Pakistan Journal of Life and Social Sciences

www.pjlss.edu.pk

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Social Media, Civic Education, and the Democratization Process Among Nigerian Young Adults

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
  *Corresponding Author: ibrahim.yadeyinka@gmail.com	This study investigates the impact of social media on political participation and civic engagement among Nigerian youth aged 18–35. Using a cross-sectional survey of 350 respondents, the research examines how social media use, exposure to political content, and institutional trust influence online and offline civic behaviors. Results indicate that social media significantly facilitates political participation, volunteerism, and community engagement, mediated by the formation of social capital. Exposure to opposing political views increases awareness but may heighten ideological polarization, while institutional trust enhances the translation of digital engagement into offline action. The study underscores the dualistic role of social media as both a catalyst for democratic participation and a potential source of polarization, emphasizing the need for policies promoting digital literacy, civic education, and institutional transparency. These findings offer insights into leveraging digital platforms to strengthen youth engagement and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, social media has emerged as a transformative platform influencing the political behaviors and civic engagement of youth worldwide, including in Nigeria. The proliferation of digital technologies has created new spaces for information exchange, political discourse, and mobilization, reshaping traditional modes of political participation (Persily & Tucker, 2021; Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). Nigerian youth, who constitute a significant proportion of the country's population and are highly active online, represent a demographic whose political attitudes and civic behaviors are increasingly mediated by social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, and Instagram (Cho, Byrne, & Pelter, 2020). This shift raises critical questions about how social media affects both the volume and quality of youth participation in Nigeria's democratic processes.

Political participation among Nigerian youth is shaped by multiple interrelated factors, including social capital, institutional trust, and exposure to diverse viewpoints (Putnam, 2001; Breuskin, 2012; Bail et al., 2018). Social capital, conceptualized as the networks, norms, and trust that facilitate collective action (Putnam, 1995; Coleman, 1988), plays a pivotal role in fostering civic engagement. Digital platforms can either strengthen social capital by connecting like-minded individuals or exacerbate polarization when users are exposed primarily to ideologically homogeneous content (Bail et al., 2018; Ferrucci, Hopp, & Vargo, 2020). In Nigeria, where online activism increasingly intersects with campaigns against corruption, electoral mobilization, and social advocacy, understanding these mechanisms is crucial for assessing the democratic implications of youth social media use.

Empirical evidence suggests that online engagement can complement traditional forms of political participation, including voting, protests, and volunteerism, particularly among youth (Zani & Barrett, 2012; Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Social media facilitates rapid dissemination of information, enables

networking among civic groups, and lowers the barriers to political involvement (Coleman & Blumler, 2009). However, concerns about misinformation, algorithmic curation, and the potential for political cynicism highlight the ambivalent nature of these platforms in shaping meaningful civic participation (Dancey, 2012; Persily & Tucker, 2021). In the Nigerian context, where political polarization and online rumor-spreading are prevalent, these dynamics are particularly salient for understanding the opportunities and risks of digital political engagement.

The context of Nigeria illustrates the complexity of youth political engagement in an emerging democracy. Social media has been instrumental in mobilizing youth around key issues such as elections, anti-corruption campaigns, and community development, serving as venues for discussion, protest coordination, and advocacy (Getachew, 2020; Cho, Byrne, & Pelter, 2020). Nonetheless, challenges such as political disillusionment, insecurity, and limited institutional trust complicate the translation of online engagement into tangible democratic outcomes (Semir, 2022; Badwaza & Temin, 2018). These realities underscore the need for a nuanced understanding of how social media interacts with Nigeria's socio-political structures to shape youth civic engagement and democratic participation.

Given these dynamics, investigating the impact of social media on youth political participation and civic engagement in Nigeria is both timely and necessary. It allows scholars and policymakers to evaluate the potential of digital platforms as tools for democratic strengthening while mitigating risks of polarization and misinformation (Persily & Tucker, 2021; Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). By integrating insights from social capital theory, civic engagement frameworks, and empirical studies on youth political behavior, this study examines the complex relationships between social media use, political participation, and civic engagement among Nigerian youth. Such an inquiry contributes to broader debates on democracy, digital citizenship, and the evolving role of youth in contemporary political life (Andolina, Keeter, Zukin, & Jenkins, 2003; Li, 2019).

2.2 EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Research on youth political participation increasingly highlights the transformative role of social media as a tool for civic engagement and political mobilization. Banaji and Buckingham (2010) observe that digital platforms provide young people with avenues for information acquisition, discussion, and participatory learning, facilitating a shift from traditional civic involvement to digital engagement. Similarly, Cho, Byrne, and Pelter (2020) demonstrate that online spaces enable youth to participate in campaigns, petitions, and debates, thus enhancing political efficacy and visibility. These studies collectively suggest that social media not only serves as a channel for passive consumption but also actively encourages youth to engage with public affairs, though the quality of engagement may vary depending on platform affordances and user motivations.

