oppositions where state media have been difficult to access by those who are not in power. In Kenya, social media was sparingly used in 2007 elections and by the 2017 elections over 80% of the candidates had an online presence. The incentive has been that a great number of Kenyans on social media as the country is said to have about 90% internet penetration and around 8million social media users Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube. It's no surprise that President Uhuru Kenyatta is ranked among the top ten Twitter active politicians in Africa. Activist have also leveraged on the social media for campaign with notable success. A good example is political activist Boniface Mwangi who without the backing of a major political party leveraged his huge followership on various social media platform to run as a parliamentary candidate in Nairobi which was successful (Ndavula, 2020). Social media has proven to be a veritable tool for politicians without "war chest" or limited financial resources. It provides an avenue to reach a large audience without payment which is synonymous with the traditional media. It also provides an opportunity to raise fund to finance elections.

It is against the backdrop that this paper explores the phenomenon of social media as a political resource in Nigeria. The study is divided into six sections. The introductory segment gives required background information on social media and its political relevance. In second section, relevant concepts are conceptualized while the third segment captures the theoretical postulation. The fourth section exposes the use of social media as a political resources and this is followed with the

fifth segment that considers the implication for Nigeria's democracy. The last section contains the concluding remark of the study.

## **Conceptualization**

### **Social Media**

Social media has also been termed as new media. This refers to platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, LinkedIn, Pinterest Weibo, WeChat, Snap Chat, Reddit, Tumblr, Badoo, Flickr, Tinder, Myspace, Kiwibox, YouTube, among others. These platforms have different features, purpose and targeted audience. Twitter and Facebook are by far the most popular platforms especially for political and non-political communication tool. Facebook currently has around 2.8 billion active users while Twitter is home to around 330 million users (Statista, 2021). Social media have been conceptualized as interactive technologies that allow the sharing of information, interest, ideas and other forms of expression through virtual networks. The contents on social media are usually user-generated such as pictures, text, videos and data generated through interaction on these platforms. The new media has long played a pivotal role in shaping the thought system of individuals and citizens. The social media has made it possible for citizens to access information and news. They help mitigate and exacerbate conflict enable collective action, and attract international attention to happenings in a nation (Aichner, 2021; Kietzmann, Hermakens, MaCarthy and Silverstre, 2011; Tuten and Solomon, 2018).

A distinguishing feature of social media is the possibility of direct communication between individuals world apart. Politically, it provides the avenue for direct contact between politicians and the electorates. These new media outlets have greatly enhanced the possibility of acquiring and interacting with the elected representatives. This medium also provide an avenue for the citizenry to engage government departments and agencies for the purpose of public service delivery. Social media makes communications more effective especially in communities with high data penetration (Bessone, Campante, Ferraz and Souza, 2020).

### **Political Participation**

The political resource of the mass media justifies political participation in the polity. In this context, political participation views citizens' role and capacity on political phenomenon. Generally, in the field of Politics, like other social sciences concepts, different conceptualization

and definitions have been offered. In fact, the Politics as a concept has been viewed from diverse perspectives. It has been referred to as the activities of politicians, political parties and government. It also entails all forms of interrelationships and interactions between individuals and the operation of power at any level of their interaction. However, political participation can be seen as a broad range of activities through which individual develop and express their opinions on issues relating to their polity and the world in general and try to take part in and shape the actions that touch their lives (Khasnabis, Motsch, Achu, Al Jubah, Brodtkorb, Chervin, & Lander, 2010).

Uhlaner (2015) opines that political participation denotes any form of voluntary actions or activities undertaken by the general public for the purpose of influencing the public policy, be it directly or by influencing the choice of policy makers. A succinct example includes, contesting elections, voting in elections, fund raising for candidates, helping in political campaign, contacting officials, protesting, petitioning and working with other group of people to achieve stated objectives.

### **Theoretical Postulation**

Politics and Social media research, just like any other research requires a good theory. However, Dimitrova and Matthes (2018) submit that there are theoretical and methodological challenges to understanding the influence of social media on politics. They submitted that current theories solely rely on description of social media use in political campaign. Hence there is need for more nuanced model that will help understand why and how social media are being used. Nevertheless, some scholars like Valenzuela, (2013); Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, (2005); Chan, (2016); Neo, (2015) Chan, (2016); Knoll, Matthes, & Heiss, (2018), have all used various theories to explain the social media as an effective political tool by both the citizens and the political class.

