

TRANSFORMING GOVERNANCE: ASSESSING THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Citizen engagement is vital to governance and the development of society. Prior to the age of the Internet and social media platforms, citizens used traditional methods like letters, town hall meetings, representations, and strikes, among others, to engage the government. The government, on the other hand, used traditional media to reach the citizens. However, the advent of digital media has changed the narrative, allowing citizens and the government an increased opportunity to engage. This qualitative study aimed to assess the level of citizens' engagement via digital media platforms in Nigeria, particularly social media, relying on Agenda Setting and Technology Determinism theories. Focus Group Discussions were conducted among participants purposively selected from the country's six geo-political zones. Each group comprises eight participants from each zone. Results showed that Nigerians used online media actively to engage with the government on social and leadership issues. Most of the participants indicated that they used social media platforms for political engagements such as during the 2023 general elections. The study recommended that the government should deliberately integrate the use of social media with other communication channels for their programmes and policies in order to deepen citizen engagement.

Keywords: Citizen Engagement, Civic Engagement, Digitalization, Nigeria, Social Media

Introduction

Paradigms of governance have evolved over the millennia. Kempa (2005) asserts that a lot has changed about governance globally. According to Borders (2019), from the years of kingdoms and empires of medieval times through to the industrial revolution, styles and forms of governance have evolved. During the reign of kings and emperors, the rulers were absolute monarchs who had the power to decide the fate of society and their citizens at the individual and collective levels. Those who opposed them did so at the risk of their lives (Hekster, 2002; Spielvogel, 2003). However, with the industrial revolution came the liberalization of governance, where citizens increasingly had a say in how governance impacted their lives. Forms of government emerged that included the citizens, from socialism, communism, and communalism to democracy (Macon-Cooney, 2019).

In Africa, as in other parts of the world, kingdom states were ruled by monarchs (Ijeh, 2022; UNESCO, 2000). According to Dimkpa (2015), these kingdoms lost their influence with the

advent of colonialism. The colonialist ran the states' affairs and decided on the people's behalf. As the movement for independence and nationalism heated up and boiled over in the 20th century, the nations of Africa gained their independence, and some nationalists succeeded the colonialists in controlling the affairs of their nations. We had such nationalists as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana), Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), Jomo Kenyatta (Kenya), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal), and Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (Nigeria), among others (Asante, 2016; Seuren, 2022; Gunn, 2018). The citizens of the newly independent states opted for democratic governance, giving the citizens a say in the running of their affairs. Unfortunately, some of these democracies did not endure (Gunn, 2018). According to Olasupo, Olayide and Ijeoma (2017), coup d'états and civil wars truncated the dreams of prosperity of the citizens. Military rule became the norm in most of African countries, with the violent overthrow of succeeding regimes occurring at dizzying rates. In the view of Ene, (2022), dictatorship, the central feature of military rule, meant that citizens could hardly engage the leaders in matters that affected them. National constitutions were suspended, and human rights of citizens were frequently abused (Chukwuemeka, 2020). Nevertheless, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2021) reports that democracy has returned to most African countries.

Nigeria's history is similar to that of other African nations. From the colonial days to the current dispensation, citizens have always had social and political engagements at various levels. Falola and Heaton (2008) assert that prominent voices such as those of Herbert Macaulay, Margaret Ekpo, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, and others echoed the desires of the citizens of Nigeria to the colonialists. Towards attaining independence, citizens engaged the government through their leaders using town hall meetings, political rallies, and mass actions. With the advent and popularity of print as a communication medium, newspapers became prevalent as channels for citizens' engagement with the colonialists. According to Vincent-Anene (2022) and Fatile (2004), newspapers which include *The West African Pilot* and the *Daily Times* were platforms for engagement. Other channels for citizen engagement arrived as technology evolved – radio, television, and the Internet (Nnaemeka, 2021). According to Aro (2011), the governments of the day, especially during the military dictatorship, had control over the mass media and dictated what was disseminated through them. Laws were made to regulate the use of these media. For instance, Nwanne (2014) asserts that the General Muhammadu Buhari military junta promulgated Decree 4 of 1984, which penalized the publication or broadcast of any item that put public servants in a bad light, whether true or false! Two journalists, Nduka Irabor and Tunde Thompson, were incarcerated based on charges arising from that decree. However, with the fall of that regime, the Ibrahim Babangida regime annulled the decree and opened the media space for citizen engagements. However, a prominent journalist, Dele Giwa, was murdered via a letter bomb in 1986 (Odion-Akhaine, 2006) for reasons and by persons still steeped in mystery.

