Perceived Impact of Social Media on the Political Participation of Youths in Abuja during the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria: An Assessment of the *Obidient Movement*

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Dennis O. Abutu, PhD*, Helen. O.C. Ambassador-Brikins, PhD**
& Simbiat A. Ademuyiwa***

Abstract

Social media have become ubiquitous channels for political communication, enlightenment, as well participation, especially at election times. During the 2023 general elections in Nigeria for instance, social media gained more momentum as it ushered in a phase of political experience that has never been witnessed before. This study therefore, seeks to ascertain the influence of social media on the political participation of youths in the country, as well as its impact on their propagation of the popularly tagged "Obidient Movement". The study which was primarily targeted at youths of Abuja city notably adopted the theory of uses and gratification. Findings revealed that social media was used for creation and popularisation of the Obidient Movement – a political interest group which had its name derived from Mr. Peter Obi, the presidential candidate of the Labour Party (LP). This movement which gained wide popularity and acceptance in Nigeria and the Diaspora also turned into a political third force amidst the already popular, majority of the political parties – the APC and PDP. Further findings also revealed that the social media platforms most consistently used by youths in participating in the 2023 general elections were Facebook and Whatsapp; and that they were highly influential in the elections as they increased voter registration and also popularised minority political parties and support groups. The study recommended that political candidates, political parties, as well as interest groups should fully capitalise on the prospects of social media for the spreading of political campaign, awareness, enlightenment, and voter sensitisation and education.

Keywords: General Elections, Political Participation, Social Media, Uses and Gratifications, Youths.

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* **Dennis O. Abutu**, PhD, Department of Mass Communication, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)abutu2dennis@gmail.com; 08067778789

** **Helen. O.C. Ambassador-Brikins**, PhD, Department of Mass Communication, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN); hambassador-brikins@noun.edu.ng; diplomatsupernatural@gmail.com; 08037318341

*** **Simbiat A. Ademuyiwa,** Department of Mass Communication, National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN);sademuyiwa@noun.edu.ng; simbiatasake@gmail.com; 08035149744

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Introduction

The use of social media in fostering political participation and reawakening political consciousness is undoubtedly gaining momentum in present day Nigerian politics. According to Abdulrauf, Hamid & Ishak (2015, p. 8), the role of social media in political participation cannot be overstated as sites like Facebook and Twitter have provided new avenues for political engagement. Ayankoya, Calitz & Cullen (2015) observe that the use of social media for political campaigning and engagement has introduced a new paradigm that offers new ways of driving political participation and engagement. In the field of politics, the use of marketing concepts to engage voters and drive collective participation in political processes has become critical due to competition.

According to Kumar & Natarajan (2016), social media has changed the approach of political communication and politicians are opting social media for new ways of connecting with voters. They state further that the empowering growth of internet has created a pathway for politics to use social media strategy. "In this present scenario, everyone wants to be on the platform of social media, since everything is towards the digital era; people are inter-linked via social media for the purpose of regular communication" (Kumar & Natarajan, 2016, p. 1).

Citizens' perception and interest in democratic practices and political participation are crucial to democratic governance (Dalton, 2017). While this is true for all democracies, it carries greater consequence for young democracies such as Nigeria. This, according to (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019) is because political participation and engagement not only guarantees the nourishment of democracies but also strengthens the credentials of popular rule in young democracies. Studies have indicated that social media diffusion fosters political participation in nascent democracies and autocratic regimes (Castels, 2012).

The interactive nature of social media makes them fit to be used for many purposes such as job search, socialisation, education, entertainment, governance, political participation, among others. Hence, social media, as social instruments of communication, promote participation, connectedness, opportunity to disseminate information across geographical boundaries and the fostering of relationships and interactions among people (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020). Commonly used social media are Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Imo, 2go, YouTube, Telegram and Flikr. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria witnessed an upsurge in online political communication and participation which projected and propelled the widespread popularity of the "*Obidient Movement*".

The increasingly important role of social media in elections is more than evident today. According to a Report from Bournemouth University's Centre for Politics and Research (2019, p. 2), "political parties across the globe are learning that along with communicating through traditional media such as television and newspapers, they must invest in digital political communication and campaigning if they want to more effectively reach their electorate and compete with their rival parties". Notably too, the invention and rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has attracted considerable attention in theoretical and practical debates about the role of digital media in political participation. Uwalaka (2021, p. 145) observes that with the emergence of digital media, people in nascent democracies such as Nigeria have started using their

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online presence to engage in political discussions. This has led to an increase in political protests in undemocratic and developing democracies. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria witnessed a new phase of an online political force popularly tagged as the *Obidient Movement*; a derivative from the name of the Labour Party (LP) presidential flag bearer, Mr. Peter Obi. The movement which predominantly had youths as its driving force grew tremendously through the country, to the international community. This precipitates the basis for this study; to assess the impact social media played in engendering wide participation in the elections through the aforementioned political movement.

