



# The ‘#tag Generation’: Social Media and Youth Participation in the 2019 General Election in Nigeria

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## Abstract

This article examines the roles of social media on youth’s political participation in the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria. It interrogates the roles played by these communication tools in the emancipation and agency of youths while revealing the double-edged implications the devices may have on the democratic processes and aspirants. The article employs both primary and secondary methods of data sourcing. Primary data were obtained from in-depth interviews with social media ‘influencers’ who played vital roles during the 2019 General Election in Nigeria. Further, data were obtained from selected social media accounts of prominent politicians and analysed using content analysis. Secondary data were extracted from books, articles, newspapers and magazines. Also, the study was contextualised using use and gratification theory. The study concluded that social media played a vital role in the 2019 General Election in Nigeria. It revealed how social media contributed to citizens’ power and agency through debates and narratives which were instrumental in agenda-setting for the ruling class and citizens’ democratic expectations.

**Keywords:** social media, youth, political participation, hashtag generation

## Résumé

Cet article examine l’impact des médias sociaux sur la participation politique des jeunes aux élections générales de 2019 au Nigeria. Il interroge sur le rôle de ces outils de communication dans l’émancipation et l’action des jeunes tout en révélant les implications, à double tranchant que ces dispositifs peuvent avoir sur les processus démocratiques et les aspirants. L’article utilise à la fois des méthodes primaires et secondaires de collecte de données. Les données primaires ont été obtenues à partir d’entretiens approfondis avec des « influenceurs » de médias

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sociaux qui ont joué un rôle essentiel lors des élections générales de 2019 au Nigeria. En outre, les données ont été obtenues à partir d'une sélection de comptes de médias sociaux d'éminents politiciens et analysées à l'aide d'une analyse de contenu. Les données secondaires ont été extraites de livres, d'articles, de journaux et de magazines. De plus, l'étude a été contextualisée en utilisant la théorie des usages et des gratifications. L'étude a conclu que les médias sociaux ont joué un rôle important dans les élections générales de 2019 au Nigeria. Elle a révélé comment les médias sociaux ont contribué au pouvoir et à l'agentivité des citoyens à travers des débats et des récits qui ont été déterminants dans l'élaboration du programme de la classe dirigeante et les attentes démocratiques des citoyens.

**Mots-clés :** réseaux sociaux, jeunesse, participation politique, génération de hashtags

The globalisation of the world has been transformed by the advent of Information Communication Technology (ICT) since the 1990s. Today, communication barriers have been reduced to the barest minimum as local events easily become global and vice versa. However, ICT has come with a growing power that can be located in the social media space. Technological innovations are not only expanding the effects of social media on politics but are also involving citizens in political debate like never before (Ruskell 2016: 1). The impact has been that a critical mass of once 'voiceless' youth have got their persuasive 'voice' through the internet and their political participation has evolved (*ibid.*). The implication of this is massive for youth at large in the context of democracy and governance. This becomes important, as youths, through the use of social media, have not only evolved from an identity of stable consumers of news and political narratives but have also become sources of newsfeeds, and trendy agenda framers concerning leadership, accountability and good governance within the polity.

African youth have also embraced social media. This is in connection with their rich history of failed governance which manifests in various forms of marginalisation. While accounts of state repression (Wilkes 2014; Arthur, Angeline, Vincent *et al.* 2013; Williams 1996) are not new to African literature, studies on African youth and political participation continue to show low turn-out in the political space. Increasingly, African youth have deployed different strategies in getting out of the failed system in which their destinies are seemingly trapped. One strategy has been political participation through social media in order to advance good governance delivery. Their efforts have put political officeholders on the spot as they constitute the greatest number of social media users and they have kept a chunk of their time in the online world (Leslie 2015: 1).

Instructively, Nigerian youth have not been left out. Nigerian youth have often shown interest in turning around the peculiar challenges which hold the country back. For one, they face socio-economic challenges which include unemployment and poverty. The National Bureau of Statistics reports that Nigeria's unemployment rate in the third quarter of 2018 moved from 23.1 per cent to 27.1 per cent in 2020 (Onuba 2019; Proshare.com 2020). Worse still, data on corruption showed the appalling state of rot in the system. For instance, Transparency International rated Nigeria in 149<sup>th</sup> position out of 180 (2020), a step above 148<sup>th</sup> in 2017 (Sahara Reporter 2018). Youth have however realised that they cannot continue to sit back and watch their potentials being under-utilised. They have also realised that a critical aspect of their socio-economic and political ascendancy is attached to existing corruption, nepotism, cronyism, incompetence of public officeholders and lack of transparency, accountability, probity, and poor governance which are exhibited in government. Hence, their functional approach has been to peacefully engage the system by organising cerebral, non-violent movements through '#' codes, viral videos and online movements, to convey serious feeds of comments, debates, newsfeeds, and editorial headlines through which their agenda are nationalised. Today's youth have grown up with the concept of 'viral media' and approach their role in society differently than older generations (Ruskell 2016).

Consequently, the 2019 Nigeria General Elections witnessed a high level of participation of youth through social media like never before. This is because social media allowed young Nigerians to contribute to discussions and events. The campaign period was dominated by robust, creative engagements of the youth of different ethnic group and apologists, political parties, 'faceless' (anonymous) social movements influencers whose roles shaped debates which questioned the integrity of aspiring politicians. Questioning of record of performance in service and character were mainstreamed. The electoral period, as Yetunde Daniel (2019) noted, did not only witness heated arguments on Facebook pages, blogs, Twitter handles, online newspaper comments sections, and propaganda messages as evidence of the awareness that the election generated amongst youth; but also demonstrated the evolvment of youth in political participation through social media platforms. In many cases, social media accounts of prominent politicians or aspirants become space for youth debate over topical issues or trends. This was used in expressing their love, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the policy thrust of such a personality. The most daring is how Twitter, YouTube videos, Facebook and WhatsApp were used. Twitter spaces, for instance, were used to raises questions on critical issues in the polity. Examples includes: #budgit, #sarakiatCCB, #Gandujedollar, #iwillsellNNPCTomyfriends

and #nameoneprojectcompletedbyBuhariandwinonemillion. The spate at which 'O' To Ge Movements' became viral and began to convey Kwara indigenes' protests towards the political establishment of Senate President Bukola Saraki suffices here. These negatively impacted the electoral chances of aspirants whose accountability and image deficit perception were questionable. The connection of Nigerians to the news and social media grid has renewed hope in the public sphere with minimal gate-keeping (Mustapha, Gbonegun and Mustapha 2016: 22). Furthermore, social media also provided an avenue towards the democratisation of information which helped youth to make informed decisions on those vying. This became important as it enabled them to bypass mass media which often constitutes part of the ruling establishment. Importantly, social media became sources of news for mass media itself. With the democratisation of information to electorates and the teeming youth, which Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) data showed constituted 51 per cent of the 84 million eligible voters (on leadership, see Natsa 2019), citizens were able to distil vital news and critique official statements. Propaganda was rebuffed while policy direction and manifestoes of candidates were scrutinised.

More so, social media enabled youth to express their views against cultural values that seemed protective of the status quo. While culture protects elders in African society (Ogo 2015; Idang 2015; Okoye and Obikeze 2005), Nigerian youth were able to challenge cultural structures through the use of social media technologies. Michel Essoughou put it well when she said that social media provides 'one of the few ways young Africans can bypass the inefficiencies in the system that allows the status quo to hold on' (2016: 4). This position was further corroborated by Theophilus Konamowo, cited by Essoughou (2016:3): 'in the African context, being able to voice one's opinion freely is not that easy, especially for young people'. Consequently, social media allows for freedom of thought and participation of youths with positive energies in democratic development, especially through elections. It must be noted that youth access to these opportunities does not come without reactions from the government and ruling elites. In most cases, the challenges resulted in political persecution through arbitrary arrests. Government's propositions on the regulation of social media content under the guise of 'hate speech' to control the internet space or, in some situations, the shut-down of internet engines suffice. This study, therefore, reacts to the problematic of the Nigerian youth and political participation in the 2019 General Election using social media. It problematises how social media played key roles in engendering youth participation in the 2019 General Election that manifests in the form of debates on probity, accountability, transparency, anti-democratic cultural reviews, and advocacy for, and action

on, good governance in a way that reconfigures power for the agency of the youth. This is very important because of how Nigeria's democratic space continues to grow with mixed signs. Even though elections are periodically held for political transition, a lot remains to be achieved in terms of good governance and the processes of electing credible public officeholders. More important is the marginalisation of the youths in democratic governance (Rast, Hogg and Moura 2018). The plight of the Nigerian youth is well documented in African literature (see William 2016). Nigerian youth have over the past decades deployed several strategies<sup>1</sup> to draw the attention of the government to issues that affect them. Issues pertaining to rights, political inclusion, gender equity, human rights adherence, human security, development and, most importantly, unemployment are common denominators in their struggles for decent lives. Their challenge has also been exacerbated by corruption in all spheres of governance. With ICT, youth have begun to engage the established political class (ruling elites) who have performed below their expectations in terms of good governance by voting them out of political offices during elections through their usage of social media tools for campaign and debates. The idea is to elect leaders who will be sympathetic to their cause for the realisation of a decent life for themselves and also to sustain the entrenchment of good governance as the cog of the country's foundation. This position became vigorously pursued via social media space such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and even text messages in mobilising and coordinating their thoughts around issues in their respective constituencies.

