

## Digital Activism And Political Participacion In Nigeria’s Fourth Republic

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### ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes a comprehensive investigation into the pivotal role of digital activism within Nigeria's democratic framework, specifically its influence on public and civic engagement. The advent of social media networks has emerged as a significant tool for disseminating information and mobilizing support for various causes. Drawing upon the theoretical lens of technological determinism, this study critically examines the intricate relationship between digital activism and political participation in Nigeria since the return of democratic governance in 1999. Employing a descriptive research design complemented by a qualitative review of existing literature, the findings reveal that digital activism, if not properly organized, can yield adverse outcomes. Consequently, the paper advocates for a holistic approach to managing digital activism, emphasizing effective collaboration between those spearheading progressive causes and the government. By analyzing the multifaceted impacts of digital activism, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of its complexities and significance within Nigeria's political landscape.

Keywords: Digital activism, political participation, social media, advocacy, social movement.

## INTRODUCTION

The development of technology and innovations like social media has transformed the political arena, making it dynamic, revolutionizing the strategies applied by political gladiators. The evolution of the new media has positively contributed to the existing relationship between citizens and those in government. Social media offers a channel through which people have access to diverse political ideas and information, facilitating increased communication between leaders and their followers (Okocha & Ademu-Etteh, 2022). These social media platforms also referred to as new media have given the youths an avenue to engage in community development programmes through digital activism (Olatunji & Duruji, 2021; Chiluwa, 2019).

Nigeria has witnessed a dramatic rise in political participation since the country's return to democracy in 1999. Continuous active political participation among citizens increases public support for governmental initiatives and gives people and organisations the ability and power to shape government policies (Okocha & Ademu-Etteh, 2022). The social media played an active role in mobilization of Nigerians for several protests since the transition to democratic rule in 1999. The #OccupyNigeria, resulted to the applications of social media networks to express their grievances towards the increased hardship caused by the removal of fuel subsidy in 2012. It has also been utilized during industrial actions, creation of awareness for social issues as well as creating a platform of dialogue for all Nigerians irrespective of their present geographical locations. Political participation has evolved beyond elections. It now involves active checkmating of government actions and policies, crowdfunding, online campaign on national issues, liquid democracy, clicktivism and slacktivism (Akinyetun, 2021).

Nigeria's democratic path in the fourth republic has been characterized by struggle for legitimacy and growth that have been marred by an unstable governance structure,

ethnocentric leadership and ethno-nationalism (Letswa & Abdulmalik, 2022). This political experience has truncated the development of the country in different sectors. The democratic transition in 1999 marked an important milestone in the country's history after nearly thirty years of military rule. Democracy presented an opportunity for Nigerians to select their leaders and influence political decisions. However, after nearly two decades of uninterrupted civilian rule and the conduct of successive national elections, discussions about the need for democratic consolidation and popular participation has remained a focal point in the polity. The fundamental components of democracy, such as conduct of elections, rule of law, government's transparency and accountability are far from being the present realities (Monday & Wakili, 2021). Social media has been instrumental in enhancing interactions among people and assisted in creating a collective identity beyond ethnic or religious leanings (Chukwudi, Gberevbie, Abasilim, & Imhonopi, 2019). They also create an opportunity for people to organize and play an important role in contemporary political actions around the world. Its availability has made it possible for people to be involved in and take part in public processes (Orfan, 2021).

Existing studies have shown that social media are important tools for activism and entrenching democracy in Africa through media campaigns, establishing communication links between government and the people and also creating awareness about the voting processes. The increased accessibility of internet enabled devices has encouraged electorates to spread messages about the political parties during electioneering campaigns. This has a new implication for Nigeria's democracy, making the social media to be used for both pre-election and post-election activities (Apuke & Tunca, 2018). This study seeks to expand on the existing knowledge on the contributions of digital activism in political participation in Nigeria. The study uses the various experiences of Nigerians to unravel how digital activism has spurred positive changes as well as the actions, reactions and responses of the government and political actors on the use of new media for digital activism.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study is anchored on the technological determinism theory propounded by Marshal McLuhan in 1962. Technological determinism is the belief that society is shaped by technological developments. New technology influences human change in ways that are beyond comprehension and cannot be resisted (Oliver, 2001). Technological determinism revolves around two main notions; technological advancement happens autonomously, guided by intrinsic logic that is unaffected by social influences; and social change is predetermined by technological change in a precise way (Kline, 2001).