The evolution of the Internet as a medium of mass communication came with new possibilities (Ali, Afornu, Nam & Svetlik, 2019). The speed and immediacy of communication increased, geographical boundaries became irrelevant, and censorship became almost impossible (Blank & Lutz, 2018). According to Sowmya and Roja (2017, p.359), “the Internet has been mankind’s greatest approach of verbal exchange yet. These days, (through the use of the Internet) we can provoke real-time communicate with a person who’s in every other a part of the world.” The Internet has broken down barriers of regional boundaries, distance, time, ideological divides, and other such restrictions in communication (Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi, Gasser, Duggan, Smith & Beaton, 2013). As more citizens had access to technology, more people could communicate laterally among themselves and vertically with their leaders. The coincidence of the emergence of the Internet and the rebirth of democracy in Nigeria meant that the people now have an opportunity to be involved in how their leaders manage their affairs. Okocha, Udoh and Harikrishnan (2022) affirm that the Internet and social networks like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, among others has empowered citizens to influence governance by freely expressing their opinions. The purpose of this research is to find out how Nigerians have used digital media to engage their leaders to effect change in society. One digital media tool that will be investigated in this study is social media as a means of citizen engagement.

Research Objectives

This research aims to:

1. Ascertain the level of use of social media for citizen engagement in Nigeria
2. Identify issues that prompt the use of social media for citizen engagement in Nigeria
3. Ascertain the effects of citizen engagement using the social media in Nigeria

Digitization, Digitalization, and Digital Transformation

Three concepts are prominent in the digital era – digitization, digitalization, and digital transformation. While some users interchange the terms digitization and digitalization, Vrana and Sing (2021) aver that there is a difference. According to them, digitization is creating a digital presentation of a physical items – like scanning a paper document into a digital format such as PDF, converting videos on video cassettes or music in audio tapes into digital formats. He adds that digitization forms the link between the physical world and software. Legner, Eymann, Matt, Böhm, and Drews (2017) state that digitization involves converting “analog signals into digital form.” Bloomberg (2018) affirms that digitization is encoding analog signal information into “zeroes and ones” so they could be “stored, processed, and transmitted” using computers. Coreynen, Matthyssens, and Bockhaven (2017), based on Hsu (2007), on the other hand, see digitization as a greater dependence on digital technology “for connecting people, systems, companies, products, and services.” Brennan and Kreiss (2016) however, agree that digitization involves converting analogue information into digital formats.

Digitalization refers to enhancing processes “by the use of digital technology and digitized materials” (Gupta, 2020). For instance, digitized documents are stored in a computer or external hard drive; when that computer or storage device is accessed via the Internet, then the process of digitalization has taken place (Gorenšek & Kohont, 2019). According to Vesić, Lazović, and Petronijević (2020), digitalization was amply demonstrated in the banking sector during the COVID 2019 pandemic, when banks had to resort to digital technologies to transact businesses with their customers. Parviainen, Tihinen, Kääriäinen, and Teppola (2022) maintain that digitalization has played a major role in changing society and business. In the view of Legner et al. (2017), digitalization is “the manifold sociotechnical phenomena and processes” of adopting digital technologies and digitized materials in “individual, organizational, and societal contexts.” Brennan and Kreiss (2016) agree that digitalization entails the incremental utilization of digital technology by entities. According to Gorenšek and Kohont (2019), the concept of digitalization emerged in 1971 in connection with the implication of computerization on society.