However, many studies on youth participation in politics are inadequate in accounting for how social media has increasingly impacted General Elections. In some cases, attempts are made to understand how the youth use such platforms to bring to the fore governance issues that affect them (see Iwilade 2013). Scholars have also looked at how social media changes attitudes of youths in political discourse but not elections per se (see Dagona, Karick and Abubakar 2013) while youth and decision-making has also been explored (United Nations Youth 2012). Certainly, youth participation has proven impactful (even though its extent has not been empirically studied) on electoral processes. Social media platforms have therefore become channels through which youth demand probity, transparency, and accountability from Nigerian leaders through their participation. Yet, it is surprising this scope of the study has not been keenly investigated. This study is significant given the global attention that the 2019 Nigerian election attracted. Importantly, the study is significant for several reasons. First, social media and youth participation in political processes is an ongoing debate in Nigeria, Africa, and the world at large. Secondly, statistical data

on youth political participation in Africa and Nigeria inclusive continue to show low political participation of people aged 18–45 years. This is attached to the marginalisation of youth in democratic space by the ruling class which continues to relegate this ‘active population’ by consolidating their established political structures.

Furthermore, the drive for democratic practices and development rests on the contribution of youth in any country. Research has affirmed that youth have largely been part of the electoral processes as active agents of violence, thuggery and ballot snatching. Hence, it is important to study how groups of mobile but voiceless youth have begun to gain ‘national voices’ with the advent of social media tools such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and even text messages. This is important as social media has helped in the facilitation of an actively engaging population which could be regarded as the ‘hashtag generation’ for their savviness on social media in the quest for good governance in Nigeria’s 2019 General Elections. The study is also significant to understand how youth participation has introduced positive energies into the political processes and how such energies have impacted leaders vying for public offices in their respective constituencies as exemplified by the 2019 General Election. This article therefore examined the problem which was held in Nigeria’s February 2019 General Elections. In doing this, it seeks to raise specific questions which include, first: why social media became pivotal in the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria. Second, it evaluates the role of social media in enhancing the involvement of Nigerian youth in electoral debates. Finally, the article analyses the major challenges that confronted young people in Nigeria in using social media as platforms for political participation in the 2019 General Elections. The article rests on two assumptions which include, first: social media operated to deepen, rather than undermine youth participation in the 2019 Nigeria General Elections. Second, the emergence of social media as a platform for political debate has significantly reduced the power of the state to suppress free speech among the youth.

The article is divided into five sections. The first section focuses on the conceptual clarification of the study. The second section provides a literature review, theoretical framework and contextual relevance. The third section is devoted to the methodology. This is closely followed by data presentation on youth participation in Nigeria’s elections in 2019. The fourth section entailed a discourse analysis on social media, youth agency and political participation in Nigeria’s General Elections. The last and final section is the summary and conclusion of the study.

## **Conceptualising Social Media, Youth, Political Participation and the Hashtag Generation**

This section conceptualises the key terms in the article. These key terms are: social media, youth, political participation, and hashtag generation. Social media is defined in Merriam Webster's dictionary<sup>2</sup> as any form of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos). Boyd and Ellison (2008) submit that these are websites that allow the creation of profiles as well as visibilities amongst users. To Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy et al. (2011), social media embodies web-based tools, codes, or applications with a key feature that allows sharing of contents amongst friends or users which could be in the form of texts, audio or videos. Kapoor, Tamilmani, Rana et al. (2017) and Oestreicher-Singer and Zalmanson (2013) share the idea that these are 'internet sites' which allow interactions and networking. Networking in this context involves both formal and informal (personal) associations or interactions.

More technical definitions are those provided by scholars such as Huang and Benyoucef (2013: 246) and Huberman (2010) that social media are 'Web 2.0 Technologies built to gather and share intelligence but also permitting individuals and groups in sharing information amongst themselves. These resonate with O'Reilly and Battelle's (2009: 1) conceptualisation of the term as 'web-based and community of connected users'. O'Reilly and Battelle (2009) differed in that their social media conceptualisation has an economic ideological precept to its endpoint. The above shows that the term is still conceived from diverse perspectives; hence, in the context of this study, social media refers to digital technologies, tools, and devices which aid communication and allow for social networking which might be conveyed in the form of audio, video or text. They include internet wired applications useable on smartphones and computers which allow people access to information and to reply, and comments on particular information (posts). Social media examples, therefore, include Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp and Telegram.

The term youth is one of the concepts in social science that has eluded a generally agreed definition. This is given by the different lens from which it is conceived and how flexibly the term cuts across sociological, cultural, political, as well as security and biological perspectives. The United Nations defines youth as people above eighteen years but not exceeding twenty-four years (United Nations 2012). However, the Secretary-General of the supranational



body added that the term is culturally defined; hence, communities or societies perceive youth differently. Youth are therefore subject to the interpretation of cultural, sociological identities and the epistemological notion of an individual (Nunn 2002: 1). Biologists have often time argue that youth are people cut in between childhood and adulthood, i.e., youth are better understood as a subject of human stages of development; however, it is difficult to see how this measures up in each locality since hormonal growth differs with impact on decision-making and reasoning. Also, Hollingshead (1946: 6) defined youth as 'the period in the life of the person when the society in which he functions ceases to regard him as a child and does accord him full adult status, roles, and functions'. It is obvious from the above that the central idea of what constitutes youth is a product of societal construction, decision-making and human growth in the form of biological conception of age. This study conceptualises youth as people who are above eighteen to thirty-five years and who are in the early but critical phase of their adulthood. Youth are therefore seen as men and women whose ability to make decisions are believed to be sound, matured and, of course, who understand the intricate linkages of such actions and consequences to their personal development. In the submission of sociologists such as Kehily (2007), Jones (2010), Pierre (1978), Spence (2005) and Frith (2005), youth are products of social constructs; an imaginary display of the concept waxed around age.

Like other concepts in social sciences, political participation is one of the most contested terms in the literature. This is hinged on the fact that scholars define it from a different perspective. To some, it is just an activity to get involved, and influence or support the government or otherwise. In the context of this study, political participation refers to the determined or conscious effort of an individual or groups to be involved in political processes via debates, mobilising, campaigning and voting in response to specific goals. These goals include reviewing the activities of a public officeholder or willingness and conviction to project an aspirant to political posts. Van Deth (2001) conceptualises political participation as those 'activities' of 'citizens' that are 'voluntary' and aimed at influencing or taking crucial impact decisions in the political process. This definition synthesises Milbrath and Goel's (1977: 2) idea that political participation is a private citizen's activities or actions seeking to influence or support government and politics in their respective constituencies. Although, these activities could be directly or indirectly targeted towards the instalment of a government (Kaase and Maarch 1979: 2), candidates or personnel (Verba and Nie 1972: 2). Nevertheless, Parry, George and Neil (1992: 16) summed this up by asserting that such citizens' actions are mainly public-



focused towards representational or official selection in a democratic style of government where the minds of the people are communicated to their leaders in satisfactory or protest form.

Lastly, the phrase 'hashtag generation' is operationalised in this study to mean a generation of youth who are more social media adept and more energetic in the participation or involvement of political discourses, debates, ideas and other civic responsibilities, especially democratic election and good governance. The hashtag generation, therefore, represents an inclusive idea of a youthful set of people between the range of 18–35 years who are more attuned to their socio-political and economic rights, expectations of the political officeholder or aspirants, and very engaged in shaping narratives in the Nigerian polity. The term captures a generation of youth which uses social media to participate in the development and dynamics of political processes within the Nigerian state.