This study adopts the Social Media Political Participation Model by Knoll, Matthes, & Heiss, (2018). The model explains the psychological process and boundary conditions for social media to affect political participation. In a nutshell, the key idea is that citizens engage in several appraisal processes, which mark a chain of contingencies that must be met in order for social media to foster engagement. Depending on their motivational state citizens must first expose themselves, either intentionally or incidentally, to political information they regard as relevant. Then, citizens conclude that there is a lacuna between their current status and the desire state, and they must regard future state as attainable, which in turn leads to a formation of an explicit participatory goal

that must be activated against other goals in a real behavioral situation then, they must conclude that there is a gap between a present state and an undesired/desired future state (discrepancy appraisal), and they must regard a (dominant goal appraisal). At some point, the prospective impact of social media can be impeded when citizens believe there is a difference between a present state and an undesired state, but they feel nothing can be done about it, they simply activate an alternative goal.

The relevance of the model to this study reflects citizens' formulation of political perspectives within the society. This has created better space for participatory populace on political communication and by way of forming opinion and stance on government actions and inactions. With this, motivations are drawn as citizens' keep engaging the government on policies which invariably checkmates leadership excesses. In essence, the model reveals and emphasizes how people political psychology can be understood via their frequent political communication through several new media platforms.

### **Social Media As A Political Resource In Nigeria**

The mass media generally has been perceived to be a vibrant mechanism through which information are disseminated to the larger society and the innovation of social media in the modern circle of news and updated reports cannot be undermined. However, despite the merits of the influx of social media in the contemporary societal engagements, its abuse remains worrisome. This prompts Enrique (2021) stance on the usage of social media for uncontrolled impulse of fake news in the society. Although the role of citizens' journalism is required to widen democratic space via diverse sources of communications, manipulation of the social media networking for political resource questions responsible and peace journalism. This contributes to polarisation of the polity along primordial and political affiliation.

Basically, the freedom of press enhances democratization process. This supports democratic virtues against authoritarian regime that boxes the media to a restricted corner. The social media have continued to play role in political actions, they are seen as an important tools for politicians and activist seeking to promote democracy and freedom and replace authoritarian regimes. The emergence of social media has increased the tempo of news reportage which according to Marshall (2005) signals the relevance of technology on journalism. By and large, technological advancement brings major significant impact on information management in a democratic rule.

This could be linked to Jost and Hipolit (2006) claim that believe social media platforms have reduced the elitist monopolistic tendency by allowing greater interaction and wider public participation. The era of monopolizing information by the elitist circle has been demystified with the advent of social media. This serves as a plus to improve democratic media.

The fundamental responsibility of any media platform, be it print or electronic media, should be centred on investigate and objective journalism. This propels adequate and reliable dissemination of information which would invariably build the populace trust on the fourth estate of the realm. Meanwhile, the in the political communication parlance, the formation and trend of social media has increased reportage on political affairs. This has actually enhanced and strengthen large participation in politics particularly among the teeming youths that are versatile with the modern social media outlets. Such gesture as rightly noted by Dan- Azumi (2020) has bridged an enduring gap between the rulers and the ruled. To him, the era of social media has improved citizens' platform towards holding the government responsible. Indeed, citizens' interaction with political office holders improves with the advent of social media. For instance, the Nigeria's 9<sup>th</sup> National Assembly has always been checked with social media outburst. With the improved citizens engagement with their parliamentarians, it is evident that social media plays vital role in creating feedback system. More importantly both the government and the governed adopt social media as means for public engagement. The former via its agencies rely on social media to reach out to the people while the latter holds government responsible through same platform.

However, the disturbing scenario is the abuse of social media for political gains. This makes the social media to have become instrument or tool for promoting selfish agenda. Though press freedom gives room for private ownership of media outlets, the payer of piper dictating the tune without respect for media laws is worrisome. The ugly trend allows misuse of social media to spread rumours and political commentaries favourably to the individual owners. This practice is applicable to both government controlled social media platform and individuals social media accounts. The government largely engages in political propaganda using visual and pictorial reports to project the ruling party positively.

The Buhari's led administration has social media handlers charged with engaging citizenry on score cards of the government. The top aides of President Buhari on social media usually promotes the government activities via several social media platform ranging from Twitter, Facebook,

Instagram etc. Despite the robustness of the platform to update citizens on government policies, overzealousness on the handlers of presidency social media platform has always questioned the integrity of some reports being dished out to the public. In an independent fact finding report by the International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR), the social media was a battle ground for Buhari's media aides towards preparation for 2019 general elections. According to ICIR (2019), President Buhari's Personal Assistant on social media in September, 2018 tweeted a picture of an asphalt road being constructed and captioned it 'Nasarawa-Jos Road' giving the impression that it was a government project but it was actually a stock photo uploaded to Getty Images in November 2015. The inaccuracy and misinformation triggered a wave of sarcastic tweets under the hashtag **#TweetLikeLaurettaOnochie**. Though she later pulled the post down and apologised, the action justifies abuse of social media for political resource. The apology did not stop her other misguided tweets such as the one in December, 2018 showing foodpacks bundled with 500 naira notes. According to her claim, the foodpacks and money were shared by the opposition political party presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar. It turned out that the picture was uploaded since 2017 by a Lagos-based charity organisation during an outreach. The report of ICIR which scrutinised several posts and pictures shared by Lauretta Onochie, discovered at least 12 inaccurate pictures which were basically to promote the administration of Buhari's government turned out to be political propaganda. This tells more on government that intends to clap down fake news.