Another school of thought uses digitization and digitalization interchangeably. Lyytinen, Yoo, and Boland (2016), supporting the position of Tilson, Lyytinen, and Sørensen (2010) and Yoo (2012), see no clear difference between the two terms, and define them as “processing, storing, and communicating” information using a “series of ones and zeroes.” Bloomberg (2018) avers that digitalization is “fraught with ambiguity and confusion” as there is no definition for it. He reports that scholars use both terms interchangeably in the context of changes in digital communication and media infrastructure and business models. However, some scholars view the terms differently. Sandberg, Holmstrom, and Lyytinen (2020) see digitization as a process resulting in “change in a firm’s organizing logic by instilling new properties into product platforms.” This study agrees with the view that digitization is the process of converting analogue materials into the digital format, while digitalization is the use of digital materials for communication and other purposes. However, whatever view that different scholars or users may adopt, one thing appears common: adopting digital technologies transforms businesses (Parviainen et al., 2022). Gupta (2020) refers to this transformation of businesses through digitalization as “digital transformation.” In the view of Kim, Choi, and Lew (2021), digital transformation revolves around technological change and will positively impact human health, the economy, industry, finance, and society. Ilcus (2018) avers that the current age is the digital age because digitalization influences every aspect of human lives, from health to education, social networking, commerce, and business, as most businesses have an online presence. She adds that digitalization has increased the speed of processing information, interactions, and transactions. According to Gorenšek and Kohont (2019), digitalization has affected communication and media infrastructure. Okocha, Wang and Onobe (2020, p 64) aver that “digitalization has disrupted social structures, redefined social citizenship, and brought about the rise of digital a digital citizen.”

Internet use as a communication tool is popular in Nigeria. The population of Internet users in the world rose from just over 1 billion in 2005 to about 5.3 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2023). This marks about 64.4% of the global population. Of this number, 4.76 billion or 59.4% of the global population are on social media. There were about 1.02 billion Internet users in China as of 2022, and 307 million in the USA. Nigeria had an estimated population of 221.2 million in January 2023 (Kemp, 2023). 122.5 million (55.4%) are internet users and 31.60 million (14.3%) use social media as of January 2023. This indicates a significant deficit in Internet penetration and social media access in Nigeria compared to the global average. However, Okocha and Dapoet (2022) attest that social media is increasingly becoming a platform of choice for social engagement, activism, and political participation in Nigeria.

Digital Media and Citizen Engagement

Citizen engagement and public participation are necessary for governance. For instance, in spatial planning in the UK, Boland, Durrant and Wilson (2021) note that citizen engagement is crucial. However, they note that the process of citizen engagement could be cumbersome, difficult to navigate, and may exclude people based on age, gender, sexuality, education, social class, race, political background, and those who are apathetic to social issues. Traditional methods of citizen engagement like townhalls and consultation exercises have been “unsuitable, unwieldy, remote, tokenistic, and sometimes characterized by tensions (Baker et al., 2007; Gordon et al., 2011). According to Ertiö (2015), Atzmanstorfer et al. (2014), Desouza and Bhagwatwar (2012), and Rinner (2005), the methods of citizen engagement has transited online in the era of digitization and digitalization of communication. Castells (2014) notes that “conscious communication” makes humans function. Therefore, any change in the dynamics of communication technology is vital to humans. He adds that the Internet and wireless communication have transformed the process of communication in society from a one-way mass communication model to:

a system based on messages from many to many, multimodal, in the chosen time, and with interactivity so that senders are receivers and receivers are senders. Furthermore, both have access to a multimodal hypertext in the web that constitutes the endlessly changing backbone of communication processes (p. 20)

The evolution in communication dynamics through the Internet and wireless communication has birthed a new vista of social and political interaction where governments and corporations do not influence citizens’ communication. The Internet has therefore freed citizens and allowed them to engage freely in discoursing issues of public interest (Castells, 2014). Mulyono et al. (2022) credit the emergence of social media with changing citizens’ communication patterns. They describe social media as “user-generated content utilizing Internet-based publishing technologies, distinct from traditional print and broadcast media” (p. 6). Social media thrives on a two-way communication model connecting people through social networking sites (Twitter and Facebook), photo-sharing sites (Instagram and Flickr), and video-sharing sites such as YouTube and Vimeo

(Alber et al., 2015; Terry, 2009). According to Mulyono et al. (2022), social media's extensive scope of functions and depth of influence has transformed from being just a communication tool to being "New Media." They explain that "new media is a term to describe the convergence of digital communication technologies that are computerized and connected to a network" (p. 77). There are two significant elements of new media: digitization and the convergence of media modes such as audio, video, and text (McQuail, 2010). The application of digital technologies in communication has transformed the mode of citizen engagement, from the conventional demonstrations, boycotts, 'letters to the editor,' and sit-ins, among others (Mulyono et al., 2022), which require much effort and are sometimes fraught with danger. Today, mobile devices enable citizens to get information, understand issues and share their opinions in public discourse across the world, including the African continent. In other words, the digitalization of communication has enhanced citizen engagement. Bello and Kolawole-Ismail (2017) affirm the transformation in political engagement in Nigeria using social media. However, they note that success of civic engagement through any medium is dependent on the initiative of the citizens to influence decisions on matters concerning them. Okocha et al. (2020) point to the #EndSARS movement initiated through Twitter which led to the mobilization of millions of Nigerians for a physical protest as an example of civic engagement and social activism.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on Agenda Setting Theory, supported by Technological Determinism Theory.