## **Review of Literature**

There exists a substantial amount of literature on social media and youth participation, most of it in articles, journals, and editorials on the internet. Social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram can be harnessed in educating citizens due to their penetrative capability (Ayeni 2019). According to Ayeni (2019), social media could be used by INEC to educate youth on shunning violence; while advertisement and persistent posting to the social media space are the right strategies to go about engaging and building a credible internet presence for the electoral body. As plausible as Ayeni's narrative seemed, his article was focused on the pre-2019 analysis of INEC usage of social media. It did not account for youth level of participation per se but suggests how such a platform could be used for robust participation. Furthermore, United Nations Youth (2012) submits that youth are key drivers of national development as they constitute agents of 'power'. The article argues that the low representation of youth in political discourses and processes often reinforces the dominance of the older generation. Therefore, initiatives that will improve youth decision-making skills should be encouraged. Nevertheless, the article failed to account for how social media has impacted youth political participation especially in areas of followership and accountability. It even failed to explain how youths became implicit or direct decision-makers during the 2019 Nigerian General Elections. Dagona, Karick and Abubakar (2013) posit that social media platforms such as Facebook allow the youth the opportunity to air their diverse views but do not necessarily translate to participants' positive political influence. Nevertheless, their article failed to interrogate youth political participation as a result of social media during the

2019 General Election. Their study also failed to analyse how social media has empowered youth or otherwise, despite its usage in the last three General Elections. Lastly, the article did not provide statistical claims that cut beyond the scope of the study (Facebook); hence, statistical records which include YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp will be areas of focus in analysing the 2019 General Election in Nigeria.

Shamsu, Mohamad and Muda (2016) contend that Facebook has become a tool for engendering political participation and interactivity with politicians. Their study further notes how social media enrich the quality two-way information sharing medium and broadening of democratic spaces, unlike the pre-social media era when mass media was controlled outside the reach of the youth. However, Shamsu, Mohamad and Muda's (*ibid.*) work did not account for how social media engendered youth participation during the 2019 General Election while other viable fora which youth utilised in setting agenda, changing narratives and refuting propaganda in the 2019 General Election were not explored. Iwilade (2013) contends that social media has engineered new dynamics to Africa's politics of resistance; hence, social media is reconfiguring youths' power and creating means to bring peculiar socio-economic challenges to the fore. Nevertheless, even though Iwilade's analysis exposes his reader(s) to the agency of youth, it did not interrogate how social media facilitates youth political participation in the General Election despite explaining the growing power of youth in Nigeria and Zimbabwe through social media. Coombs, Falkheimer, Heide et al. (2016) posit that the use of social media in established public institutions in Africa seemed a mixed blessing since information can be diverted, uttered or used to promote a political development. However, due to its focus on public organisations, their analysis did not examine how social media engendered youth participation during Nigeria's General Election.

Apuke and Tunca (2018) explain that social media was deployed differently during the 2011 and 2015 Nigerian General Elections. In this context, they submit that it was used for sharing information that was exclusively the preserve of the ruling elites. Also, it was used for a political campaign by politicians, to follow collation of results from the polls from ward level even before the declaration of results. More so, Apuke and Tunca's (*ibid.*) study notes that images of politicians are projected using the tools either positively or for the campaign of calumny or hate speech which does degenerate into online abuse, harassment, misinformation or mischief. Therefore, there is a need to grasp the various ways social media can be used in electoral processes. This rich contribution is however embellished with the gap of how social media helps youth to facilitate political participation in general elections, hence the study.

Moreover, Pierre Omidyar (2018) examines how social media can be put to different uses and asserts that social media poses existential threats to Nigeria's nascent democracy. His article points to the manipulative tendency of 'fake news' and distorted 'viral videos' which are enhanced by anonymous status for users. However, this work did not examine how youth participated in political processes as a result of social media during Nigeria's General Election. Also, Ngozi Onyechi (2018) asserts that social media can be mobilised to foster democratic change amongst student youth. But Onyechi's work did not explain how such ideas of youth mobility for social change took place during the 2015 Nigeria General Election.

Mustapha, Gbonegun and Mustapha (2016) argue that social media has helped youth to overcome the deficiencies of traditional media which hitherto deny them political participation and mobilisation. Nevertheless, they submit that more data should be drawn to prove how such platforms engender active youths' participation in electoral processes. This was argued as a way to distinguish between mere 'civil participation' and 'political participation'. Despite the salient contribution of Mustapha, Gbonegun and Mustapha (2016), its assertion on participation is short on conceptual depth. It is silent on how social media facilitated youth political participation during the 2019 Nigeria elections. Aliyu Kolawole (2019) explains how youth are adopting new means such as the internet and social media tools to facilitate communication and political campaigning during the 2019 General Election. Establishing his research on a survey conducted amongst conceptualised youth between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five, Kolawole argues that youth engagement was facilitated by social media better than at any time in Nigeria's political history. In this context, Kolawole further explains how 'Not too Young to Run' (NTYTR) canvassed, mobilised and pressurised the National Assembly into signing its bill into law. However, as apt as the article seems, it is weak on the methodological processes of data representation. This is because it only drew representation from Osun State tertiary institutions with implications for the entire thirty-six states without any other complementary primary data to interrogate youth and social media enhancement in the 2019 general election. This work will, therefore, contribute to statistical and other forms of data. It will help dissect how such position challenges encountered in Kolawole's (*ibid.*) study in terms of political participation by youth during the political campaign era were overcome using social media.

More so, Madueke, Nwosu, Ogbonnaya et al. (2017) submit that social media has not only allowed freedom and political participation in Nigeria's political processes but that its features help the multitude who are in need

of vital information about their political choices. They contend that social media features which include anonymity, accessibility, affordability, privacy, and personal contact exchanges help citizens to scrutinise the policy thrust of leaders and aspirants, consequently allowing a more accountable democratic value in the conduct of the election. Nevertheless, emphasis on youth and General Elections through this means was not made hence the study. Ayodeji Adeloju (2016) in his article submits that social media enabled youth during the 2015 Nigeria General Elections to show their displeasure. He contends that social media was used to challenge political figures whom they would not have critiqued due to culture and socio-economic standing. Hence, such platforms were critical in deciding the direction of the election. As insightful as Adeloju's study seemed, his work is weak in empirical data. His article drew references from a selected timeline and newsfeeds of politicians which makes more use of desk research. This study combines such an approach with a semi-structured interview with social media influencers. This will enhance the study's data and the impact it had on the electoral outcomes.

From the foregoing, scholars have provided useful insights into social media and youth participation in Nigeria's 2019 General Election. Nevertheless, it could be observed that there exists a gap in how social media tools enhance youth's political participation through debates, with a direct impact on the electoral outcomes in the 2019 General Elections. Empirical data on this referent seemed scarce or non-existent. Further, while there are a few accounts which address the implicit powers accruing to social media usage by youth, none explicitly demonstrate how such social media impacted a candidate during the 2019 General Elections nor the last two elections; but only referred to such a point in manners that deal with organising revolution as seen in the fuel subsidy crisis and the Maputo bread, water, and fuel riots in Iwilade's (2013) account. It could also be discerned that the literature on youth participation in areas that cover accountability, transparency, probity, good governance, character deficits, and utterances of leaders in the 2019 General Elections were not covered from the above reviews. The reviews dealt more with the conceptual, theoretical and functional usage of social media by youths without links to political participation and electoral outcomes. This is the gap the study fills.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study is based on use and gratification theory. Use and gratification theory derives from mainstream mass communication theory (Hossain 2019; Dunne, Lawlor and Rowley 2013; Al-Jabri, Sohail and Ndubisi 2015; Hsiao, Chang and Tang 2015; Williams and Whiting 2013: 2; McQuail

1994; Ruggiero 2000). It emerged in reaction to the need to know why radio and television listeners get glued to music and adverts such as Soap Opera. Coming from Herzog's radio research findings, it was discovered that there are communication contents that satisfy the psychological and social needs of the audience (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 2016: 2). The theory assumes that media contents are powerful social and political tools meant to achieve a particular goal. Put differently, individuals look out for media messages and contents that satisfy their needs and lead to ultimate gratification (Lariscy, Tinkham and Sweetser 2011). Therefore, news contents are targeted to yield gratification from the users' end. Use and gratification theory also assumes that individuals use contents of communication in their environment (physical) among other resources to satisfy their needs and achieve their goals (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 2016: 1). Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch posit that, for every communication or information, there exists an active audience (2016: 2). That is, information and communication are goal-oriented and directed (McQuail, Blumler and Brown 1972: 21).