Objectives of the Study
i.   To assess the social media platform that was used more often by youths of Abuja metropolis to access information on the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.
ii. To ascertain the most significant influence of social media on the political participation of youth of Abuja metropolis during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.
iii. To deduce the impact of social media in propagating the *Obidient Movement* among youths of Abuja metropolis.

Research Questions
i.   What was the social media platform used more often by youths of Abuja metropolis to access information on the 2023 general elections in Nigeria?
ii. What was the most significant influence of social media on political participation of youth of Abuja Metropolis during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria?
iii. What was the impact of social media in propagating the *Obidient Movement* among youths of Abuja metropolis?

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory
The Uses and Gratification theory was propounded by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in 1974 (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). The theory advocates that people use certain media based on the gratification derived from it. Specifically, the uses and gratification theory directly place power in the hands of the users. Additionally, studies have described it as the gratifications or benefits that attract and hold audiences to diverse types of media and the types of content that satisfy their social and psychological demands (Apuke, 2016). The widespread adoption of social media by Nigerian youths today is evident in spheres of entertainment, information, healthcare, business and politics too. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria saw social media gain another momentum in its prospect of political mobilisation when it basically served as a fulcrum and a window for massive citizen involvement in the polity, through the initiation of the popular *Obidient Movement* by a vast majority of concerned Nigerian youths.

Social Media and democracy

When we talk of social media, we mean those internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online. According to Madueke, Nwosu, Ogbonnaya & Anumadu (2017, p. 48), "social media are interactive web-based media platforms that offer citizens opportunity and place to connect, share opinions, experiences, views, contacts, knowledge, expertise, as well as other things like job and career tips". They belong to a new genre of media that focuses on social networking allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends and share information with greater freedom as well as publish their views on issues on the World Wide Web.

Chatora (2012) as cited in Madueke (2017) observes that it is this interactive or collaborative nature of these tools that makes them social. He describes these media as "online platforms that promote participation, openness, conversation and connectedness". Akinwunmi (2011) sees them as social instruments of magazines. They are online content, created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies to disseminate information across geographical boundaries, providing interaction among people.

Social media emerged with the advent of the internet and the World Wide Web. According to Madueke *et al* (2017), they are usually associated with the term "web 2.0" which is used to describe websites that provide opportunity for a user to interact with the sender of a message. Nnadozie (2007) observes that "Web 2.0" refers to the state of the web from 2004 till date; a period when interactive websites emerged as opposed to "web1.0" which describes the state of the web prior to 2004.

Once the concept of social media is mentioned, what comes to mind are *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Whatsapp*, *Instagram*, *YouTube* etc, and other interface of interaction such as *LinkedIn* and *Flickr*. Anim (2013) states that these are the interactive websites, chat rooms, or platforms that permit users to leave comments and have discussions with other people. According to him, there are many characteristics of social media that enable them to be adapted for more than the sharing of social courtesies among friends.

General elections have become recurrent in Nigeria, following the successful historic transition of the country from military despotic rule to democracy in 1999. Ayodeji (2016) states that although conflicts, rigging, and low turnout by electorates have marred past elections, the 2015 general elections were a watershed in Nigeria's democratic process, owing to the rousing commendation the outcome drew from domestic and international communities. The main concern of these communities was the successful transition from one democratic administration to another, which was accomplished with consummate ease. According to Adibe (2015), this was the first time since 1999 (when the military handed over power to civilians) that the opposition had a realistic chance of dislodging the ruling party.

The 2015 general election happened when Nigeria was caught up in the dilemma of opportunity and challenge, more than at any other point since the country's first decade of independence. Hate speech and soapbox rhetoric were heating up the social and political system. According to Thurston (2015), the

mandate of the electorate carries a high stake for governance, security, and the economy. These stakes largely defined the interests of the international community, which was visible in its ultra-careful support for the successful conduct of the election.