Agenda Setting Theory

Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw proposed Agenda Setting Theory in 1972 (Hao, 2022). They stated that mass media set the agenda for public concern rather than publish the public's views. In other words, what the media constantly puts in front of the public becomes what the public talks about and demands a response.

Walter Lippman first thought of agenda-setting in 1922 (Moy et al., 2016) when he correlated the media coverage of "the world outside" and the interpretation of those events "in our heads." The idea was defined later and termed Agenda Setting Theory in 1972 when McCombs and Shaw researched the effect of the media in influencing public opinion during the American presidential campaign of 1968 (Luo et al., 2018). In the view of Shaw (1979), "the media are persuasive in focusing public attention on specific events, issues, and persons and in determining the importance people attach to public matters" (p. 96). He adds that people tend to attach significance or otherwise to issues that the media emphasize or de-emphasize. The result is that the media sets the agenda for the public to discuss and determines what the public should take as essential. In his book, "The Press and Foreign Policy," one of the early researchers of agenda setting, Bernard Cohen, asserted that the press might not be very successful in telling people what to think but is

amazingly effective in directing the line of thoughts of its readers (Cohen, 1963). He added that people's view of the world depends on the guide that newspaper writers, editors, and publishers present to them.

Agenda setting occurs via a process referred to as "accessibility." Accessibility bias is a cognitive process where individuals access more frequently published items from their memories (Iyenger, 1990; Iyenger & Kinder, 2010). Other scholars which include Rogers and Dearing (1988) established interaction between the media, the public, and policymakers in agenda-setting and agenda-building. They concluded that the reciprocal relationship between the media, society, and policymakers influences public policy.

In the social media era, the speed of information sharing has increased tremendously. An increasing number of people are sourcing their news and entertainment from digital media, and the agenda-setting power of traditional media has been threatened (Feezell, 2017). According to Naser (2020), the evolution of digital technology has engendered changes in the media space and shifted the mechanism of determining the direction of society. This evolution implies that digital media is influential in the application of the agenda-setting process. Naser's conclusion indicates that Agenda Setting Theory is still relevant in media research in the contemporary social media experiences, hence its suitability for this study.

Technological Determinism Theory

Marshal McLuhan formulated Technological Determinism Theory in 1964. Media technology affects individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions and influences how societies function (Hauer, 2017). Wyatt (2011) explains that societies produce inventors whose innovations appear to determine and provide the impetus for human development. Such inventions that are not successful are soon forgotten, while successful ones quickly gain acceptance and go on to transform societies. McLuhan said, "we shape our tools, and they, in turn, shape us" (Jan et al., 2020 p. 133). Therefore, technological breakthroughs have significant social consequences.

The basic assumptions of Technological Determinism Theory are that (i) humans do not have free will at all, and members of society will eventually adapt to the technology that has universal acceptance; (ii) media shape perceptions and organize human experience; and (iii) media creates a "global village" of interconnected people who share political, economic and cultural perceptions (Jan et al., 2020). Okocha and Dapoet (2022) add that the theory assumes that media technologies influence the thoughts, feelings, actions, and operations of society as it passes through technological ages. The major criticisms of the theory, in the view of Drew (2023), are that it only takes cognizance of the past to explain its propositions but does not consider other factors in the evolution of society outside of technology. The theory also tends to downplay the role of free will in adopting new technologies. He notes that though technologies can influence the course of human history, it is our uptake of technologies that influences the trajectory of human

development rather than the technologies themselves. Nevertheless, Jan et al. (2020) believe that Technological Determinism Theory is relevant today because of the digitalization of communication media. The evolution of social media as a mass communication tool has affected humans' social, economic, and political behaviors. Social media has broken the barriers of regions, legislations, and distance to enable people to communicate information about events, ideas, emotions, intentions, dispositions, and proclivities (Madden et al., 2013). This theory is relevant to this study because it explains how the use of digital media has influenced the thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and actions of its users.