More so, the theory also assumes that data and information supplied are in tune with people who are sufficiently aware of their environment, interests, and motives. However, these specific interests and motives are recognised when confronted in reality with reactions showcasing intelligible and familiar verbal formulation (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 2016: 3). The theory thereby assumes that value judgements about the significance of such communication to an audience are taken up given audience orientations towards such a line of information that meets their goals and interests as consumers (*ibid.*). The gratification therefore comes in the form of goal outcomes which each supplier of information has provided to a targeted, interest-oriented audience. Moreover, the theory assumes that audience gratifications can be derived from at least three distinct sources: media content, exposure to the media per se, and the social context that typifies the situation of exposure to different media.

## Contextual Relevance

The above assumptions of use and gratification theory explain the roles of social media and youth participation in the 2019 Nigeria General Election. It captures the idea that social media contents are purposive and goal-directed to a specific audience. Furthermore, it also relays how the producer of news content shares and posts information (text, image, video and audio) via their social media handles to drive a goal. Shared data and information on social media represent ideas whose ultimate goal is aimed towards engendering political participation of youth in electoral processes

during the 2019 election. Furthermore, the theory highlights that the youth participated in political processes given the debates emanating from social media. Moreover, the idea that gratification comes in the form of outcomes of participating in vote patterns against a particular candidate explains the relevance of social media's information and communication. This means that youth are moved by what they read, listen to and share as sentiments through social media. A cumulative effect of which enhanced their mobilisation, awareness of candidates, and informed their choices to active participation in the last General Election.

Nevertheless, the theory is not without weaknesses. For one, gratification as assumed by the theory exemplifies a social construct. That is, gratification is a product of social construction and it is difficult to determine exactly what and the extent to which media content becomes the real influencing factor for political engagement or decisions made by youth in a particular context. Nonetheless, this does not derail the value of the theory in explaining the phenomenon.

## **Methodology**

Data for this study were drawn from primary and secondary sources. Primary data were got in two ways. First, a purposive selection method was used in extracting data from four presidential candidates' social media accounts. These candidates include President Muhammadu Buhari, Alhaji Atiku Abubakar, Omoyele Sowore and Professor Kingsley Moghalu. In this context, data were drawn from their Facebook and Twitter pages. The PEW survey of 70 per cent of youth presence on social media (Ogunlesi's study on youth presence on the internet reflects the same) was used as the baseline in calculating the percentage of youth presence on each post that was sampled for the study. In doing this, data were studied, reviewed and analysed from 18 November 2018 (when INEC declared political campaigns officially opened) up to a month after the election ended to ascertain how much youth participated in political processes during the 2019 General Election. Selected posts samples were therefore copied with careful counting of the first fifty comments by youth. Painstaking attention was devoted to face recognition and profile proof-reading. In a situation where justifying the certainty of youth profile could not be guaranteed, such comments were discarded, and others analysed.

Secondly, primary data were also extracted from semi-structured in-depth interviews with targeted 'social media influencers' such as Deji Adeyanju, Ayo Olowo (godfather), J. J. Omojua, Hamzat Ibrahim (CODE), and Ibrahim Faruk (YIAGA) to gain deeper knowledge of the inner working and

reflection of the hashtag generation (youth) concerning the Nigerian 2019 General Election. The selection of these influencers is motivated by the large followership which they command in the social media space amongst Nigerian youths. Only 'influencers' with not less than 10,000 followers on Twitter were purposively selected. Their selection was informed by their capacity to shape narratives, debates and topics through initiated posts which often attract youth participation in political debates. Furthermore, they also represent an active supplier of news to their followers and friends, especially the youth whose influence during the 2019 General Elections proved decisive. Their selection resonates with the key roles played in youth discourses around the 2019 General Elections. More so, data were drawn from the feeds, posts and comments by Nigerian youths from these influencers in reaction to a particular debate, trend, viral video, or issues. Data were analysed using a descriptive and content method of analysis. The above method was supported by a pool of secondary data available in books, articles, magazines as well online sources. This helped in situating the context of what took place during the 2019 General Elections and how social media enhanced youth's political participation with implications for power relations.

## **Data Presentation and Discussion**

### ***Youth Participation in the Nigerian Elections 2019***

This section focused on youth participation in the last General Election using social media accounts such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube where major debates took place. Table 1 shows the texts and reaction by youth in political discourses and debates by calculating the extent to which support for and against such posts were made.

#### ***Analysis Table 1***

Table 1 shows five selected Twitter posts of President Muhammadu Buhari. The total comments for the first post represent 4,700 while youth participation indicates 3,290. The analysis showed from fifty comments with negative reaction from the youth to the text. The comments also revealed anger over the violence and perceived rigging that characterised the elections. Furthermore, for posts 2, 3 4, there were 2,900, 2,500, 6,000, and 2,400 comments and 2,030, 1,750, 4,200 and 1,680 numbers of youth who reacted to the texts respectively. Of the first fifty comments analysed, the second post showed negative reactions from the youth towards the removal of the Chief Justice of Nigeria with capture such as 'tyranny',



‘desperation’ and ‘autocracy back to its old days’. A summary of the idea put forward by the President: it could also be discerned that a good number of the first fifty comments were negative on the third post while the few positive comments in support of him got angry or responded mockingly to those who supported his view. More so, the fifth post reveals a trend of youth against the President. In sum, the youth expressed negative or sarcastic comments regarding the tweets.

**Table 1:** President Muhammadu Buhari’s selected Twitter posts

S/N	President Muhammadu Buhari’s posts	Date	Total number of comments (C)	Estimated number of comments by youth (70% of C)
1.	The hard work to deliver a better Nigeria continues, building on the foundations of peace, rule of law and opportunities for all. We have no other motive than to serve Nigeria with our hearts and might, and build a nation which we and generations to come can be proud of.	27 February 2019	4,700	3,290
2.	Fellow Nigerians, A short while ago, I was served with an Order of the Code of Conduct Tribunal issued on Wed 23rd January 2019, directing the suspension of the Chief Justice of Nigeria, Honourable Justice Walter Nkanu Samuel Onnoghen from office pending final determination..	25 February 2019	2,900	2,030
3.	Yesterday I visited our Presidential Campaign Head-quarters in Abuja. I met the very hardworking members of our Team, many of them young people, and was briefed on the performance of our party so far in the Presidential Elections.	22 February 2019	2, 500	1, 750

4.	I humbly ask for your support again in the coming election to enable us move to the NEXT LEVEL & consolidate on the successes recorded in making Nigeria a better place. I don't take your support for granted. We will continue to work to protect your interest & deliver our mandate.	10 February 2019	6,000	4,200
5.	Fellow Nigerians, this is our story. Join us as we take Nigeria to the Next Level!	12 February 2019	2,400	1,680

Source: Oluwasola Festus Obisesan (author's survey)

***Analysis Table 2***

The selected posts in Table 2 are extracts from Alhaji Atiku Abubakar's Twitter handles during the electioneering period. The total number of posts were analysed using the first fifty counts. For the first post, there were over 2,500 comments with 1,750 youth involved in the social media debate. However, the text received mixed reactions with some promising him their votes, mobilising their friends and family while some called him 'Mr. President'. On the other half, there are those calling his integrity into question, especially with regards to corruption which could be best summarised as 'you will never become president'. Furthermore, the second post reflects a more positive reaction with over 70 per cent of those who reacted promising him their votes. The total number of comments is estimated as 1,600 while 1,120 youth participation was indicated. For the third post of the fifty comments analysed, a large chunk of comments were against him being a president. Common language used was 'his delusion of coasting to victory'. Many replied to his post as someone thinking delusionally about winning the elections. Moreover, posts 4 and 5 attracted 2,700 and 2,300 comments with 1,890 and 1,610 estimated youth participants in the respective debates. The fourth texts drew sympathy of the youth with a statement extolling him when he said, 'join me irrespective of who you want to vote for'. The last post attracted mixed reaction with some youth denouncing their support for him while others saluted his courage to have escaped the 'trap' of the ruling party who want to expose him to the flaws of technically sound candidates through the debates even though the sitting president (President Muhammadu Buhari) did not attend.