According to Marcus (1994), the consequences of technology will always be influenced by how people perceive and use these technologies. The social impacts of electronic communication would continue to appear puzzling and evasive because of the intricate, systemic connections that exist between people and technological developments. Technological determinists contend that social structures are determined by the development of technology, which is primarily understood as the discovery of preexisting laws and processes. Social structures and processes can only change in response to new technological advancements. Technology enables society to design decisions, but these technical decisions in turn influence how the social subsystems develops (Bauer, 2007).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research paper adopts a descriptive approach in order to comprehensively analyze the intricate aspects concerning digital activism and political participation within Nigeria's fourth republic. In addition to primary research methods, the study incorporates a secondary research method that heavily relies on an extensive range of scholarly sources, including journals, conferences, encyclopedias, and other documented research materials pertaining to the subject matter. By employing a combination of primary and secondary research methodologies, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play within the realm of digital activism and political participation in Nigeria's fourth republic.

## **DIGITAL ACTIVISM; A CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION**

Digital Activism creates a whole new avenue for organization of social movements around the globe. Its ability to collectivize ideas, thoughts and visions of people with limited financial resources makes it an instrumental tool in galvanizing people to achieve positive change. The development in technology and innovations of social media has transformed the way and manner people interact in the campaign for political and social change (Sivitanides & Shah, 2011; Gberevbie, Ayo, Iyoha, Duruji & Abasilim, 2018). Digital activism is a term that has been used to denote both in-depth and exclusive actions or practices. In-depth because it covers any form of social and political campaigning that makes use of digital network infrastructure, and exclusive because it does not include activities that do not fit this description. Aside from 'digital activism,' variety of related terms have been used to identify similar or overlapping concepts which includes networked activism, internet activism, hybrid activism, hashtag activism, online activism and other activism terms with prefixes having denotations of digital terms in them such as 'web', 'mobile', 'net', or 'e' (Ozukula, 2021).

Social and political movements have utilized technological devices over the years to spread their campaign. However, this cannot be considered as digital activism because these technologies are not digital technologies that encode and transmit information in binary. They do not utilize low-cost scalability of the global digital network (Joyce, 2010). The infrastructure that facilitates the use of digital activism is based on an online network of interconnected devices that makes use of digital code to transmit information. This network does not only connect people to a central server, the network allows people to connect with each other to engage on variety of issues. The use of technology has been crucial in swaying public opinion. The political environment of digital activism can be defined in terms of law and regulation in democratic nations where citizens have real influence over the decisions made by their government (Joyce, 2010).

The availability of technology has facilitated the organization, mobilization and propagation of socio political movements around the world. These digital technologies and media platforms have since given a voice to hitherto unheard voices in the society. Technology also puts a spotlight on areas of the world that little to no information is heard from. Political actors and government institutions have been compelled to stay informed about creating a favorable image and carrying out their duties effectively due to these situations. However, some countries have used sovereignty as a means to carry out actions that can only be condemned by the international community, without any constructive actions against them. The use of social media has also led to the rise of transnational movements that have shaped political happening around the world. Many autocratic and rigid political governments have been overthrown and replaced with more democratic ones thanks to the usage of social media, as seen by the "political tsunami" that swept through various African nations following the well-known Arab spring of 2012 (Erubami, 2020). The Arab spring demonstrates how the media was used to spread and propagate these ideals for political change around some Arab speaking countries.

Vegh (2003), characterizes digital activism according to the activist's initiative, which includes disseminating information, urging actions on issues, or and participating in such actions. He further subcategorizes online activism into three types. The first is advocacy or raising awareness. In this situation, public awareness is established by releasing critical information regarding issues of concern to the public. It focuses mostly on news items and stories that are ignored, underreported, or covered incorrectly by the mainstream media which may be influenced by political stakeholders in a country. In this approach, the internet or another digital instrument is employed as a substitute for traditional news platforms. In this approach, the internet or any digital instrument is employed as a substitute for the traditional mainstream news. Digital activism has created an avenue for people to spread awareness and advocate about underrepresented causes like gay rights, which would otherwise be challenging to do via the

mainstream media (Kakungulu-Mayambala & Rukundo, 2019). It also creates awareness about societal issues that are oftentimes neglected by traditional media and political actors. Mental health, gender issues have become a front burner of digital activism in Nigeria.