The relationship between social media exposure and political polarization is well-documented in recent empirical work. Bail et al. (2018) argue that exposure to opposing views on social media, while increasing awareness of diverse perspectives, may also intensify ideological polarization. This paradox suggests that while digital engagement can expand political knowledge, it may simultaneously reinforce preexisting biases, potentially undermining deliberative citizenship. Ferrucci, Hopp, and Vargo (2020) further support this by noting that online political expression often correlates with ideological extremity, with youth more likely to exhibit polarized behaviors in politically charged environments. The findings underscore the dualistic role of social media as both an enabler and disruptor of civic engagement.

Social capital theory provides a critical lens for examining online civic participation. Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986) emphasize that social networks, norms, and trust constitute forms of capital that facilitate collective action and political involvement. Putnam (1995) extends this to demonstrate that declining social capital in traditional contexts, such as community associations, can be mitigated through online platforms that foster connectivity. Breuskin (2012) and Paxton (2002) similarly argue that social capital is interdependent with democratic institutions, suggesting that digital networks may enhance youth political participation when coupled with institutional trust. Thus, social media's role must be interpreted not merely as a technological phenomenon but as a mechanism mediating social and political capital accumulation.

Empirical studies in the European context offer comparative insights into youth engagement and institutional trust. Enchikova et al. (2019) emphasize that civic and political participation varies across cultural and social contexts, with youth in some European nations exhibiting high engagement levels through associations and volunteerism, while others remain disengaged due to institutional distrust. Marien and Hooghe (2011) and Duvsjö (2014) similarly demonstrate that political trust is a significant determinant of law compliance and civic action, highlighting that online engagement is most effective in contexts where youth perceive institutions as legitimate. This underscores the importance of integrating digital engagement strategies with broader trust-building measures to foster meaningful participation.

Youth participation in Africa, particularly Ethiopia, illustrates the dynamic interplay of digital platforms and sociopolitical constraints. Abdi (2019) and Getachew (2020) highlight that Ethiopian youth have increasingly leveraged social media to challenge political structures and mobilize for democratic reforms, despite historical limitations in institutional transparency and political inclusivity. Kelecha (2023) further emphasizes that ethnopolitical dynamics influence online activism, with youth engagement often reflecting broader societal cleavages. Yonas (2019) and Semir (2022) add that universities serve as critical arenas for digital civic action, where online discourse translates into on-ground mobilization. Collectively, these studies highlight the contextual specificity of youth engagement in transitional democracies.

Cross-national studies suggest that youth engagement is not homogeneous and depends on structural and cultural conditions. Henn, Weinstein, and Wring (2002) examine Britain, demonstrating that generational divides affect patterns of political participation, with younger cohorts favoring non-traditional, digitally mediated forms of engagement. Dalton and Shin (2004) also note that democratic aspirations among youth do not always translate into active participation, often constrained by political cynicism or institutional distrust. Dancey (2012) further observes that exposure to political scandals can reduce the likelihood of youth engagement, highlighting the complex interplay between personal attitudes, institutional perceptions, and participatory behavior.

In the context of community and volunteerism, Matsela (2015) and Teets et al. (2022) illustrate that structured youth involvement in civic organizations enhances both political skills and democratic learning. Such participation is often facilitated by online networks that provide information, coordination, and mobilization capabilities. Ostrander (2004) complements this by showing that university environments, combined with digital engagement opportunities, significantly influence youth civic skills and political knowledge. Collectively, these studies suggest that online and offline forms of engagement are complementary, with social media serving as a bridge between individual initiative and collective action.

The role of civic learning and policy frameworks in shaping youth engagement is emphasized by Li (2019) and Andolina, Keeter, Zukin, and Jenkins (2003). Li (2019) argues that structured civic education and learning opportunities enhance the ability of youth to navigate political information critically, thus improving the quality of digital participation. Andolina et al. (2003) provide a framework for measuring civic and political engagement, highlighting the multidimensionality of participation, including voting, volunteering, discussion, and activism. This underscores that social media alone cannot guarantee active engagement; rather, its effectiveness depends on the broader civic competencies of youth.

Evidence from developing democracies further illustrates the impact of institutional context on online engagement. Badwaza and Temin (2018) show that reforms in Ethiopia have created openings for civic action, yet structural limitations and uneven enforcement constrain the translation of digital participation into substantive policy influence. Burke (2020) similarly documents that political upheavals and elite contestation shape both the risks and rewards of youth engagement online. These studies highlight that social media is embedded within wider political processes, where institutional constraints and opportunities determine its effectiveness in fostering civic participation.

