

Fake Political News in Social Media and Youth Participation in Politics in South-East Nigeria

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Abstract

The study focused on issues relating to fake political news in social media and youth participation in politics in South-East Nigeria. Specifically, it determined youths' frequency of use of social media to gather political news, their major sources of political news online, extent to which they verify credibility and authenticity of political news and their sources, their level of exposure to fake political news online, and ways fake news in social media influence their participation in politics. Survey research design was adopted. Population of study was made up of undergraduate students (youths) in South-East state universities, aged 18 to 29 years. Questionnaire was used for data collection. Data were analysed using frequency, percentages and mean. Findings reveal that many youths (56%) frequently use social media to gather political news especially from family members, friends, special groups, influencers and opinion leaders' pages online. They however, rarely verify quality of such political news and their various sources. The findings further reveal that youths have been exposed to fake political news online and this has negatively affected their political engagements, orientation, perception, interest and trust in elected government. In line with these, the researcher recommends continual use of social media platforms to disseminate verified, authentic and credible political news, introduction of compulsory course on 'how-to-spot-fake-news' in the universities and development of updated fact checking apps that can verify political news emanating from short tweets, hash tags, posts, comments, unverified sources, and illogical stories.etc. There should also be information websites created and handled by non-partisan persons where youths can access correct political information.

Keywords: Politics, Social media, Fake, News, Youth, Participation.

Introduction

Social media is a strong purveyor of modern democracy. It has turned people from passive followers of political events to active participants in political activities. Ranging from political discussions and debates to quick dissemination of political news and other political activities such as campaigns and

elections, social media platforms have consistently provided amazing opportunities that enable citizen involvement in politics. Onyebuchi, Anorue and Obeyi (2016) agree that unlike the mainstream media, social media platforms (internet) serve as a fertile ground to advance political discourse, campaigns and effective

communication with the general public, thereby fine tuning the course of governance in the evolving global world (Okon, 2016). Agboola (2013), noted that emergence of new Information and Communication technologies (ICT) particularly the internet, is a new source of political socialization and a way of bringing young citizens closer to political process. As against the regular traditional media, social media platforms offer the audience an opportunity to bring vital topics for deliberation at will and at any point in time. Scholars believe on the positive effect of social media usage on civic and political engagement of citizens who utilize the platform for the expression of their political thoughts and feelings (Literat, & Vilenchik, 2019, Khane, Lee & Feezell, 2013). Olley and Ekhareafu (2013) affirm that every true believer in democracy must see social tools as freedom tools for the liberation of the world from the shackles of oppression.

Nigerian youths are now part of the digital natives that utilize online realm in expressing their political views just like a natural world (Kim & Anna, 2015). Mohammed (2013) and Kim and Anna (2015) agree that social media have gained acceptance especially among youths with large percentage of them using at least one as a major communication channel. Internet has gained acceptance among Nigerian youths whose cognitive engagement in online platforms such as facebook, twitter, whatsapp and instagram have greatly increased their political knowledge, political participation and trust (Chan & Guo 2013, Abdulrauf, 2016 and Agboola, 2013).

Despite the power of social media in fostering political freedom, it can still

become dangerous weapons in the hands of political miscreants. The recent misuse of the platform to promote spread of unverified information is becoming an issue of great concern. Igwebuike (2020) agree that social media widespread usage has enabled digital peddling of fake news and exploitation by anonymous political influencers. Onyeike et al (2011) note that social media web provides all kinds of information for those exposed to it and the information could either be good or bad depending on each person's persuasion. Okafor, Ebenezer, Chukwuemeka and Patience (2013) agree that the media space has been hijacked by amateurs and people (mostly youths) who are not trained journalists.

Pieces of fake political news include deliberately fabricated political stories in form of write-ups, photos, videos, created and spread to confuse, manipulate and misinform the masses. Most fake political news stories are stereotyped biased and have elements of prejudices geared towards exploiting peoples' emotions like anxiety, anger and frustration. Mitchell et al (2016) affirm that false information can get to a large number of audiences by spreading from one individual to another. Fayoyin and Ngwainmbi (2014) pointed out the possibility of misrepresentation in this digital age as everyone is a global communicator without official gate keeper. This embodies a major challenge to information accuracy and credibility.

Research shows that youths follow social media news updates, links, and comments to shared stories and tend to align with views of opinion leaders, organizations or online persons who they perceived to be learned, more-informed, or experts whose interpretations help to bring context to news stories (Bergstorm

& Belfrage, 2018). Alcott and Gentzkop (2017) however, warn that people (youth) who get news from social media platforms are less likely to receive evidence about true state of the world. The implication of this is their high risk of exposure to malign agendas and personal anxiety founded in uncertainty especially where there is lack of literacy skills among young people to navigate the digital world and identify fake news (Powel, 2018). Lee and Heiss (2022) reported that social media networks have a character of exposing individuals to different political information that can lead to different political outcomes. In the words of Berger (2018) notes that purveyors of disinformation prey on the vulnerability or partisan potential of recipients whom they hope to enlist as amplifiers and multipliers". Ahmad et al (2019) agree that political influencers employ fake news to either legitimize or delegitimize politics while engaging netizens (youths) in political activities.