Within the domestic community, the election bred a large socio-political movement among Nigeria's politically literate. Civil society groups such as the Civil Liberties Organisation; Campaign for Democracy; Nigerian Union of Journalists; Centre for Democracy and Development; Nigeria Labour Congress; Transition Monitoring Group; Electoral Reform Network; National Coalition on Affirmative Action; Gender, Electoral and Constitutional Reform; and Committee for the Defence of Human Rights amongst others all pledged their usual roles. Omede & Bakare (2014) believe these roles are *sine qua non* for the sustenance of a nation's development, especially during elections. Nonetheless, the general elections resulted in an unusual or new movement by Nigerian youth on social media platforms, especially *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

Youth, *Facebook* and *Twitter* in the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

In preparation for the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, *Facebook* and *Twitter* played myriad roles, especially in the areas of electioneering, political campaigns, mobilisation and enlightenment of the electorate. According to Ayodeji (2016), political parties, politicians and news agencies used social media to disseminate information and to solicit support and sympathy from the general population who constituted part of the electorate. At some points, even some civic groups used the same medium to promote political messages of public interest.

During the period of elections, notably on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, hashtags of trending news and events were created for easy access to news and information. For instance, news agencies, civil societies and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) made use of the hashtag *#NigeriaDecides* to categorise information. The electoral umpire, INEC, constantly used the hashtag to disseminate information on the elections through social media platforms. Politicians and political parties also explored this means to pursue their ambitions and to propagate their names in order to gain popularity among *Facebook* and *Twitter* followers.

Younger people are more active on social media today, which makes it a befitting channel for reaching out to them. According to Gambo (2015), voters aged 18 to 34 make up 65% of the voting population in Nigeria. Individuals within this age bracket also constitute the largest *Facebook* and *Twitter* population in Nigeria. Hence young people in the country made use of *Facebook* and *Twitter* during the general elections. The power with which internet literacy equips the youth was effectively deployed in persuading stakeholders during the election to use social media platforms.

A substantial number of politicians and political parties have *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts where they outlined their manifestos and motives for vying for political positions. Ayodeji (2016) states that through the inquisitive and voracious nature of young people; they subjected the manifestos and motives of politicians and political parties to interrogation. They mandated political parties

and their candidates contesting elective positions to clarify their various manifestos.

Prospects of Social Media in Fostering of Political Participation among Nigerian Youths

Social media have penetrated all levels of the information society and have catalysed the process of democratisation and political development. "The media, a modern trend in information and knowledge dissemination, has taken communication beyond the limitations of the traditional way of communicating and socialising, making it an essential part of people's lives; affecting their social, political and economic activities" (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020, p. 132). While some decades ago, the internet was considered a news media, societies now turn to social media as sources of information. One of the major applications of social media is social networks, where millions of people are connected to utilise an open domain for interacting with others and socialising with all types of media such as text, voice, images, or videos (Alquraan *et al*., 2017).

Political participation means "citizens' involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives" (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013, p. 33). It is the various mechanisms through which citizens express their political views and/or exercise their rights and influences on the political processes (Chatora, 2012). Thus, it is a civic activity and a critical part of any democracy; an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of a political issue. According to (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020, p. 135), "political participation could also be explained as a set of activities that citizens perform to influence government's officials or its structured policies". In other words, through political participation, citizens can elect political representatives, who make policies in favour of the citizens who are the ultimate beneficiaries of social programmes put in place by the representatives.

According to Omotayo & Folorunso (2020, p. 136), "the many benefits of using social media for political participation include granting citizens the opportunity to participate actively and get involved fully in the political discourse by adding their voices on issues posted on social media sites". The platforms also afford electorates a more accommodative avenue of assessing candidates for political offices and promoting transparency in governance, thus, advancing the tenets of participatory democracy that sees the media as debate avenues which aid tremendously, the actualisation of involvement in politics. Omotayo A Folorunso (2020) state further that social media also offer a range of potentials for enhancing good governance and finding new ways of governing by creating an opportunity of listening to opinion polls online, thereby setting ideas about citizenry yearnings including the possible reaction of people towards public decision-making processes.

Review of Empirical Studies

Omotayo & Folorunso (2020) conducted a study titled, "Use of Social Media for Political Participation by Youths in Oyo State, Nigeria". The study investigated the use of social media for political participation among youths in Oyo State, Nigeria; specifically, the types of social media used for political

participation, the types of political activities social media are used for, as well as factors influencing the use of the media for political participation. Findings reveal that social media was highly used by the youths for political participation. Facebook was the most used, followed by Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter and Yahoo Messenger respectively. Majorly, the youths used social media to participate in political advocacy, political campaigns, communicating with politicians, political discussions, monitoring and reporting electoral malpractices, public consultations, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, blogging about political issues, and writing letters to public officials respectively.