In a related development, the promotion of unguided reports through the use of social media is not peculiar to the government in power, several opposition groups and political parties also engage in misleading information for political score points. The islamization agenda is one of the major propaganda against the political dispensation of Buhari's administration. A group of Northern Pastors under the Umbrella of Arewa Pastors Peace Initiative, Nigeria (APPIN), issued a statement debunking the islamization agenda which according to the group was a mere political propaganda sponsored by opposition elements trying to destabilize the government (Vanguard, April 5, 2018). In the remarks of the APPIN spokesman, Nigeria's constitution is sacrosanct and the diversity of the country is recognised by the law which testifies to freedom and rights of individuals and groups to practice faith of their wishes. Moreover, appointment into government offices requires



constitutional back up which is cognisance of Nigeria's plurality. Unfortunately, the social media has been hijacked to promote such fake perspectives in order to further create division among Nigerians.

The dynamics of Nigeria's politicking cannot be understood without proper assessment of social media. It has been and remained fastest access to political communications in contemporary Nigeria's polity. Considering the electoral campaign in the post-2011 elections in Nigeria, the impact of social media cannot be undermined. In fact, the electoral campaign propaganda that changed the political configuration in 2015 recorded mass media excesses as information became more manipulated for cheap electoral values. The politicians exploited their influence beyond conventional media outfits and filled the social media with immersed sentiments cutting across ethno-religious dimension against perceived opponents (Okolie, Enyiazu & Nnamani, 2021). It should be noted that the triumph of the opposition party which resulted to electoral turnover in 2015 showcased the utilization of the social media as a willing tool for political actors and foreign interests to truncate the intent of the ruling party. Although the 2015 general elections was applauded to be fairly conducted (Sakariyau, Muhammad & Zakuan, 2016), the social media determinism as a propaganda to influence voters behaviour confirms the political tool of the modern electronic media. The manipulative techniques deployed by the political actors during the elections has always been easily sellable to the masses particularly the youth via the social media. This is justified by Corona (2011) when he affirms that the social media in Nigeria has become instrument of political exaggeration and misinterpretation. Prior to 2015 general elections, the political campaigns and context between Muhammadu Buhari of APC and Goodluck Jonathan of the PDP were over heated with series of hate speeches and fake news emanating from social media. These were creatively designed to convince the electorates through popular sentiment. Both the ruling party and opposition adopted this strategy which invariably determined the voting trend among Nigerians. Besides series of uploaded information on internet, the video message of President Obama days to Nigeria's 2015 presidential election signalled the political affiliation and international interest on the elections. Definitely, social media platforms have become veritable instruments for arousing political consciousness in Nigeria. In fact, the increased availability of smart phones enabled party supporters at the grassroots to disseminate political campaigns propaganda during Nigeria's elections (Apuke&Tunca, 2018).

In the final analysis, the modern trend of policking has placed the social media to be a formidable tool for political communication, its utility has always been mixed correlation. The social media is a viable tool for improved political partisanship in the society and it has also been a manipulative instrument for campaign propaganda. This makes the social media to a linkage tool that serves as coins of two sides. Be that as it may, the thrust of this paper reflects the excessive of social media abuse not only as instrument to influence political transition but also as ugly tool being used to create unwanted tension in a plural society like Nigeria. In lieu of this, the next section captures the implication social media abuses for the country's democracy

### **Implication For Nigeria's Democracy:**

The phenomenon of social media as a manipulative tool for political resource remains a disturbing hurdle to Nigeria's democracy. As mentioned earlier, both government and private handlers of social media have abused the usage of social media for unnecessary political propaganda. The instance of the presidential aides on social media uploading pictures and disseminating false information signals lack of adherence to the principle of truthful and investigative journalism. This action poses threat to the country's democracy by widening the level of political cynicism in the polity. With this, the populace develop more trust deficit with the ruling class. By implication, when genuine news are reported by government officials via social media, such might not be embraced as being factual by larger number of digital compliance individuals. So, fake and false reporting from government media team worsen the trust deficit between the rulers and the ruled.