**Table 2:** Alhaji Atiku Abubakar's Twitter posts

S/N	Alhaji Atiku Abubakar's posts	Date	Total number of comments (C)	Estimated number of comments by youth (70% of C)
1.	Earlier today I received a call from US Secretary of State, @SecPompeo, who reaffirmed the international community's commitment to free and fair elections in Nigeria. Wishing you all a peaceful election, wherever you are. God bless Nigeria.	25 February 2019	2,500	1,750
2.	Dear citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, as you know, the Independent National Electoral Commission has announced a postponement of the elections until 23Februaryand9Marchrespectively.	16 February 2019	1,600	1,120
3.	So, let me reassure you, we are going to win these elections. And to our long-suffering citizens, I say do not despair, our time is now, and together we shall reshape the destiny of our beloved country. #PDPNECMeeting #LetsGetNigeriaWorking-Again	19 February 2019	2,500	1,750
4.	I will be voting on Saturday, the 23rd of February 2019, and I call on you to please join me. #LGNWA	21 February 2019	2,700	1,890
5.	We came here for a Presidential debate, not a candidacy debate, and I, Atiku Abubakar cannot challenge or question an administration where the man at the helm of the affairs of the nation is not present to defend himself or his policies. #2019Debate I just cast my vote at Ajiya Ward in Yola, Adamawa State. Go out and cast your vote too if you have not done so yet. -AA #NigeriaDecides2019	25 January 2019	3,300	2,310

Source: Oluwasola Festus Obisesan (author's survey)

**Table 3:** Omoyele Sowore's Twitter posts

S/N	Omoyele Sowore's posts	Date	Total number of comments (C)	Estimated number of comments by youth (70% of C)
1.	We defeated @APCNigeria APC's Muhammadu Buhari @MBuhari and PDP's Abubakar Atiku @atiku at our polling unit 005, Apoi Ward Ilc In Ese Odo LGA, Ondo State. Final Results: AAC 208, APC 82, PDP 11, AA 8.	23 February 2019	762	534
2.	New date for Nigeria's Presidential Election is NOW February 23rd 2019...Postponing their day of judgement by one-week #TakeItBack	16 February 2019	136	96
3.	It is Election Eve in Nigeria! "Prominent" religious leaders gathered together in my country. Half of them are asking that they want a THIEF, and the other half want a KILLER to rule over our affairs. We are taking it back do good. #TakeItBack	22 February 2019	93	66
4.	'Sowore disrupts Godfatherism politics, raises N150m from public donation for campaign' - Vanguard News Nigeria	21 February 2019	51	36
5.	President Buhari finally sheds any pretense of democratic decency. Nigeria is down under his jackboot. We must #TakeItBack in few days or you might as well forget it!	25 January 2019	102	72

Source: Oluwasola Festus Obisesan (author's survey)

### *Analysis Table 3*

Table 3 represented five selected social media posts by Omoyele Sowore with comments and youth participation totalling 762 and 534; 136 and 96; 93 and 66; 51 and 36; and 102 and 72 respectively. The first fifty comments were analysed. The first post x-rays a positive and congratulatory comment to Sowore for his polling unit result while birthday felicitation was meted on him with some saying he should 'do the next in the *Aso Rock Villa* after the election'. The third post however was a total rejection of vulgar and uncouth language in the campaign message of Mr Sowore which used words like 'thief' and 'killer' in his post. The fourth post revealed a mockery of token raised from his projected campaign fund while the last post shows mixed reactions over the suspension of the Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN) which some see as a way to avoid being rigged in court by the major opposition party (PDP). Others saw it as a desperate project of a dictator which Sowore shared with his tweets.

**Table 4:** Prof. Kingsley Moghalu's selected Twitter posts

S/N	Prof. Kingsley Moghalu's posts	Date	Total number of comments (C)	Estimated number of comments by youth (70% of C)
1.	My campaign contracted with NTA to show my special address to the nation this night at 8.30 pm. But they have sabotaged our campaign and declined to broadcast our material because I am an opposition candidate. Send the @MBuhari dictatorship a message at the polls. Vote YPP!	21 February 2019	487	341
2.	A fake news report making the rounds on social media that I have teamed up with PDP's Atiku Abubakar is just that- fake news! If it's not that I am working for Buhari, it's that I am with Atiku. Wow. Is this dude popular or what?	21 February 2019	60	42
3.	So after I rebutted their original fake news, desperate PDP continues to spread the falsehood that I have "finally" stepped down my candidacy and joined up with @atiku. Lol! I thought it was supposedly "a two-horse race" between APC and PDP"? Who's afraid of #YPP? #Itistime!	22 February 2019	204	143

4.	Onnoghen's Suspension Must Not Stand President Muhammadu Buhari set aside the constitution by "suspending" the Chief Justice of Nigeria (CJN), Justice Walter Onnoghen. This action is a serious threat to Nigeria's democracy and a gross violation of the rule of law, which must...	26 January 2019	62	44
5.	"Atiku and Buhari are not here because they want to come to power on the wings of entitlement without a record of performance..." #VoteKingsleyMoghalu #ItisTime #PresidentialDebate2019 #2019Debate #PresidentialDebate2019 #IAmVotingMoghalu.	19 January 2019	81	57

Source: Oluwasola Festus Obisesan (author's survey)

**Analysis Table 4**

Table 4 reflects comments from the youth who participated in the political processes arising from five selected social media posts. First, fifty comments by youth were calculated using the baseline which is 70 per cent as for the others above. The data showed total comments of 487, 60, 204, 62, and 81 respectively, while 341, 42, 143, 44, and 57 were the estimated number of youths who participated in the discussion. However, the first and second posts x-ray mixed reaction on his chances; hence, some youth advised him to 'join hands with Atiku' to avoid wasting his time and splitting the youth vote which will be to the advantage of the ruling party. The third post showed a mockery of him overrating his chances to the PDP candidates. There seems to be a negative reaction over his position on the suspension of the CJN as well as the debates in which the President and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar did not participate. Comments from most of the youth showed that he will only derail the perceived decent chance of Alhaji Atiku with oratory prowess while helping the sitting President continue for another term which is deemed underperformed.

## Selected Social Media Influencers' Posts and Youth Participation

This section examined selected social media influencers' posts. It used a 70 per cent PEW survey data baseline to calculate the percentage of youth who participated in political debates from the Nigerian registered voters. It showed that over 65 per cent of the youth population participated in Nigeria's political debates and electoral processes. This agrees with Ogunlesi (2013) and Gambo's (2015) study that the age bracket that is most active in political discussion on social media in Nigeria falls within the range of 18–35. This is also in consonance with the Nigeria's Youth Policy (2015) which defines the age bracket within 18–35 despite cultural interpretations.

**Table 5:** Selected social media influencers' posts and youth participation

S/N	Posts	Posts	Post	Total number of comments (C)/ estimated number of comments by youth (70% of C)
1. Adetutu Balogun	<p>"I am handing over this flag of honour to our presidential candidate." When the man to his left corrected him, he responded with "to our senatorial candidate". Again, the man corrected him, This time, Buhari said: "governatorial candidate". Buhari is totally clueless.... (17 January 2018)</p>	<p>President @MBuhari gets daily security briefings but not aware that the CJN is being charged to court!!! What type of daily security briefing does he get? (14 January 2019)</p>	<p>Atiku is the second highest employer of labour in Adamawa and Kadaria is asking the impact he has made? #NgThe Candidates (20 January 2019)</p>	<p>390/273  137/96  120/84</p>
2. Reno Omokri	<p>How can Present @MBuhari endorse Gandollar @GovUmarGanduje of Kano for a second term and still pretend to fight corruption? Who is more corrupt than a man caught on camera collecting bribe? RETWEET if you agree that Buhari is fighting OPPOSITION, not CORRUPTION #RenosDarts</p>	<p>MUST WATCH: President @MBuhari raises up the hand of the wrong gubernatorial candidate. Not only that, he still calls the man a GOVERNATORIAL candidate. This man should be in a RETIREMENT home not at @AsoRock. The CABAL is in charge, not Buhari. WATCH,</p>	<p>BOMBHELL: LISTEN and SHARE Part 2 #Amaechi Tapes. Rotimi @Chibuikwe Amaechi, DG of @MBuhari's campaign said "This country can never change, I swear. The only way this country can change is in a situation</p>	<p>159/112  905/634</p>