South-East Nigeria has had its share of the menace of fake political news. Past studies reports instances where social media have been deployed to spread fake news that nearly hindered election in South-East Nigeria. Adegunle, Odoemelam and Odoemelam (2019), Aboyade, Masu, Aboyade and Ajayi (2022). Other instances and reports show that the underlining intention of circulating fake news during elections is to sow seed of discord, disrupt electoral process, character assassination and cause panic among electorates (Apuke & Omar, 2020, Ibeleme 2018, Okoro et.al, 2018).

Adjin-Tettey and Johnston (2022) emphasize the place of media and information literacy in identifying fake news, disinformation and

misinformation. According to them, media literacy training will not only ensure that media consumers do not fall prey to fake content but also equips them with the requisite knowledge, skill, attitude and technical know-how to obtain authentic and credible information, critically evaluate and verify the authenticity of information received.

Purpose of the study

The general purpose of the study was to examine issues relating to fake political news disseminated on social media platforms and youth participation in politics in Nigeria. Specifically, the study determined:

1. Frequency of social media utilization by youths to gather political news.
2. major sources of political news online.
3. extent to which youths verify quality of social media political news and their sources
4. youths' level of exposure to fake news in social media (FNSM).
5. ways FNSM influence youths' participation in politics.

Research Questions

1. How often do youths use social media to gather political news?
2. What are their major sources of the political news in social media
3. To what extent do youths verify the quality of social media political news and their sources?
4. To what extent are youths exposed to fake political news in social media?
5. In what ways have exposure to fake political news in social media influenced youth participation in politics?

Methodology

Design of the study: The study adopted survey research design.

Area of the study: The five states in South-East geo-political Zone, Nigeria formed the area of this study. South East is among the six geopolitical zones representing both a geographic and political region of the country. This area is one of the densely populated regions of Nigeria with a good number of youths who are politically aware. South-East zone has five state universities namely: Abia State University, Uturu (ABSU), Imo State University (IMSU), Enugu State University of Technology (ESUT), Ebonyi State University (EBSU), and Chukwuma Odumegwu Ojukwu University (COOU).

Population of the study: Population of the study was made up of all undergraduate students of the five state universities in South-East Nigeria who are young adults (18-29 years) engaged in academic degree programme of the universities.. According to the 2019 Nigerian University system Statistical Digest, the estimated populations of undergraduate students of the universities are as follows: ABSU -11,128, IMSU-22,154, ESUT-16212, EBSU-14,726, and COOU-13,115.

Sample for the study: The sample size of this study was 794 determined using Survey system online sample size calculator with confidence level of 95 percent (%), $P=50$, and confidence interval =3.46. Multi-stage sampling technique was used. Firstly, one state university (each) was purposively selected from each of the five states of the South-East geopolitical zone. The 794 sample size proportionately distributed to each university based on their population as follows: ABSU- 114, IMSU-227, ESUT-166, EBSU-152 and COOU-135. At stage two, convenience sampling was

used to select one faculty from each of the selected universities. At the third stage, three departments were randomly selected from each of the select faculties while the study participants were randomly selected from the departments.

Instrument for data collection: The data for the study were collected using questionnaire constructed in line with the specific purposes and based on literature reviewed. The questionnaire was divided into two sections; section sought information about demographic characteristics of respondents while section B sought respondents views on questions relevant to specific objectives. A specific 4-point scale was adopted for each part of the questionnaire, including: very frequently(VF), frequently(F), infrequently (IN), for Table 2; never (N); always (A), often(O),rarely (R), never(N), for Table 3; very high(VH), high (H), low(L), very low(VL), for Table 4; very negative(VN), negative(N), very positive (VP) and positive(P), for Table 5. Numerical values were assigned to expressions in each Table in descending order of (3,2,1,0). The cut off point for the mean scores was 1.50. Questionnaire was validated by three Mass Communication lecturers. Pilot study was conducted on 40 respondents who were not part of the sample for the study in ESUT. At collected were used to established reliability of the instrument using Cronbach Alpha. Coefficient of 0.75 was obtained.

Data collection procedure: The researcher with the help of four trained research assistants distributed 794 copies of the questionnaire online via the Whatsapp group pages of the selected departments. All copies of the questionnaire distributed were returned indicating a 100% return rate.

Data Analysis Technique: The data were analyzed using frequencies, percentages and means. Mean response of 1.50 (was used for decision making.