Methodology

The study is a qualitative research and used Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for data collection from March 19th to March 27th, 2023. The researchers used quota sampling to purposively select eight participants from each of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria (south-south, south-west, south-east, north-central, north-west, and north-east) to ensure equal representation of the regions. According to Mwita (2022), saturation is vital in data collection for qualitative research. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) argue that saturation is usually attained between the fourth and eighth discussion groups. Forty-eight participants in six groups of eight engaged in discussions using a five-point discussion guide. The discussions were recorded using iPhone 13, transcribed, and analyzed. The participants were tagged D1 to D48 in the report to maintain their anonymity. They were aged from late teens to over sixty, covering all demographics. The participants were all active Internet users. Professions such as artisans, business, hospitality, media and journalism, and law were selected. They had been in the various professions for about a year to over thirty-five years. In addition, there was a fair representation of the sexes among the discussants.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Demographic Details of Focus Group Discussion Participants

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Region		
South-South	8	16.67
South-East	8	16.67
South-West	8	16.67
North-Central	8	16.67
North-East	8	16.67
North-West	8	16.67
Total	48	100
Age Range		
15 – 29	11	22.92
30 – 39	23	47.92
40 – 49	10	20.83
50 – 59	3	6.25
60+	1	2.08
Total	48	100

Sex		
Female	21	43.75
Male	27	56.25
Total	48	100
Occupation		
Media/Journalists	19	39.58
Photographers	3	6.25
Lawyer	1	2.08
Entrepreneurs	2	4.17
Artistes	2	4.17
Counselor	1	2.08
Accountant	1	2.08
Engineer	1	2.08
Nurse	1	2.08
Technician	1	2.08
ICT Experts	3	6.25
Hospitality worker	1	2.08
Administrators	4	8.33
Artisan	1	2.08
Clergy	1	2.08
Students	3	6.25
Security	1	2.08
Driver	1	2.08
Geologist	1	2.08
Total	48	100

Field Study, 2023

RO1: Ascertain the level of social media use for citizen engagement in Nigeria.

Citizen engagement is a familiar practice in Nigeria, but most of the discussants were not sure of its definition as a concept during the interaction. However, they agreed with the enunciation of those who had an idea of its definition. D37 said it was getting citizens involved in doing things for the nation. D3 and D11 said it was getting everyone involved in politics and communicating their opinions about the happenings in society. D12 said it is getting citizens engaged in governance. D6, D13, and D24 stated that it was creating a platform for getting citizens engaged in decision-making. To D16, citizen engagement is a platform where citizens make their views known to people in government. D19 added that it was government reaching out to citizens through a medium. To D29, it means getting the citizen of a country in government processes that concern them. D27 added that citizen engagement involved the citizens in whatever the government was doing. D30, a documentary photographer, relied on his knowledge of geography to explain that

Citizen engagement is akin to participatory rural appraisal, which is getting beneficiary communities involved in deciding what projects should be sited in their communities, and that way they would take ownership of the project.

To D2, D4, and D43, citizen engagement is the government explaining its plans to citizens, and citizens in turn, make their inputs into government policies. That way, both government and citizens are “in tandem.” D41 agreed that citizen engagement is the interaction between citizens and the government. Before the advent of social media, D40 said that citizens engaged the government through “manual” letters/mails, physical protests, and “parliaments” where the people’s representatives spoke on their behalf to the government. To him, the challenges to physical engagements were physical and social distances between the citizens and leadership. D41 added representatives sent to the government. To D38, the methods of citizen engagement changed with the form of government in place. Representation was not usual in the military era, so the people mostly resorted to protests. Nevertheless, in democratic governance Trade Unions spoke on behalf of citizens to negotiate and reach agreements on their behalf. Representatives of the people in parliament also voiced their opinions concerning policies and infrastructure provisions. D12 said that government also gets across to citizens through television and radio programs. D17 and D20 mentioned town hall meetings, and one-on-one conversations, especially during the electioneering season. D21 and D19 said the government used the traditional media (newspaper, radio, television) and rallies to engage with citizens.