	(31 January 2019)	COMMENT and RETWEET (31 January 2019)	where everybody is killed. This country is going nowhere.” LISTEN and RETWEET (6 January 2019)	1200/840
3. Tolu Ogunlesi	Obasanjo believed he could fight poverty with 2,000 Tricycles (his poverty alleviation programme ultimately failed, by the way) but doesn't believe Buhari and Osinbajo can fight poverty by giving micro-credit loans to 2,000,000 Petty traders.  SMH. 21 January 2019	PDP's biggest achievement in 16 years on the 130km Lagos-Ibadan Expressway was the demolition of toll-gates. True or False? 24 January 2019	PDP people are legit trying to accuse Kadaria of bias. Imagine! Y'all need to have your brain checked atink. I think that's enough evidence one needs that the interview went very badly for their candidates. Meanwhile the main defeat is still loading... 30 January 2019	139/98  210, 147  219/154
4. Aka Ebube	FT: Lifeless FC 0 - 6 Atikulate FC Despite poor officiating by the Referee,  Atiku scored a Hat Trick  Peter Obi controlled the Midfield, gave brilliant assists, and exposed their baseless “propaganda” tackles with “OBJ's VAR” #NGTheCandidates  (30 January 2019)	My attention has been drawn to the fact that ACPN(Aunty Oby's party) has endorsed Buhari.  I want to thank Atikulate FC Manager and Technical crew for their sound judgement at the last Debate El Classico.  They averted the disaster of playing against Lifeless FC's U-23 team.  (25 January 2019)	Watching NGTheCandidates on NTA Baba is fumbling like Bakayoko of Chelsea as usual He can't hear or answer simple questions well So Osinbajo is now doing a Kante for him He is intercepting all the passes and covering up for him Fam, We need to sell this Bakayoko this season (16 January 2019)	158/111  158/111  403/283

Source: Oluwasola Festus OBISESAN (author's survey)

### *Analysis Table 5*

Table 5 shows selected posts of social media influencers during the 2019 electoral campaign. The data captures the total number of comments as well as that of youth who participated in the discussions. The first fifty youth comments were counted and analysed as was done in the previous examples above. This was matched with the percentage adopted for the study which is hinged on the 70 per cent survey by PEW, Ogunlesi (2013) and Gambo (2015). Adetutu's posts reveal a total number of 390, 137 and 120 comments while the youth percentage who partook in the discussion is estimated as 273, 96 and 84 youth. The first post mocked the President for handling the flag to the wrong candidate; hence her claim that he is 'old and unfit to continue'. This became the subject of negative comments on her walls by lovers of the President. It generated hate speech or online violence with abusive languages being railed out on her while sarcasm and value discussion were some of the reactions to it by participating youth. The second post got a warm reception from over 70 per cent of those who share the view that the suspension of the CJN was a calculated attempt at rigging the election at the tribunal. The third post equally celebrated the effort of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar for his contribution and outstanding business success which they hope can be replicated when he assumes office. This was predominantly responded to positively.

Furthermore, for Reno Omokri, total comments for his three selected posts are 159, 905 and 1,200 while calculated youth who joined in the discussion were estimated at 112,634 and 840. The first posts centred around the Ganduje scandal and the reactions of the President to the leak. Youth reacted negatively to the President's endorsement of his party member who was caught on the video stashing money to his 'Babaringa' while claiming to be an anti-corruption fighter because of political expediency. The second video received negative reactions from youth who saw Reno's post as culturally disrespectful and over-exaggerating the physical fitness of the President being called to question by what they described as 'human error'. The last video received positive reactions for exposing the inner workings of the presidency who do not believe in what they claim to be doing in the country. Thus, some youth were asking for more of the same to let Nigerians know what is happening to the ruling President's leadership.

For Tolu Ogunlesi's posts, there were a total of 139,210, and 219 comments respectively. Youth participation in the feed amounted to 98,147, and 154 people. The first post evidenced a negative comment from Tolu for comparing Obasanjo's economic policy to Muhammadu Buhari's economic policy; a thrust argued for being in disarray. This witnessed a huge exchange

of hate speech-language and online violence. However, for the second post, Tolu had a good number of youths who shared his sentiment for PDP's failure of fixing basic infrastructures such as roads, education, health and rail. This was shared as a reason to not see the President get re-elected. The third post received a fair number of negative reactions for churning out propaganda on Alhaji Atiku Abubakar's interview. Tolu was accused of trying to turn the fact on the head. He was abused online for his candidate, President Muhammadu Buhari's performance at the same desk.

Lastly, Aka Ebube's post x-rays a political sarcasm of political developments. His three selected posts received 158 and 111; 158 and 111; as well as 403 and 283 comments. Notably also, youth participated actively in response to his post. His first post centred on the debates which he opined saw Alhaji Atiku Abubakar outperform his critics' expectations. He received a positive response from this post from youth who joined his tweets and this was juxtaposed to mock the President's interview as seen in the third post as an unfit leader, lacking in ideas, energy and mental capacity. Therefore, a solid reason never to re-elect him. The second post however was targeted on Dr Oby Ekwezili's resignation which was rejected by the Electoral Commission because it had passed the stipulated timeframe to withdraw. The sarcasm was made to mock her naivety to dabble in the electoral process without grassroots structure. This received positive responses from his walls from the youth who participated in the discussion.

**Table 6:** Selected television and radio station posts and youth participation

S/N	Media outlet's post	Date	Total number of comments (C)	Estimated number of comments by youth (70% of C)
1.	Punch – I'm APC member, though I'm Atiku's spokesman – Galadima	21 February 2019	429	301
2.	Premium Times – BREAKING: Snatch ballot boxes and lose your life – Buhari	18 February 2019	402	282
3.	Sahara Reporters – We Have Employed Eight Million Nigerians in Three Years, Says Buhari   Sahara Reporters	2 February 2019	304	213
4.	Channels TV – 12 Presidential Candidates Back Buhari Two Days To General Elections.	21 February 2019	631	442

Source: Oluwasola Festus Obisesan (author's survey)

**Table 7:** Selected YouTube political trends and youth political participation

S/N	Post	Date	Total number of comments (C)	Estimated number of comments by youth (70% of C)
1.	#GandujeGate Video – 412,115 YouTube views	October 2018	205	144
2.	I WILL SELL NNPC TO MY FRIENDS Abu Sidiq – Atiku just confirmed what we have always known about him. 'I will sell NNPC..... I will sell to my friends.... Are my friends not entitled to be enriched?' Take a listen	16 January 2019	197	138
3.	SARAKI AT CCB Channels TV – BREAKING! Assets Declaration: Supreme Court Upholds Saraki's Appeal, Frees Him Of Charges.	6 July 2018	141	99
4.	NAME ONE PROJECT AND WIN ONE MILLION NAIRA OkeStalyf – I'm giving out 20,000 naira to anyone who can name ONE federal government project initiated, completed and commissioned by Buhari since he came to power 3 years ago The project must be physical and actually initiated, not body language project Entry close by 6 pm today. Goodluck	28 March 2018	1,000	700

Source: Oluwasola Festus Obisesan (author's survey)

## The Discourse

The above data demonstrate the active engagement of the Nigerian youth in online debates that forged the core aspect of the electioneering campaign. The selected data demonstrate a high percentage of youth in almost every post with over 70 per cent participation. This is significant as the youth were able to undertake dialectics over topical issues that bother them on corruption as seen with Ganduje gate<sup>3</sup> and its endorsement. Also, leadership deficit and competence issues were brought to bear with examples from the Amaechi leaks<sup>4</sup> and the President's lack of awareness of the CJN house bogging. The above data also explain how social media trends became the subject of national discussion and mass media prints. This comes to play with the aforementioned scandals and leaks. It therefore explains how youth increasingly became producers of information due to the democratised features of social media. In evidence also are troubling issues on hate speech among the youth which is on the rise. The culture of reigning abusive language and online violence remains a challenge in the social media space. This corroborates the Kofi Annan Foundation (2018: 23), Adelakun (2018: 13–15) and Mutahi and Kimari's (2017: 18) study on hate speech and social media platforms in political engagements.