Findings of the study

Table 1: Percentage Responses on Frequency of Social Media Utilization by Youths to Gather Political News

S/N	Frequency Indicators	Percentage Responses (F%)
1	Once each day	127 (16%)
2	Several times a day	445 (56%)
3	Only on weekends	48 (6%)

4	Once in a week	32 (4%)
5	Several times a week	79 (10%)
6	Once in a month	15 (2%)
7	Several times a week	48 (6%)
8	Never	00 (0%)

Table 1 shows that 56 percent of the respondents get political news from social media on a daily basis. This therefore, clearly indicates a high level usage of social media in gathering political information by youths in South-East, Nigeria.

Table 2: Mean Responses on Youths' Major Sources of Political News in Social Media

S/N	Major Sources of Political News	VF(3)	F(2)	IF(1)	NE (0)	
1	From: online family members and friends	452	300	32	10	2.50
2	Special groups and links online	399	238	112	45	2.24
3	Candidates / Political party political pages	140	140	452	62	1.40
4	Sponsored political pages	103	126	452	103	1.30
5	Influencers/ Opinion leaders' pages	417	290	40	47	2.40
6	Online newspapers, radio and TV	120	160	499	24	1.45
7	Individual comments to posts	305	250	180	61	2.10

Keys: (Very frequently-VF, Frequently-F, Infrequently-IF, Never-NE). N=794; = Mean

Table 2 shows four items (sources) with mean scores above 1.5 (respectively indicating that the political news youths receive on social media come mainly from: online family members and friends(2.50); special groups and links online (2.24); influencers and opinion leaders pages(2.40); and

individual comments to posts(2.10). Other sources of political news from sponsored political pages and online newspapers, radio, and T.V obtained mean scores of 1.30 and 1.45, while sources involving candidates and political party political pages obtained mean of 1.40.

Table 3: Mean Responses on Extent to Which Youths Verify Quality of Political News in Social Media and their Sources.

S/N	Major Sources of Political News	A(3)	O(2)	R(1)	NE (0)	X
1	Identify where the political news originates from	38	111	496	149	1.04
2	Browse the publication site to determine its originality, history, reputation and influence	56	100	398	240	0.83
3	Verify the political news across multiple social media outlets and other media like TV, radio, newspaper etc	68	104	420	202	1.1
4	Seek out more information regarding the political news from sources such as eye-witness, police statement.	80	90	409	215	1.04

expert reports, official release etc

Keys: (Always-A; Often-O; Rarely-R, Never-NE); Number of Respondents (N) =794; = Mean

Table 3 shows that all the four items obtained mean scores that are less than 1.5 (). This means that youths in South-East Nigeria do not verify the quality of political news they receive from social media and their various sources.

Table 4: Mean Responses on Levels of Youths' Exposure to Fake Political News in Social Media

S/N	Incidental Exposure Indicators	VH(3)	H(2)	L(1)	VL(0)	Mean
1	Following posts/updates from friends	394	368	14	15	2.44
2	Reading comments to posts	401	268	21	104	2.21
3	Reading push notifications / alerts from phone apps	420	330	32	12	2.45
4	Receiving unsolicited updates from sponsored political pages	300	420	30	44	2.22
5	Deliberate search for political news updates from different sources	308	370	70	46	2.18

Keys: (Very High-VH; High-H; Low-L; Very Low-VL; Number of respondents (N) = 794; = Mean

Table 4 shows that all the items obtained mean scores that are above the cut –off mean of 1.5 (). this mean that youths in South-East Nigeria have had exposure to fake political news in social media by following posts/updates from

friends, reading peoples' comments to posts, getting political news notifications from sponsored political pages and apps on their phones, and by deliberately searching for political news updates from different sources.

Table 5: Mean Responses on Ways Fake Political News in Social Media Influence Youths' Participation in Political Activities.

S/N	Ways FPNSM Influence Youths	VN(3)	N(2)	VP(1)	P(0)	Mean
1	Political discussion and debates	459	280	40	15	2.5
2	Political orientation and opinion	460	294	31	9	2.5
3	Election and voting-based issues	426	235	50	83	2.3
4	Post election reactions	400	299	70	25	2.4
5	Political interest	501	200	50	44	2.5
6	Choice of political candidate and party	310	201	200	83	1.9
7	Trust in elected government	413	299	70	12	2.4

Keys: (Very Negative-VN; Negative-N; Very Positive-VP, Positive-P); N=794; = Mean

Table 5 shows that all the seven items obtained mean scores above the cut off mean of 1.5 indicating that fake political news spread in social media influence youths' participation in political activities in South-East Nigeria.