Not only that, the manipulation of social media for selfish political communication also threatens Nigeria's security apparatus. The liberal perspective of media remains a unique feature of democratic system. However, twisting political events towards sentiment and all sorts of unhealthy politicisation has led to several cases of security bridges in the country. Promotion of fake news keeps resulting to security challenges particularly violence related to ethno-religious lines. The face off in Jos, Plateau State, between the settlers and land owners has been hijacked with wrong postage as most information on the social media were debunked by the State government as fake news. For instance, the Police Public Relation Officer in Plateau State had to clarify the purported report on killing of 230 Igbos in Jos. According to the Police Command in Plateau, the social media has been agog by reports that a luxurious bus conveying commuters of Igbo extraction was set ablaze, killing

230 passengers was a malicious and attempt to stir up conflict in the state and the entire country at large (The Guardian, August 29, 2021).

Similarly, the August 14, 2021 massacre along Rukuba road in Jos local government was falsely reported on social media as religious inclined crisis. The Governor of the state, Simon Lalong, visited the spot and vowed to deal with promoters of fake news as the ugly event was perpetuated by criminals but using social media to create more tension along religious connotation (News Agency of Nigeria, 15<sup>th</sup> August, 2021). This fake reportage is not peculiar to Plateau State. The similar scenario was also witnessed in Oyo State prompting the Governor Seyi Makinde to have issued official statement on the plan to cause social mayhem in the state by some political stakeholders using religion and ethnicity variables. The attack on Ibarapa land and some parts of Oke Ogun in Oyo State was hijacked by promoters of fake news with some viral video and audio messages stating false and inciting claims about cities such as Ayede, Igangan and others (Daily Trust, February, 7, 2021). All these and many more demystified the Nigeria's national security as several lives have been lost and properties destroyed ignorantly as a result of malicious social media posts.

Furthermore, if the social media is not properly regulated, it has the tendency of leading the country to a state of anarchy. The excessive loosed of the use of social media in Nigeria contributes to unverified postage of information among the users. Unfortunately, the government that is expected to issue guidelines on regulation of the social media against fake news has severally abused the platform with false viral pictures and messages for cheap political scores. Be that as it may, if the social media fails to be efficiently regulated and monitored, the tendency of false information posters to create anarchy in the political system is very high. In order to avoid a nasty and brutish society as speculated by Thomas Hobbes state of nature, regulating the social media becomes imperative in Nigeria. No doubt, the implication of allowing unguided dissemination of fake news via the social media would not only collapse the democratic system like a pack of cards but also return the polity to lawless atmosphere.

In addition, the trend of fake news and false information has actually deepen deep into Nigeria integration wall. The agitations by some groups of different nations calling for secession have been promoted largely on social media. Democracy allows genuine struggle and agitation by groups and nations, but the polarisation of the Nigeria's state along ethnicity, religion and political affiliation keeps threatening the country's national

integration. The divisive mechanism among different agitators has always been communicated through social media platform. This definitely weakens the unification of various ethno-religious groups in the country. Nigeria is not the only state with plurality of nations, Malaysia, Singapore and numerous countries across Asia and Africa have diverse ethnic and religious background but their national unification is stronger as a result of strict compliance to against abuse of social media. Although, Malaysia for instance is categorised as authoritarian democracy due to media regulations and other factors, the relative peace in the country makes democracy to be at work (Mohammad & Zakuan, 2018). The series of violence orchestrated along ethnic and religious divisions and championed by social media unguided post is a serious menace to Nigeria's national integration.

Basically, the sustainability of any country democracy depends on several factors which the media plays key role. The current political configuration in Nigeria reflects the vibrancy of the social media as the level of consciousness on political phenomenon increases among the populace, its abuse can mar rather making the country. Nigeria political transition had been truncated with series of military incursion, this present fourth republic must be guided jealously and the fourth estate of the realm remains a strong partner. Despite the global outlaw of military intervention, the Mali and Guinea political junta is a warning signal for neighbouring African counterparts.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of the social media is key to any democracy in the world. This contributes to peoples' orientation on governance and political processes. No doubt, the pendulum of information gathering keeps swinging adversely due to the contribution of internet era that resulted to springing up of several social media outlets. Be that as it may, the main thrust expressed in this study exposes the danger of unguided reporting which Nigeria's social media handlers fail to curb. The present security challenges and series of unhealthy politicking have been attributed to fake news and hate speeches that dominate modern usage of social media. Nevertheless, this study recommends and supports sincere regulation of the social media. By sincerity, the regulation should not be targeted at opposition by the ruling government and vice versa. Also, political sensitization and communication require checks and balances by relevant agencies. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and National Orientation Agency (NOA) have been improving

towards engaging users and non - users of social media, such role require formidable partnership with the Civil Society Groups on why fake news cannot be sustained in Nigeria's plural polity. With this, political communication will be assessed politely and unguided utterances among politicians and their followers can be easily reduced if not eradicated.

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