The discourse in tandem with data obtained answered two research questions and objectives. First, it could be gleaned that social media played a pivotal role in the 2019 Nigeria General Election. This is as it was used to facilitate communication, marketing, and image projection which allowed Nigerian youth who have often been marginalised in the electoral processes to contribute to national discourse in a meaningful way. It is important to also note that social media allowed this hashtag generation to upturn, review and uphold values which are in line with their needs and aspirations. This explains why transparency, credibility, image and unemployment were at the centre of the campaign of all the major candidates. More so, this is more important given the political history of Nigeria's youth who have been rendered politically irrelevant. Rather, the youth have often been made agents of violence prior to the social media era. It is also evident that youth agency is undergoing re-invention and accruing more power within the polity given their ability to partake, mobilise and negotiate spaces on national issues as a result of social media tools. The youth were therefore not only rooting for their preferred candidates using digital technologies in scrutinising leaders' accountability, transparency, policy thrust and moral values. They were equally becoming a reckoned with constituency whose voices are heard and listened to by political candidates. This helps the agency of youth during the electoral process. It could be observed also that

such digital technologies helped in fostering needed social networking and social bonds which are used in aggregating opinions on public officeholders and aspirants. This helps in setting the agenda of what is expected. Hence, the credibility of candidates took a fair share of the peddled narratives. This speaks to the research questions which ask: why did social media become pivotal to the 2019 General Election and to what extent did social media enhance the involvement of Nigerian youth in the electoral debates during the 2019 General Election?

Secondly, social media fulfilled the purpose of enhancing youth access to participating in political debates. Youth were able to join issues raised by mass media. Traditional mass media outlets were taken up on issues of interest vis-à-vis leaders. It helped in the framing of what was expected from political aspirants. In this context, the roles of social media influencers cannot be over-emphasised, for they helped in the shaping of narratives while generating heated debates amongst youth. This invariably contributed to the outcomes of aspirants' chances during the process. This upheld the research assumption which states that: social media have operated to deepen, rather than undermine, youth participation in the 2019 Nigeria General Elections.

### **Social Media, Youth Agency and Political Participation**

The agency of youth in the Nigerian democratic space was revitalised by the use of social media during the 2019 General Election. Argument buttressing probity and accountability endeared youth to participate in deciding their next few years with credible leaders. Social media, therefore, provided itself as an effective tool for expanding the communication network of the youth during the period against established political views. This was made possible by sharing information, news items and bulletins that helped shape opinions and knowledge about candidates. It invariably helped mobilised the teeming youth which INEC data showed was a staggering constituency. This reflects Mucktar Ibrahim's (CODE) submission when he said, 'youth are now using social media to hold their government accountable during the election and are also doing same after the electoral processes' (Mucktar Ibrahim, Interview, 2019).

Furthermore, the convenience of joining political discussions online, spreading propaganda and reviewing policy could not have shaped patriotism more than social media did on Nigerian youth during the electoral period. Moreover, social media shattered the financial barriers which have marginalised a chunk of the youth. This helped the youth agency with political aspirants re-aligning their commitments (manifesto) through reactions on the online issues regarding their candidacy. Therefore,

unlike the traditional media which is essentially owned or tilted to favour the older generation, social media allowed for equal participation, breaking financial barriers and consequently allowing active participation during the electoral period from the youth constituency. The youth were able to participate in debates, singing jingles for their loved candidates, and share their opinion on national discourses. Ayo Olowo alluded to this position when he said: 'right now, you might not have money but with a phone, and a little data to surf the internet, young people can participate and join political discussions or shape it' (Ayo Olowo, Interview, 2019). Besides, social media mobilised youth on cultural values. Cultures were reviewed in the light of participation, accountability, transparency and credibility. The 'hashtag generation' was able to bring forth debates on established norms of developed democracies. For instance, the issue of 'Not too Young to Run' and presidential debates were elevated to a higher standard expected of any leader. All these galvanise youth to form an impression of a better Nigeria while electoral frauds were vigorously debated.

### **Youth, Social Media and the Power of the State**

During the 2019 General Election in Nigeria, youth participated in the political debates unfolding within the polity through social media platforms. These social media debates became appropriate sites for youth's engagement and voice aggregation in support or rejection of politicians' ideas and policies. Consequently, youth, through their political participation, wielded a new form of power that impacts states' ability to control citizens' expression and other anti-democratic tenets. The theoretical power inherent in electoral choices that had been nearly non-existent was reasserted. African political disposition to key areas of leadership was challenged and capitalised on by the opposition. For instance, the idea of privatisation of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation and acquisition by former Vice-President Atiku Abubakar by the APC and other leading aspirants was discerned as 'corruptible' and negligent of public character. Also, President Muhammadu Buhari was taken head-on regarding Chief Justice, Walter Ononghen's removal in office. Also, the rejection of corruption and godfatherism was meted on former Senate President, Dar. Bukola Saraki with the 'O To Ge' chant and campaigns. This invariably created 'big wig' losses. Issues such as insecurity in the Northeast (Boko Haram) and Northwest (banditry and herder–farmer conflicts), poor economy, unemployment, anti-corruption, projects (infrastructure) completed, leadership and competence did not only become the central themes around which heated and robust debates were placed. But political officeholders and aspirants were put on the spot on what



they say or put out as a policy thrust. In most cases, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube's accounts of candidates and news agencies became sites of power relations and reconfiguration between government officials' perceived taking of elites' bids while political parties' representatives were scrutinised with their past records, achievements and policy positions beyond conventional media narratives. This is in line with Ayo Olowo's submission that 'social media has given the young people opportunity to becoming producers of information with inherent powers which has changed the landscape for them to be listened to'.

Although signs of the North-South divide were silent as in the 2015 General Election, the government's twice attempts<sup>5</sup> to curb the vitality and potency of freedom of speech being exemplified through social media under the guise of regulation were rebuffed. Social media in the course entangled itself with the power structure. Information from individuals and opposition social media accounts became the arena of power struggles between the citizenry and the state. Citizens' voices became a threat to established political order. Hence, social media activists like Deji Adeyanju were incarcerated for almost a month (up to a few days to the election) in order to curb the thread of information reducing political capital of the ruling President and its party. Social media thereby empowered Nigerian youth to challenge the status quo during the processes. This was alluded to by Mucktar (CODE) when he said:

Basically, for whatever new, it is always difficult to change the mindset of a people at a time so easily, so, we have seen issues of the arrest of people being jailed harassed and molested ... for example, one of our (CODE) observer in Nasarawa state who was using social media was arrested just as another experience in Kano State in the Gama Local Government. However, a whole lot of youth continue to say no to attitudes that do not conform with democratic tenets and accountability during the elections (Mucktar Ibrahim, Interview, 2019).

The inability of the state to muscle down youth dissenting voices was made possible via social media, even though harassment and house boggling were recorded just to chicken out youth activism via social media. This calculated attempt at cutting down information supplies to followership failed. These actions became counter-productive because they only re-invigorated the 'hashtag generation' that their 'voices' and displeasure were being heard. This new invigoration led to the emergence of citizens' trusted information disseminators or influencers. The youth began to follow and see social media influencers and activists as the true voice of the people or real patriots. This justifies how committed they were to their social media accounts. Social

media influencers relegated the roles of political spokespersons as the mouthpiece of information. Spokespersons' identities were lost as part of the problematic establishment. The tech-savvy youth were able to dig into the social history of their representatives and 'fact shame' their governance deficit and failures vis-à-vis 2019 election promises. Social media trends consequently became a source of information and headlines in the dailies, even for the mass media. It suffices here to mention the presidential debates, the Ganduje scandal and the reaction of the President to it. The utterance of Alhaji Atiku Abubakar's on his intention to sell (privatise) NNPC to his friend and Dr Bukola Saraki's campaign leaks on how he funds the APC in 2015 to get to the Senate Presidency, as well as the 'O To Ge' movement's virality, substantially generated serious impact on the choices of the youth and their followers.