The second group consists of organization or mobilization. Online or offline calls to action can be made using digital means. Offline action can be organized and requested using digital activism. Here, information about the purpose, date, time, and location of an intended protest or demonstration can be circulated to the public. Digital activism can also be utilized to carry out a task that would have been feasible offline but is more easily accomplished online. Such tasks reduce costs of operations that would be present during physical meetings. Digital activism also gives opportunities for those in power to communicate with the public. It creates a new relationship between the government and the people, thus making them accountable for their actions. The use of digital technology has made topical issues in the national polity to accessed and thoroughly evaluated. It allows the government to gauge the reaction of the public on plans and actions being made by them.

The third category is called "action or reaction," and it simply refers to taking online action in support of or opposition to a cause. Here, performative hacktivism activities including vandalism of websites, e-mail bombing, and other similar tactics are done activism (Kakungulu-Mayambala & Rukundo, 2019). Nigerians use social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube on a regular basis for various types of digital activism. They serve as a source of information, enabling trending news stories to circulate faster and receive greater coverage than was previously feasible when internet technology was not available.

### **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA SINCE 1999**

The start of the fourth republic in 1999 has not brought about the expected results in terms of good governance. This is largely due to the fact that government sees

themselves above the law and use the instrument of power to do their will. Political participation among Nigerians since the commencement of the fourth republic has been in the form of membership enrolment in political parties, mobilization for voter registration, specialized writings and public speaking, political campaign activities and running for public offices and party positions. Gaining power and using it to organize society, gather and distribute resources, and influence and influence decision making in accordance with specific interests has been the priority of political participation in Nigeria (Peter & Iteogu, 2021; Oni, Chidozie & Agbude, 2013). These has resulted in the political engagement by diverse groups of Nigerians irrespective of their ideology, religious affiliations or ethnic background.

The political process over the years have gradually improved due to changes in electoral laws and the use of technology (Chidozie, Aje & Ogunnowo, 2020). The first set of elections conducted by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was marred with controversy. There was criticism around President Obasanjo's smuggling of several provisions into the electoral act during the elections conducted under his administration. After a lengthy delay, there was a lack of registration materials in locations where the authorities believed the ruling party had no popular support during voter registration for the election. Massive election tampering was reported to have occurred during the elections (Alumona, 2010). These occurrences led to displeasure among Nigerians about the conduct of national elections, further causing apathy towards subsequent elections. A technological advance was made during the 2003 election with the introduction of Optical Magnetic Recognition (OMR) forms. Procurement of the Direct Data Capture Machines (DDCM) for the 2007 general elections voter registration exercise introduced a measure of credibility to the electoral system (Ayeni & Esan, 2018)

Electoral reforms which facilitated the introduction of technologies like the INEC card readers in the 2015 elections and the BVAS machine introduced for the 2021 Anambra elections, 2022 Ekiti and Osun gubernatorial elections and the 2023 general elections have revived the confidence of Nigerians regarding the conduct of elections. The use of



technological devices has given Nigerians first-hand information about happenings in different communities the mainstream media wouldn't cover. It has also allowed citizens to follow the electoral process from nomination of candidates in political parties till the announcement of election results. Political discuss are also made on social media platforms, giving citizens an opportunity to question actions of people in government. Monitoring what people post on social media and the internet has provided a deeper insight into what citizens' care about and are concerned with at a particular period. Furthermore, it assists segments of the global population to become aware of local happenings (Metaxas & Muustafaraj, 2012).

### **DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN NIGERIA**

According to Chitukutuku (2022), the ruling elite in Africa have strengthened the militarization and securitization of the state, which has reduced the space for criticism and interaction of the government. In order to promote counter-hegemonic conversations, the youth who are marginalized and denied a platform and a voice on governance concerns have taken advantage of technological developments in the sphere of social communication. Social media has given room for socio-political expression in these platforms that are unrestricted by the government (Apalowo, Akerele-Popoola, Ajakaiye, & Ojeka-John, 2022).

The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), notably smart mobile phones, in protest movements has increased significantly as a result of the widespread use of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Nwofe, 2019). Rapid technological advancements in Africa over the past decades have sparked a new wave of young people getting involved in politics, primarily through online activism. Although access challenges remain on the continent, social media platforms are increasingly being used as a tool to further the objectives and activities of various groups in society. According to the Internet World Stats data, the continent's population of internet users was estimated at 453,329,534 in December 2017 (Internet World Stats, 2022). The numbers also revealed that the top 10 countries on the continent using mobile phones for

internet usage are Nigeria, Egypt, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, and South Africa, to name a few (Olabode, 2018).