Numerous other studies have investigated the use of social media for political participation in Nigeria. Chinedu-Okeke & Obi (2016), for instance, explore the extent of South-eastern Nigeria electorates' involvement with social media for the electioneering process and found that political campaigns through the social media had a significant effect on electorate's decision-making and participation in Nigeria's 2011 and 2015 elections. Similarly, Okoro & Santas (2017) appraise the utilisation of social media for political communication in the 2011 Nigerian presidential election to determine whether voters' choice of presidential candidates was influenced by their social media use. The results reveal that the majority of the respondents' choices of presidential candidates were influenced by the use of social media. Similarly, the respondents were of the opinion that the two selected presidential candidates were popular because they used social media in their political campaign. Ekwueme & Folarin (2017) examine the role of social media in the Nigerian 2015 presidential electioneering processes. Findings show that social media played a major role in mobilising people, creating awareness, as well as participation and circulation of information about candidates.

Apuke & Tunca (2018) also examine the implications of social media usage in the electoral processes and campaigns in the Nigerian 2011 and 2015 general elections. Findings show that social media was employed due to its participatory nature and that social media was applied to influence the thoughts of many young people, increasing their political awareness.

Research Methodology

The survey research method was adopted for this study. Nwodu (2006, p.7) states that, "the survey research works on the premise that a given population is too large for any researcher to realistically observe all the elements of the population". The method is one in which a group of people or items are studied by collecting and analysing data from only a few people considered to be representative of the entire population. The populations of the study are youth of Abuja metropolis. Notwithstanding, the researcher purposively selected 300 respondents as the sample size and further stratified them into the 6 area councils of Abuja namely: Abaji, Bwari, Gwagwalada, Kuje, Kwali and Abuja Municipal. Subsequently, 50 copies of the questionnaire were allotted to each of the area councils. Primary and secondary sources of data collection were used in this study, while simple statistics was used for data analysis.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The total copies of questionnaire distributed were 300 but only 288 were valid and used for data analysis. The remaining 12 copies were not appropriately filled thus, were not used. Consequently, a total of 388 copies of the questionnaire were used for data analysis.

Table 1: Gender

Gender	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Male	140	48.6%
Female	148	51.4%
Total	**288**	**100%**

Table 1 shows that 140 respondents (48.6%) indicated that they are male, while 148 respondents (51.4%) are female respondents. This implies that both sexes were fairly represented.

Table 2: Age Bracket

Ages	Respondents	Percentage (%)
18-25	64	22.2%
26-35	85	29.5%
36-45	77	26.7%
46 and above	62	21.5%
Total	**288**	**100%**

As seen in the table 2, 64 respondents (22.2%) fell within the age range of 18-25 years, 85 respondents (29.5%) ranged from 26-35 years, 77 respondents (26.7%) fell within the range of 36-45 years, while 62 respondents (21.5%) ranged from 46 years and above.

Table 3: Occupation

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Civil Servant	94	32.6%
Trader	76	26.4%
Student	97	33.7%
Farmer	21	7.3%
Total	**288**	**100%**

Table 3 which displays respondents' occupation categories indicates that 94 (32.6%) of them were civil servants, 76 (26.4%) were traders, 97 (representing 33.7%) were students, while 21 (7.3%) were farmers.

Table 4: Social Media Platform Accessed more often during the 2023 General Elections

Social Media Platform	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Twitter	53	18.4%
Facebook	108	37.5%
Whatsapp	103	35.8%
Instagram	18	6.2%
Telegram	-	-
TikTok	6	2.1%
Total	**288**	**100%**

Table 4 presents a distribution of respondents according to the social media platform they used more often in accessing information on 2023 general elections. From the responses on the table, 53 respondents (18.4%) indicated that it was via Twitter; 108 respondents (37.5%) indicated that it was Facebook; 103 (35.8%) of them indicated that it was on Whatsapp; 18 (6.2%) indicated that it was on Instagram; while 6 respondents (2.1%) indicated that they accessed information of 2023 general elections more on TikTok.

Table 5: How Social Media Influenced Participation in the 2023 General Elections

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Massive political campaign posts	68	23.6%
Constant voter registration reminders and updates	89	30.9%
Voter education and sensitisation	37	12.8%
Formation of online support groups	94	32.6%
Total	**288**	**100%**

Table 5 presents a distribution of respondents according to how social media most significantly influenced their participation in the 2023 general elections. From the responses on the table, 68 respondents (23.6%) indicated that it was used for massive political campaign posts; 89 (30.9%) of them indicated that it offered constant voter registration reminders and updates; 37 (12.8%) indicated that it was used for voter education and sensitisation; and 94 respondents (32.6%) indicated that social media was used for the formation of online support groups during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria.