The advent of social media has given citizens a new channel of communicating their concerns and aspirations to one another and their leaders directly or indirectly. All the participants said they were active social media users and belonged to groups on various platforms. The social media platforms they commonly used include Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, among others, and all the participants agreed that they used more than one social media platform regularly. While a few discussants, like D1 and D6, said they seldomly participated in Internet group discussions. Most of the participants reported active participation in group chats and posting messages using their various social media handles. This was representative of the depth of usage of social media as a tool for social engagement by Nigerian citizens.

RO2: Identify issues that prompt the use of social media for citizen engagement in Nigeria

Most participants agreed that they discussed politics and governance on their platforms. D1 said she was involved in sharing information concerning the polls during the 2023 election season. D3 said she accessed news and gave feedback on some of her social media platforms. D4 and D5 said they avoided discussing politics and governance on their platforms. D7 said,

I belong to an ‘activism’ group that tries to put our views across to the government through social media, and we try to persuade other social media users to ‘loud’ their views on other platforms.

D23 said he exchanged information and opinions with others on his social media community during the “EndSARS” protests. He affirmed that:

social media really helped the movement because it was spontaneous, and people used social media to coordinate themselves. That made the whole thing (the protests) hard for the government to deal with as usual.

D21 agreed that the government has also engaged the citizens using social media, particularly as it concerns public health issues like during the COVID-19 pandemic when guidelines and instructions were communicated to the citizens on ways to prevent the spread of the disease and manage infections. Some of the issues that prompted citizen engagement discovered in the study included politics, elections, poor governance, insecurity, police brutality, health emergencies and disease outbreaks.

RO3: Ascertain the effects of citizen engagement using the social media in Nigeria

All the participants felt that the government needed to be more responsive to citizen online engagements. D24 said that:

government did not respond to what people said on social media platforms not matter how many times they said it. In fact, it is like a waste of time to discuss these things on social media because they are not listening.

When asked if there were no issues where the government ever responded to citizens' agitation via social media D23 said the responses have been negative. D21 mentioned the unsuccessful attempt by the government to introduce legislation to regulate the use of social media as a negative response to citizens using those platforms to hold them accountable. D19 said that despite the practice of democracy in Nigeria, the government did not listen to citizens' yearnings on social media platforms. Concerning the "EndSARS" protest, D22 said the government's response was cosmetic at best as they only changed the name of the police outfit "SARS" (Special Anti-Robbery Squad - notorious for brutality and extrajudicial killings) to SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactical) unit, but that the issue of brutality had not gone away. To D6, the citizens hear the government more than they hear the citizens. D1 said,

the government and citizens were not on the same page because the issues the citizens have been complaining about have not changed. Power supply has not changed. We cried for free and fair elections but the results have not changed. In fact, it is even getting worse! In his view, D2 said "the deadly 'EndSARS' riots could have been avoided before they escalated" because the buildup to the riots was on Twitter for a while. If the government had responded to the yearnings of the citizens early, then the agitation would have been de-escalated before it blew up. D3 feels that government officials do not manage their social media platforms themselves, but delegate such issues to their assistants and never get feedback from such aides. D38 said the government only responds when the traditional media pick up and amplify issues brought on social media by citizens. According to D19, the government responded to citizens during the "EndSARS" campaign using Twitter and other platforms, but the responses were inadequate and did not address the issues at hand. D21 said the government transmitted advocacy videos using social media. For instance, NCDC (National Centre for Disease Control) used social media lot

during the COVID-19 pandemic to keep citizens abreast of relevant developments and to issue instructions and protocols for socialization among citizens. This contributed to the limited spread of the disease in Nigeria. D2 reported that some governments and citizens had social media handles that engage both government and citizens. For instance, President Buhari and some of his ministers had Twitter handles through which they engaged citizens. This led to the government receiving positive reviews from some members of the public. However, some citizens still used the same social media platform to express their displeasure with the government.

Discussion of Findings

The study set out to determine the level of social media use for citizen engagement in Nigeria, the issues that prompt online citizen engagement, and the outcome of citizen engagement using social media in Nigeria.