Digital activism in Nigeria can be observed from the various social and political movements that have been organized using ICT platforms. Internet penetration over the years have since improved the use of technology by Nigerians (Duruji, Olanrewaju, Olu-Owolabi, Duruji-Moses & Chukwudi, 2021). Social media has been efficiently used for political activism, social advocacy, and protests with long-time effects. The sudden removal of subsidy on Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) on the 1st of January, 2012 brought about a shockwave of reactions among Nigerians leading to the commencement of the Occupy Nigeria protests. The protests occurred at a time when social network applications were becoming widely used by Nigerians. The discuss of socioeconomic challenges being faced by Nigerians online, motivated offline protesters to continue the protests (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). There have been occasional industrial actions in Nigeria which has been focused on occupational issues with the trade union organizing them. The social media has allowed those affected by such industrial actions to use the platform to make demands from the government.

The 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests marked a turning point, uniting Nigerians under one umbrella demanding for a change on a certain issue. Social media connected different Nigerians irrespective of geographical locations to highlight the issues being faced regarding the increment in the price of PMS. Egbunike and Olorunnisola (2015), recognized that social media was not the only factor in the success of the Occupy Nigeria protest. The ideas and objectives of the organizers of the protest were spread via both traditional media and social media. The importance of social media in the Nigerian political system was also demonstrated by the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria in October 2020. Nigerians utilized the social media networks to organize protests in various parts of the country demanding stoppage of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) which had engaged in profiling an attacking youths perceived to be engaging in cyber criminality. This period witnessed Nigerians crowdfunding protest grounds using the social media to

raise funds and also display accountability on how the funds were spent (Idowu & Chukwudi, 2021). The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police was disbanded as a result of a massive public demonstrations that began as a critique of police violence on Twitter (Odera-Oguejiofor, Mark, & Okonkwo, 2021). The adoption of social media for promoting the #EndSars protests resulted in deepening the political consciousness among the youth demographic of the country. The social media platforms acted as a hub for aggregating the grievances and opinions of the Nigerian youth. Since traditional media outlets were largely silent on the issue, the use of social media during the protests assisted in amplifying the voices of Nigerian youths. Protesters used social media to plan and coordinate demonstrations around the nation, publish real-time updates and footage of police brutality, and demonstrate the cohesion and power of their movement.

#### **DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA**

Democracy emphasizes the role of the citizen's political participation. Its goal is to keep everyone involved moving forward, and this is where the new media play a crucial role. Therefore, an environment of constructive debate is essential for the survival of democracy. Social media and citizen journalism, which among other things allow for participation and public access to all, are therefore essential for the survival of modern democracies (Okocha & Ademu-Eteh, 2022). One cannot overstate the value of citizens' participation in politics, as a lack of political engagement creates voter apathy among the populace and fosters poor government performance. By using social media to make their opinions known in different states of the federation, the electorates have an opportunity to maintain their cadence of political interest and participation (Erubami, 2020).

The impact of communication tools for democracy in Nigeria can be traced back to the printing press and the role it played in improving previous democratic movements (Olabode, 2018). The use of traditional media to spur socio-political change in Nigeria dates back to nationalist

movements and struggle for sovereignty from the colonial government. Notable Nigerian nationalist utilized the media to engage in political activism. An example of such is Nnamdi Azikwe who used his *West African Pilot* to promote the cause for independence. Developments of new technologies brought about the adoption of new media and continuous use of traditional media for political activities. Social media networks have been utilized by political parties to create awareness about their party's manifestos. It has also been used to mobilize Nigerians into registering to join political parties. Its presence in the country has brought about its use for both positive and negative purposes.

The increase acceptability and usage of new media have made it important in Nigeria electoral process. Facebook and bulk SMS were effective tools used by Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan to communicate with prospective voters during the 2011 presidential election. Jonathan even made his presidential candidacy declaration on Facebook. Aleyomi and Ajakaiye (2014) asserts that one of the contributing reasons to the success of the 2011 general elections, which were deemed the freest and fair in Nigeria since the return of democracy in 1999, was the use of online media platforms. With the development of new social media networks and an increase in Nigerians subscription and enrollment on the platforms, the online space became an important tool in commerce, entertainment and politics.

During industrial actions or general protests, political parties use the occasion to score political points and gain support from the populace. This is evident in the occupy Nigeria protest when important personalities in the major opposition parties joined the movement to question the decision of the government in power to remove subsidy. In 2012, Nigeria's opposition parties were amorphous (lacking organization or cohesion). For many of these opposition parties' politicians, the Occupy Nigeria demonstration served as a launchpad to reinvent themselves (Egbunike & Olorunnisola, 2015). The internet's function in democracy, particularly in new democracies, has been to enable pluralistic competition, participatory democracy, and political liberty for people who feel stifled in conventional

politics. Increased internet usage has provided for more communication and better information availability. As a result, political participation and the demand for good governance has risen (Uwalaka, 2021).