Table 6: Influence of Social Media on Political Participation in the 2023 General Elections

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Massive turnout at political rallies	43	14.9%
Increased voter registration	99	34.4%
Popularised minority political parties and groups	93	32.3%
Heightened political discourse	53	18.4%
Total	**288**	**100%**

Table 6 presents a distribution of respondents according to the most significant influence of social media on political participation during the 2023 general elections. From the responses on the table, 43 respondents (14.9%) indicated that it engendered massive turnout of citizens at political rallies; 99 respondents (34.4%) indicated that it increased voter registration; 93 of them (32.3%) indicated that it popularised minority political parties and groups; and 53 respondents (18.4%) indicated that social media heightened political discourse during the 2023 general elections.

Table 7: Impact of Social Media in Propagating the *Obidient Movement*

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Major channel of propagating the movement	64	22.2%
Enabled its popularity and wide acceptance	101	35.1%
Eased the accessibility of information for supporters	28	9.7%
Projected the movement to a political third force	95	33%
Total	**288**	**100%**

Table 7 presents a distribution of respondents according to their perception of the impact of social media in propagating the *Obidient Movement* during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. As evident from the table, 64 respondents (22.2%) indicated that it serves as a major channel of propagating the movement; 101 respondents (35.1%) indicated that it enabled the popularity and wide acceptance of the movement; 28 respondents (9.7%) indicated that it eased the accessibility of information for supporters; and 95 respondents (33%) indicated that social media projected the *Obidient Movement* to a political third force during the 2023 general elections.

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to assess the impact of social media in enhancing political participation during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria; using the *Obidient Movement* as a case study. Three objectives and three research questions were raised and three major findings were made. First, it was found that the social media platforms used more often for political activities during the 2023 general elections were Facebook and Whatsapp. In a similar vein, a study by Funmilola & Folorunso (2020) on the use of social media for political participation by youths in Oyo State, also found that the social media platform most dominantly used was Facebook, which was followed by Whatsapp and Instagram.

This study also found that social media most significantly influenced participation in the 2023 general elections through the formation of online support groups, and also through constant voter registration reminders and updates. These influences specifically range from increased voter registration as well as the popularisation of minority political parties and support groups. Chinedu-Okeke &

Obi (2016), for instance, found that political campaigns through the social media had a significant effect on electorate's decision-making and participation in Nigeria's 2011 and 2015 elections. Similarly, Ekwueme & Folarin (2017) established that social media played a major role in mobilising people, creating awareness, as well as participation and circulation of information about candidates. Similarly, the respondents were of the opinion that the two selected presidential candidates were popular because they used social media in their political campaign. Furthermore, this study also found that social media created some impact in the propagation of the *Obidient Movement* during the elections. These impacts were that it enabled the popularity and wide acceptance of the movement, and also projected it to a political third force. Okoro & Santas (2017) noted that the majority of the respondents' choices of presidential candidates were influenced by the use of social media.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The increased adoption of social media for political communication and participation keeps gaining momentum as the days go by; thus, the interactive media has become an integral part of modern day politics as it benefits both the politicians and the electorates. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria revealed the unwavering influence of social media in the creation of political participation. Most of its platforms, precisely Facebook and Whatsapp were used to serve as a reminder to electorates on the need to register as eligible voters, and this correlatively increased the number of voters compared to previous years. More so, it was used for creation of online political support groups that engendered wider participation and popularisation of some political parties and their candidates.

Typical evidence to this was seen with the initiation and popularisation of the *Obidient Movement* – a political interest group which had its name derived from Mr. Peter Obi, the presidential candidate of the Labour Party (LP). This movement which gained wide popularity and acceptance in Nigeria and in the Diaspora, also emanated into a political third force amidst the already popular, majority political parties. This study therefore recommends the following:

i.   Political candidates, political parties, as well as interest groups should fully capitalise the prospects of social media for political campaign, awareness, enlightenment, and voter sensitisation and education.
ii. Network providers should ensure the provision and sustenance of efficient and consistent network reception on their service providers so as to minimise the service constraint in mainstream or rural areas of the country especially. In addition, data tariff for these network services should be made affordable for a vast majority of users.
iii. Broadcast and print media outlets should explore the option of also prioritising and promoting their different social media handles and platforms along with conventional media channels so as to ensure a wider audience outreach in broadcasting political messages and or, activities.

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