Discussion of Result

Table 1 reveals a high level usage of social media in gathering political information among youths. It is no longer debatable that social media platforms are viable means of political socialization and mobilization of youths in the twenty-first

century politics. This underscores the need to utilize the platforms to disseminate authentic and credible political communications that can win back the trust of the youths who tend to have developed more confidence on political information emanating from their online families, friends, special groups, influencers and opinion leaders as revealed in Table 2. These, confirm the findings of Bergstorm and Belfrage (2018) that youths follow, read and align with political views of opinion leaders, organizations or online persons who they perceived to be learned, more-informed, or experts whose interpretations help to bring context to news stories.

The findings of this study also corroborate the findings of other researchers which indicates that social media have gained acceptance among Nigerian youths whose cognitive engagement in online platforms have greatly increased their political knowledge, political participation and trust (Kim & Anna, 2015; Chan & Guo, 2013; Abdulrauf, 2006 & Krueger, 2005 cited in Agboola, 2013). Findings in Table 2 also shows that youths have little or no regard for political news stemming from the mainstream media (radio, television and newspapers) who are known to have trained journalists and official gate keepers that verify news stories before disseminating them. This questions the authenticity and credibility of political news stories youths are exposed to online.

Findings in Table 3 clearly indicate that youths rarely verify the quality of these social media political news and their various sources. They rarely try to identify where the political news originates from, browse the publication site to determine its originality, history,

reputation and influence, verify the political news across multiple social media outlets and other media like Television, radio, newspaper etc. The reason for this could be due to two things; firstly, because such news emanated from sources they naturally believe in and share the same ideology just as Alcott and Gentzckpw (2017) noted that people who get news from social media platforms are less likely to receive evidence about true state of the world that would counter an ideologically aligned but false stories. Secondly, there is a serious lack of knowledge and ability to spot fake news among youths in line with the view of Powell (2018) who pointed the existence of a dangerous lack in the literacy skills that young people require to navigate digital world and identify fake news.

The implication of the above finding explains the youths' incidental exposure to fake political news in social media. Findings in Table 4 shows that the youths have been exposed to fake political news by following political posts/updates from friends, reading comments to political posts, receiving unsolicited political notifications from sponsored political pages, and apps and deliberately searching political news from different unverified sources. These have increased their risk of exposure to malign agendas and personal anxiety founded in uncertainty thus confirming the finding of Lee and Heiss (2022) that social media networks have capacity of exposing individuals to incidental political information that can lead to different political outcomes. Youths' incidental exposure to all manner of political information will only increase their vulnerability and susceptibility to political tantrums dispatched on the

social media platforms by unscrupulous political elements. Thus, corroborating the findings of Ahmad et al (2019) that political influencers employ fake news to manipulate the gullible netizens (youths).

Findings in Table 5 shows that fake political news spread on social media influence youth participation in politics.

Majority of the youths have developed negative perception and opinion of politics which affects their involvement in political discussions, debates, voting, choice of candidate and political parties as well as trust in elected government. This challenges the findings of Chan and Guo (2013, p461) study on face book use in political activities which shows that 'social media use among youths can facilitate greater political and civic engagement, particularly for those who perceive that they have limited ability to participate and understand political affairs. This present findings indicate that it is the kind of political information youths receive online that determines their civic engagement. Thus, youth exposure to unverified political information will only increase their wrong perception about politics and subsequently discourage their involvement in politics.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that fake political news disseminated in social media platforms influence youth participation in politics in South-East, Nigeria. Majority of the youths rely on social media as a source of political news but do not bother to verify the quality of such news and their sources probably because it emanated from online sources known and related to them. Majority of the youths lack the literacy skill to detect fake political new. The fake political news

youths are exposed have contributed to the negative perception and general apathy towards political activities in Nigeria. The findings of this study confirm that youths' active involvement in real politics depends largely on the kind of political information they are exposed to in social media. If large portion of political news that gets to the youths from online platforms are fake, unverified and mostly biased, it will be difficult if not impossible to get their maximum support and corporation in political activities of their state. Since the social media platforms have numerous advantages, its role in determining the involvement of youths in politics cannot be neglected.

Recommendations

1. Social media platforms are viable tools for youth civic engagement. Thus, government, mainstream media and other authorized agencies should continue to utilize it in disseminating authentic and credible political news stories.
2. Government in collaboration with owners of social media sites such as whatsApp, face book, twitter should develop more fact checking apps capable of verifying the authenticity and credibility of online political news stories from short tweets, group hash tags, posts from unidentifiable sources, illogical political stories, make-believes, distorted reports and sensational headlines etc
3. Introduction of 'how to spot fake news' as a compulsory media education course (GS) in higher institutions where youths are taught on how to filter news stories, cross check facts and verify the quality of

political information before posting and reposting..

4. There should be information websites created and handled by non-partisan persons where youths can access correct political information.

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