The new media platforms have been utilized as a propaganda tool by citizens and political actors to spread fake news messages. This has resulted to the rise of increased numbers of unverified news stories coming from different parts of the country. These acts are done to score political points and sway the public mood from one political party to another (Chukwuere & Onyebukwa, 2018). Political propaganda has become a machinery used by political parties, and the social media has been instrumental in spreading these stories. During electioneering, political actors try to act relatable to the poor masses, showing empathy and positioning themselves engaging in activities normal Nigerians can identify with. The social media is used to share images of politicians engaging in various types of shenanigans, such as street hawking, eating local foods by the roadside, visiting IDP camps, and even cleaning drainages. These actions are done to gain support from locals where such actions are done and some garner support from unsuspecting online users. However, the growing political consciousness among Nigerians have made them juxtapose these images on social media platforms, exposing them as mere political stunts. The use of social media by some terrorist groups in Nigeria have made the government to be at an alert in monitoring activities on the social media. Social media platforms are used by some terrorist groups to spread propaganda. It is also an instrument for fundraising and recruitment of new terrorists. Activities of the terrorists are also used by politicians to spread fear and misinformation among people, exploiting the new media platforms to render terror on the populace (Chukwuere & Onyebukwa, 2018).

Political party officials and those seeking political offices are in the forefront in creating accounts on social media platforms. As access to internet improved, interest in other social media platforms like LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, Skype, increased, however these platforms were more frequently used for social entertainment than politics

(Mohammed & Ogwuche, 2021). The social media is also becoming to one-stop shop to get news stories. This has resulted to an increase of new users on social media platforms. According to Internet World Stats (2022), as of July 2022, there were 5,385,798,406 internet users worldwide (67.9 %), 601,940,784 in Africa, and 154,301,195 (73%) in Nigeria, out of a total population of 211,400,708 people, 34,608,200 of whom were Facebook subscribers.

Social media usage to improve political participation can be observed in three perspectives. The first involves the activities of political parties in creating awareness and push for support from citizens. These political parties also use the social media platforms for digital activism by creating an online team of supporters who condemn negative policies or actions of those in government. Political parties utilize the social media platforms to inform the public about their plans and goals prior to the commencement of an election. This is done with the assistance of party members who construct political slogans and digital pamphlets that can be circulated online (Adeola & Muhyideen, 2020). These slogans include words like "Obidient", "Atikulate", "Batified", which are coined from the names of political leaders in various political parties. Political participation at this stage usually evolve from support for a political party towards support for personalities within such political parties. The second perspective deals with the actions of Nigerians who are affected by social, political and economic issues in the community. This makes them motivated to participate in politics. Also, activities of civic societies, religious groups and sociocultural groups in social media platforms have increased participation in politics. Such movements online include the #NotTooYoungToRun, #ChurchMustVote. The third phase of political participation involves the Electoral body's activities to create knowledge about the procedures to be taken for the conduct of elections. Social media have been used to educate voters about the voting process, use of technological devices and innovations like the card readers, Permanent Voters Cards (PVC), and servers which guaranteed the security of the results information from hacking and falsification. Despite the benefit and gains from using social media for mobilization in general elections in

Nigeria, its adoption brought about some difficulties. These issues include cyberbullying, online display of manipulated results as well as other types of political instability via social media like hate speech between political parties' supporters and their candidates (Nnamani & Okafor, 2021).

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Digital activism is gradually becoming critical in entrenching political consciousness among Nigerians. Nigeria has a huge population with a significant percentage being youths who are predisposed to using social media daily. The existence of variety of social media networks have interconnected Nigerian's from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Digital activism helps to sustain the discussions and conversations about social issues affecting Nigerians. Due to the lack of ownership of social media networks by Nigerians, it allows people to voice out critical issues that are oftentimes gagged by existing traditional media.

Based on findings of this study, it is recommended that digital activism movements should be managed effectively by leaders of such movement to prevent it from being hijacked by individuals interested in utilizing the movement for their selfish gains. Government also needs to heed to the request of some of the issues raised by the digital activist. The social media is a platform in which government can understand the perception of the citizenry on policies and actions. Activities of digital activists should not always be observed as being against the government in power, but the new media platforms should be a medium for connectivity between the government and the people. Social media is gradually being populated by politicians and government officials. Civic engagement between those in government and the people should be encouraged.

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