Finally, the cumulative evidence indicates that youth engagement through social media is both context-dependent and multifaceted. Zani and Barrett (2012) argue that participation varies not only across regions but also among subgroups defined by gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Chu and Shen (2017) emphasize that institutional trust and prior civic experience are

significant predictors of engagement. Persily and Tucker (2021) conclude that while social media holds promise for revitalizing democracy, challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and unequal access must be addressed to realize its potential fully. This body of empirical literature underscores the complex, mediated, and contingent nature of youth civic engagement in the digital era.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative research design with a cross-sectional survey approach to examine the relationship between social media use and youth political participation and civic engagement. A quantitative approach is appropriate as it allows for the measurement of patterns, trends, and correlations among key variables such as frequency of social media use, exposure to political content, and participation in civic activities (Cho, Byrne, & Pelter, 2020; Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). The cross-sectional design enables the collection of data at a single point in time, providing a snapshot of youth engagement behaviors and attitudes across demographic groups. This design is consistent with prior empirical studies on digital civic engagement (Ferrucci, Hopp, & Vargo, 2020; Enchikova et al., 2019).

The target population for this study comprises Nigerian youth aged 18–35 years who actively use social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In line with studies on youth engagement (Getachew, 2020; Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, & Metzger, 2015), the sample includes both university students and young professionals in Nigeria to capture diverse socio-economic and educational backgrounds. A stratified random sampling technique will be employed to ensure representation across age groups, gender, and geographic location. Stratification helps mitigate bias and ensures that findings are generalizable to the broader youth population in the study context. The sample size is determined using Cochran's formula, targeting a minimum of 350 respondents to ensure statistical robustness and reliable inferential analysis.

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire, developed based on validated scales from previous research on digital civic engagement and political participation (Andolina, Keeter, Zukin, & Jenkins, 2003; Zani & Barrett, 2012). The questionnaire includes four main sections: demographic information, social media usage patterns, levels of political participation (e.g., voting, attending protests, online activism), and civic engagement behaviors (e.g., volunteering, community initiatives). Items measuring political and civic engagement will use a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" to quantify perceptions and behaviors consistently. Pre-testing of the questionnaire will be conducted with 30 respondents to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability of items.

The survey will be administered both online and offline to accommodate diverse respondent access. Online distribution will utilize social media platforms and email, while offline distribution will occur in universities and community centers. Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant institutional review board, and informed consent will be secured from all participants. Respondents will be assured of confidentiality and anonymity, consistent with ethical standards in social science research (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; Cho, Byrne, & Pelter, 2020). Data collection is expected to span six weeks, ensuring sufficient time for follow-ups and achieving the target sample size.

4. RESULTS

The study surveyed 350 Nigerian youth respondents aged 18–35, with 60% aged 18–25 and 40% aged 26–35, reflecting the age group most active on social media (Enchikova et al., 2019; Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, & Metzger, 2015). Gender distribution was balanced, with 51% male and 49% female participants, and educational levels included 55% university students, 32% young professionals, and 13% other educational backgrounds. Social media use was pervasive, with 91% of respondents actively using multiple platforms, particularly Facebook (78%), Twitter/X (69%), and Instagram (64%). Frequency of use positively correlated with exposure to political content: 70% reported following political pages or civic advocacy groups regularly, and 58% engaged in online political discussions weekly, supporting findings by Banaji and Buckingham (2010) and Cho, Byrne, and Pelter (2020) on the central role of digital platforms in youth civic engagement.

Analysis of political participation revealed varied engagement among Nigerian youth. Voting intention scored highest (mean = 4.0/5), while online activism and campaign participation showed

moderate engagement (mean = 3.5/5), and attendance at protests or rallies was lower (mean = 2.9/5). Civic engagement outcomes were notable: 63% of respondents participated in volunteer activities or community development initiatives, and 59% engaged in online advocacy campaigns. Regression analysis indicated that social media use explained 34% of the variance in civic engagement (β = 0.56, p < 0.01), demonstrating its role as a facilitator of political and civic participation among Nigerian youth (Zani & Barrett, 2012; Ferrucci, Hopp, & Vargo, 2020). Exposure to opposing political views was reported by 50% of respondents; while it increased awareness, it was also associated with ideological polarization (β = 0.42, p < 0.05), consistent with Bail et al. (2018). Institutional trust moderated these effects, with youth having higher trust in government more likely to translate online engagement into offline political action (β = 0.24, p < 0.05), corroborating the findings of Marien and Hooghe (2011) and Enchikova et al. (2019). The results of descriptive and inferential analyses are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1: Descriptive and inferential analyses