The implications are that social media amongst youth plays two major roles concerning power. First, it decentralises power: from government establishment to the ordinary citizen. This implies that whoever possesses information, as seen with the examples of Jafar Jafar's confession on Governor Ganduje of Kano State<sup>6</sup> or Reno Omokri's 'Amaechi Tapes' (scandals) and Deji Adeyanju's internal workings of the ruling party, shapes the narratives, sets the agenda and reconfigures power in a way that does not serve the status quo but places it in the hand of the people as against the state and established power structures. This invariably means information became a key tool which was made possible for youth re-shaping the structure of the polity with enormous impact on image perception and re-modelling during the 2019 election. Secondly, youth participation through social media meant that the government had to accept the responsibility that good governance was the key and that it was therefore imperative to re-jig itself off image deficit towards re-election. The sacking of former Secretary to the Government, Babachir Lawal, in an internal reshuffling within the ruling party (political caucus), buttresses this point. This implied that social media linked citizens directly to power as a shaper of polity and government direction.

### **Youth, Social Media and Agenda-setting and Framing**

Framing and agenda-setting are as important as political discourse and debates themselves. Who shapes and sets what controls the dynamics of elections. This has consequential effects on decision-making and power in politics. The control of what goes on as debates and political discourses concerning power eluded youth in Africa and Nigeria in particular until the recent development in ICT which social media provided in the 2019 General Election. Social media tools helped wax a stronger voice of youth agency as

a calculus of power whose constituency determines electoral direction. This captures the evolving power of the youth to control narratives and frame ideas that are dealt with by political parties, politicians, electoral bodies and other stakeholders. Texts, video and audio posts arising from the agency of youth became the source of direction on which political calculations were based. Agenda-setting helps them put forward their peculiar needs and aspiration as seen in the 2019 election. The effects of these feeds and contents became difficult for politicians or public officeholders and aspirants to eschew. Nevertheless, the youth's agency and understanding of how to wield this nascent power must be grasped with its inherent challenges to shape political discourses. For instance, the burning issue of unemployment, lack of adequate infrastructural facilities in key sectors of the economy, as well as moral and legal issues such as rights and anti-corruption were at the centre of Nigeria's 2019 election. This position was given credence by Ayo Olowo when he said that:

social media indeed helped youth in setting agenda and frame what decide the strategy of political parties' electoral campaigns; hence, this is only possible as a result of social media tools which has to empower these social media generation as observed with the not too young movement (Ayo Olowo, Interview, 2019).

This signifies that unlike in the pre-social media era, citizens are now increasingly at the centre. Movements and online activism therefore help them to pursue the vigour of good governance, accountability, responsibility and enhance democratic tenets. What is certain is that this will continue to grow further as reflected by Ayo Olowo's summary that 'social media is helping the young people to get their voice heard while letting their opinion known with consequences on narratives being shaped in the polity' (Ayo Olowo, Interview, 2019). This was also corroborated by J. J. Omojua who posits that 'social media influence will continue to soar in the deepening of political processes in that in near future say 2023, more Nigerians would have got access to the internet. Thus, more social media generation can be expected with implication for more robust political engaging Nigerian youths on good governance and democratic practices' (Japhet J. Omojua, Interview, 2019).

### **Youth, Social Media and Malicious Contents: Digitised Opportunities and Democratic Implications**

One significant value that social media added to the course of youth political participation and politicking in Nigeria's 2019 General Election is the access to online information that has relevance for the manner of

electoral value. However, this observable course was double-edged: used by the youth and seasoned politicians as a manipulative tool. Notably, social media also unleashes the 'fake news' attributes that have become politicised in the course of the electoral campaigns. It must be noted that fake news has been an integral part of social media innovation, but its adaptation to political strategies and electioneering was made conspicuously potent during the 2019 General Election by actors of different classes and interests. The ruling political party (APC) has been alleged to have made it to the *Aso Rock* with propaganda through social media by its ex-party leader, Alhaji Lai Muhammed. According to Dr Farrok Pkeroqi, his conviction that Alhaji Lai Mohammed and the APC gained political capital using social media had inspired his research on his published Lai Mohammed's fifty legendary lies (see *Nairaland* 2017; *Daily Trust* 2017). To the PDP hierarchy voiced by Reno Omokri (*Daily Trust* 2018), the APC was simply reacting against the same structure that it rode to power with attempts to gag the power of the social media through hatched regulations and bill passages. The youth usage of fake news to project narratives about unwanted politicians or aspirants was therefore weaponised fully. This leaves both the states as represented by the ruling elites and the revisionary agents (the youth) as both employer of divisive mechanisms to score points against each other, whether to demarket an opponent(s) or against the electorate's brainwashing for its desired political ends.

Also, there was a heavy deployment of malicious contents in the form of text, news broadcast, graphics and cartoons by the youth against politicians not celebrated. This position was corroborated by Joseph Japhet Omojua when he said:

A lot of malicious promoting contents such as hate speeches and texts, videos were used by youth who do not agree with another supporter's view during the electioneering period via the social media. The social media space in turn became hall of online violence amongst politically polarised Nigerian youths especially. Worst still, social media influencers were trolled while their feeds became saturated with unprintable attacks on the personality of the person and its supposed supported. Also, conversation that was meant to stir good governance nearly lost its focus and became ethnicised, sentimentalised without recourse to objectivity and respect for the individuals whose view were considered politically non-soothing (Japhet J. Omojua, Interview, 2020).

Malicious contents are not without implications for democracy. First, they threaten peace and the spirit of sportsmanship in electoral processes. This is more important when the realisation of Africa's nascent democracy is put into context: for a democracy which is often paused by military *coups*

*d'état*. Raising undue tensions in an atmosphere where power is personalised is delicate for usurpers and 'illiberal' in government. Fake news as it is known has effects on national security as it is often a veritable means for securitisation of the media and civil space by the ruling class. Attempts to regulate the media space through the aborted social media bill buttress this point. More so, fake news helps in autocratising the democratic terrain. This is because the ruling class resorts to the conclusion that such information is the opposition or surrogate's sponsored ideas. It is not surprising that rather than sieving through inappropriate information through people-friendly awareness campaigns to accommodate liberal views, the African political party as it is characteristically oriented towards power capitalised on this as leeway to ending liberal dissenting in the polity. Nevertheless, malicious contents and fake news have constituted new security challenges.

## **Conclusion**

The study examined the roles of social media in facilitating youth participation in the 2019 General Election. It revealed that youth were able to actively participate in political debate and processes through the use of social media. In most cases, youth were even at the centre of a social media frenzy which shaped narratives and subsequently in some cases became headlines in mass media. Youth were therefore able to re-invent power and aggregate it to themselves in light of their needs through in-depth debates. This transmutes to thorough scrutinisation of public officeholders or aspirants' policy thrusts, as well as speeches. Furthermore, the study revealed how social media enhanced the agency of youth not only as an inclusive constituency but as a structure that is increasingly becoming the centre of information production and power, agenda-setting and framing, and cultural review. Youth, through the use of social media, are now faced with new opportunities as well as challenges of malicious contents or what is popularly regarded as 'fake news' and opportunistic manoeuvre through the use of social media. However, the above showed that social media, concerning youth's political participation in Nigeria's 2019 General Election, addressed the research questions. It is therefore right to conclude that social media is important in endearing youth political participation especially in the General Election as witnessed in the 2019 Nigerian election, hence it intensified and enhanced youth political participation. More so, it is also clear that challenges arose with youth who used social media to participate during the 2019 election. This aligns with the second research assumption that the emergence of social media as a platform for political debate has significantly reduced the power of the state to suppress free speech among the youth.

## Notes

1. Strategies such as joining political parties, protesting against bad policies as seen in the fuel subsidy crisis of 2011 or countless universities protests on infrastructure or tuition hikes as well as forming or joining movements such as 'Our Mumu Don Do', 'Enough is Enough', 'O To Ge Movements' and environmental movement such as the Ogoni Peoples Movement.
2. Merriam Webster, 'Social media noun, plural in form but singular or plural in construction', <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media>, accessed 26 July 2019.
3. Ganduje gate connotes the reported scandal to the Governor of Kano State and a member of the APC presidential team. Ganduje was found collecting bribes from contractors and stashing them into his kaftan in a leaked video that went viral.
4. Amaechi Leaks pertains to an audio tape where the Minister for Transport of the Republic and Chief Campaign Chairman of the APC Presidential Campaign was quoted to have said the President is incompetent and does not read or is not bothered by anything.
5. The Federal Government and the ruling party first introduced a bill to regulate social media in 2016 with contents targeting imprisonment, and the second hinged on the need to target 'fake news' under the guise of national security.
6. Ganduje gate typifies the allegation of contract throwback by the Governor of Kano State. See *Premium Times* (2018).

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