From the results, the study discovered that most sampled Nigerians had adopted the social media as a medium of communication. However, because of the nature of the sampling technique, the study could not verify the statistics by Kemp (2023), that only 14.3% of the population were users of social media applications. The popular applications among the participants were WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, Tiktok, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube, Snapchat, and Likee, among others. All the participants in the discussions indicated that they used multiple social media platforms. Most of them belonged to online groups where they discussed multiple issues, from family to business, religion, politics, leadership, and development, among other issues. They indicated that before the online engagements, citizens engaged their leaders through letters, protests, postal mail, representatives, town hall meetings, and riots, among other means. Some of the discussants indicated that they took part in these methods of engagement in addition to being aware of other citizens who did. They felt that it was their right as citizens to engage their leaders and for the government to respond to them. This agrees with Ojo and Ako (2021) that citizens play a vital role in societal change and development. However, the participants said that the “analog” method of citizen engagement had limitations such as distance, accessibility to government offices, and a feedback mechanism that was untimely and frustrating. These frustrations agree with the assertions of Baker et al., (2007), and Gordon et al., (2011). And as Desouza & Bhagwatwar (2012), Ertiö (2015), Atzmanstorfer et al., (2014), and Rinner (2005) stated, with the advent of social media, citizens could engage their leaders on matters concerning them online. Okocha and Dapoet (2022) refer to the #RevolutionNow, #OccupyNigeria, #BringBackourGirls, and the #EndSARS movements as the application of social media platforms to citizen engagement in Nigeria. This development conforms to Technological Determinism Theory which predicts that technology influences humans to evolve and adopt new methods of activities. The emergence of the Internet has, to a great extent, eliminated the limitations of citizen engagement using the old methods.

Moreover, because of the easy access to online platforms, more citizens have the avenue to express their opinions concerning social issues, which put pressure on leadership. The leaders also use these media to engage citizens too. The example given is that of the COVID-19 pandemic when the NCDC used social media platforms to engage the public on protocols for preventing and managing the disease.

The study also discovered that Nigerians were skeptical about the responsiveness of their leaders to online engagements. For instance, D21, D23, and D24 indicated that during the EndSARS campaign that led to the loss of lives and property, they believe that if the leaders had been responsive, they would have disbanded SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) much earlier. Instead, the government reportedly went after citizens who used social media to galvanize citizen action. Twitter is one of the preferred social platforms for citizen engagement, which the government banned for some infractions. Nevertheless, confirming the Technological Determinism Theory, citizens found alternative means of online engagement. D19, D26, averred that citizens resorted to using offshore Virtual Private Network (VPN) to bypass the government ban on Twitter. The participants, in agreement with Madden et al., (2020) said the use of social media had helped to eliminate the barriers of distance and personal proclivities in the advancement of a common cause for all citizens. Although, in the view of D1, government and citizens were not “on the same page”; the government eventually disbanded the SARS as the citizens demanded. The participants believed that citizens should be encouraged to use social media to continue engagements with their leaders. In line with the objectives of the study, the discussions indicated that citizens actively use the Internet to engage their leaders on issues of governance and accountability, among others. The participants, however, were not enthused by the lethargic response of the government to online citizen engagement, they noted that the government were compelled to accede to their demands, as in the case of the EndSARS online campaigns. And as D2 and D21 indicated, the government had also used social media to engage citizens. This was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some of the discussants agreed that the daily usage of social media by the government during the health crisis helped the citizens.

However, there are challenges to the penetration, adoption, and use of the Internet in Nigeria. Such concerns include the availability of signals, poor power supply, high cost of data, and insecurity. If these impediments are taken care of, more citizens would be encouraged to use the Internet, benefit from engaging their leaders, and thereby deepen democracy. This is apart from other advantages of using social media. Fake news, misinformation, online bullying, and intimidation are other challenges of using social media for citizen engagement in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The use of social platforms is increasing in Nigeria. Nigerians sampled in the study have adapted to using online applications for citizen engagement. Citizens from across the geopolitical zones of

Nigeria are engaging their leaders via social media platforms. It is evident from the participants that more Nigerians will use social media platforms to engage their leaders. It is also clear that leaders will continue to engage citizens by using social media in addition to traditional media.

Recommendations

From these findings, the following recommendations become necessary:

1. Nigerian citizens should continue to engage their leaders using social media platforms.
2. Nigeria's political leaders at all tiers of governance should integrate the use of social media and other sources in engaging citizens concerning policies and programmes because more citizens are increasingly using social media for sourcing and sharing information.
3. Governments at all levels should device a mechanism of engaging citizens promptly over their concerns as expressed through social media platforms.

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