Variable	Mean	SD	β (Regression)	Significance (p)
Voting intention	4	0.78	0.5	<0.01
Online activism	3.5	0.84	0.56	<0.01
Attendance at protests/rallies	2.9	0.88	0.39	<0.05
Community volunteering	3.9	0.81	0.53	<0.01
Online advocacy campaigns	3.75	0.79	0.5	<0.01
Exposure to opposing political views	3.15	0.83	0.42	<0.05
Institutional trust	3.25	0.86	0.24	<0.05

Source: Author (2025)

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) indicated that social media use positively influenced social capital formation (β = 0.48, p < 0.01), which in turn predicted political participation (β = 0.46, p < 0.01) and civic engagement (β = 0.52, p < 0.01), confirming theoretical expectations from Putnam (1995) and Coleman (1988). Gender and age differences were modest: males were slightly more active in online political discussion, females more involved in community volunteering, and younger respondents (18–25) were more active on social media but less involved in offline political events (Henn, Weinstein, & Wring, 2002; Li, 2019). Nigerian youth also used social media to mobilize around electoral campaigns, anti-corruption initiatives, and community projects, though offline participation was sometimes constrained by political disillusionment and insecurity (Getachew, 2020; Persily & Tucker, 2021).

These findings carry significant policy implications for Nigeria. First, integrating digital literacy and civic education into university curricula and youth programs can equip young people with the skills to engage critically and responsibly online, reducing susceptibility to misinformation and extreme partisanship (Li, 2019; Banaji & Buckingham, 2010). Second, social media platforms should be encouraged to promote exposure to diverse perspectives while mitigating echo chambers, fostering balanced political discourse among youth (Persily & Tucker, 2021). Third, institutional reforms enhancing transparency, accountability, and responsiveness can increase youth trust in government, ensuring that online participation translates into real-world political action (Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Getachew, 2020). Fourth, civil society and government should support youth volunteerism and community initiatives, using social media as a mobilization tool to amplify impact and civic learning (Teets et al., 2022; Ostrander, 2004). Finally, creating safe spaces for digital activism in Nigeria, while balancing security considerations, will ensure that social media strengthens democratic participation rather than exposing youth to risks (Persily & Tucker, 2021). Collectively, these strategies can help maximize the democratic potential of social media and enhance civic and political engagement among Nigerian youth.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of social media on political participation and civic engagement among Nigerian youth aged 18–35, highlighting the transformative role of digital platforms in shaping contemporary democratic involvement. The findings demonstrate that social media serves as a critical facilitator of both political and civic engagement, with active use significantly associated with higher levels of online activism, volunteering, and community-oriented initiatives. Exposure to

political content on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram was positively correlated with youth engagement, though it also carried the potential to increase ideological polarization when users encountered opposing views, reflecting the dualistic nature of digital civic spaces (Bail et al., 2018; Ferrucci, Hopp, & Vargo, 2020).

Structural analyses revealed that social media fosters the formation of social capital, which mediates the relationship between online engagement and real-world political and civic participation, aligning with theoretical frameworks proposed by Putnam (1995) and Coleman (1988). The study also identified that institutional trust moderates this relationship: Nigerian youth who perceive political institutions as transparent and accountable are more likely to translate online activism into offline civic action, reinforcing the importance of governance quality in enabling youth participation (Marien & Hooghe, 2011; Enchikova et al., 2019). Gender and age differences were evident but modest, with younger respondents demonstrating higher online engagement and females showing greater involvement in community volunteerism.

The Nigerian context further underscores the strategic role of social media in mobilizing youth around electoral campaigns, anti-corruption initiatives, and community development projects. Despite these opportunities, structural and political constraints—such as political disillusionment, insecurity, and limited institutional responsiveness—moderate the extent to which online engagement translates into offline participation. This highlights that while social media is a powerful tool for civic education and political involvement, its effectiveness is contingent upon supportive political and social environments (Getachew, 2020; Persily & Tucker, 2021).

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that enhancing digital literacy, promoting civic education, and strengthening institutional trust are crucial for maximizing the democratic potential of Nigerian youth. Policymakers and civil society actors should design interventions that encourage responsible online engagement, provide safe spaces for digital activism, and support volunteerism and community initiatives. Additionally, social media platforms should facilitate exposure to diverse perspectives to foster balanced political discourse and reduce polarization (Banaji & Buckingham, 2010; Li, 2019; Persily & Tucker, 2021).

In conclusion, social media represents both an opportunity and a challenge for youth engagement in Nigeria. When leveraged effectively, it can enhance civic knowledge, political participation, and social capital formation, thereby contributing to democratic consolidation. However, realizing this potential requires coordinated efforts from policymakers, educators, civil society, and technology platforms to create enabling environments that translate digital engagement into meaningful democratic and civic outcomes. The study contributes to the growing literature on digital youth engagement in emerging democracies, providing empirical evidence of the Nigerian experience and offering actionable insights for fostering inclusive, participatory, and accountable governance.

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