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Digital Media and Political Participation among Nigerian Youths in the 2019 General Elections

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Research Article

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Abstract: Every era in life throws up its own opportunities and challenges, and here we are, in a digital era made possible by advancements in information and communication technologies. That being the case, it will amount to self-deceit for anybody in this era to pretend that the advancements in information and communication technologies do not have any effects on the political, social, cultural and religious lives of the people. At the political arena, the advent of digital media has brought about an entirely different type of politicking and campaigns referred to as digital political campaigns. This type of campaign permits politicians to reach out to the electorate through digital platforms without necessarily embarking on rallies. As a matter of truth, the technologies of those digital media and their resultant online platforms have not only bridged the communication gap between content-creators and content-consumers; but have even gone a long way in turning the communication process into a more interactive, participatory and democratic dialogue. Thus, the public communication sphere has been flung wide-open for public participation without restrictions. By the very nature of the digital media (interactive, participatory and democratic); it could be assumed that anybody with an internet-enabled device can become a partaker in the communication process. But such an assumption may forever remain conjecture until it is connected or experimented upon. To that end, this study investigated the use of digital media for political participation in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. It adopted the survey method of research to determine: (i) the most-frequently-used digital media for political participation of Nigerian youths in the 2019 elections (ii) the amount of time Nigerian youths spent on the digital media for political participation in the 2019 elections (iii) the number of times Nigerian youths visited the digital media for political participation in the 2019 elections (iv) the gratifications which Nigerian youths sought from the digital media and (v) the relationship between use of the digital media and political-needs gratification among Nigerian youths.

Keywords: Communication Technologies, Digital Media, Electioneering, Political Participation and Nigerian Youths

Introduction

There is no gain reiterating the fact that technological advancements have polarized the media world into old and new; conceding near-endless capabilities to the digital media. With such awesome attributes of interactivity, inter-connecting, instant messaging, etc.; the digital media have radically transformed man's mode of communication. Thus, in contemporary media lexicon, we are inundated with such terms as: FaceBook, Youtube, Twitter, WhatsApp and a variety of other digital platforms that allow user-generated content to be freely disseminated.

Such technological innovations have not only succeeded in eliminating the traditional gate- keeping and agenda-setting monopoly of the conventional media but have injected and popularized the concept of 'presume' in the communication arena. According to Ballard (2011, p.13), the term prosumer is used to refer to someone who takes charge of the production and distribution of contents. Whether you call them New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT's), New Communication Technologies (NCT's) or Information and Communication Technologies (ICT's), etc; the undeniable fact remains that they are simply those gadgets, hardware, equipment, or facilities that have modernized, improved and eased exchange of communication between and among different categories of people from different geographical locations (Akpoveta 2014, p.62). They are described by (Nwosu 2003, p.5) as the hardware adopted in ensuring instantaneous dissemination of information and social values across the globe.

Those digital media which emerged in the latter part of the 20th century have increased communication between and among people all over the world. They did and have continued to facilitate this through blogs, Facebook, Twitter, 2go, youtube, websites, WhatsApp and other user-generated platforms. They help the people to have quick access to any information they desire anytime, anywhere on any digital device; thereby democratizing of the communication process. Thus, digital media have no doubt utterly altered the way journalism is practiced across the globe. For instance, news, the major ingredient of journalism, is no longer gathered and disseminated exclusively by reporters, but now a product of an ecosystem in which journalists, sources, readers and viewers exchange information (Pew Research Centre 2013). Consequently, Heinrich 2008 cited in Akpoveta (2014, p.66), submits that the need for this collaboration(i.e. among journalists, sources, readers and viewers) gives credence and authenticity to news and information; as any of the parties can now afford to post comments, pictures, videos, texts, etc. to any platform of his/her choice courtesy of the digital media.

The digital media as earlier pointed out, possess some unique attributes that fasten, cheapen, strengthen and democratize the communication process. Ruggiero cited in Izuogu, Nwachukwu, and Ugwu (2017, p.20) identifies those unique attributes as interactivity, demassification and asynchroneity. According to him, interactivity means user's ability to switch, as well as regulate contents and other forms which enable reciprocal information-gathering and exchange. Demassification on the other hand, is the ability of the user to select from a wide menu; whereas asynchroneity is a term used to describe a user's ability to assess media message at any time, as opposed to the conventional pattern of assessing media messages at a particular time.

Already, research findings in Nigeria point to the fact that there are more student users of these new media platforms than any other user group, and that users spend a large chunk of their time surfing the net. Heiberger and Harper 2008; Idakwo 2011; Akpan, Akaowo and Senam 2013). No doubt, the advent and subsequent proliferation of those digital platforms have indeed aroused the consciousness among all classes of people in Nigeria. But the basic concern of this research is to among other things, find out the gratifications which Nigerian youths sought from the digital media in the 2019 elections and how such gratifications robbed-off on the electoral process.

Statement of the Problem

There is abundant evidence that youths are the most avid users of digital media. It is also not in contention that this class of people, the majority of who are University students, represents a substantial part of the civil populace in Nigeria. However, there are conflicting accounts on the use of digital media for political participation. For example, Adeyanju and Haruna (2011) averred that digital media played a huge role in instigating and fuelling violence in the 2011elections. Similarly, Okoro and Nwafor (2013) found that digital media were used to attack opponents, spread false rumours, digitally-manipulate images among other ills. On the other hand, Izuogu, Nwachukwu and Ugwu (2007) declared that the various digital media served as veritable instruments of information-gathering, voter education, election monitoring, political mobilization etc. Against the background of the above conflicting research findings, the current study is intended to investigate how digital media were used by Nigerian youths for political participation in the 2019 elections.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study include to:

1.   determine the most-frequently used digital media for political participation of Nigerian youths in the 2019 elections
2.   the amount of time Nigerian youths spent on the digital media for political participation in the 2019 elections
3.   the number of times Nigerian youths visited the digital media for political participation in the 2019 elections
4.   the gratifications sought by Nigerian youths from the digital media for political participation in the 2019 elections
5.   whether there is any significant relationship between the use of digital media and political needs-gratification of Nigerian youths in the 2019 elections

Review of Literature

A couple of studies had been conducted on the various ways people make use of digital media platforms. For instance, Idakwo cited in (Eze 2016, p.5) investigated the use of Facebook among Nigerian youths. Using the survey method of research, the study found out that 74% of the students sampled, admitted using Facebook as an alternative to other kinds of communication channels. That survey also showed that youngsters between the ages of 16-30 spend a lot of man-hours on the digital media platforms as alternative channels of information gathering and exchange among other things, the respondents also confirmed accessing the digital media platforms at least twice a day.

In their work on "understanding the implications of social media usage in electoral process and campaigns in Nigeria" Apuke and Tunca (2018) observed that digital media have turned into one of the fundamental platforms for political participation in Africa; arguing that they (digital media) are effectively outstanding for political campaigns. To corroborate the above finding, Abubakar (2012) who investigated the place of social media in enhancing citizen's political participation in Nigeria during the 2011presidential electioneering found that with the aid of social media; the political sphere was broadened to allow more people to participate in the political discourse which for a long time, had been dominated by the conventional media. The digital media provided politicians and the citizens the platforms to share their views which invariably influenced voters' decisions, policy initiation and implementation. This is harmonious with the findings of Smyth and Best (2013) who declared that in the 2011 general elections; social media helped to overcome the previous scarcity of information witnessed during electoral processes, and that the use of social media increased transparency in the electoral process, thereby reducing tension.

Down the line, there had been phenomenal growth in the use of digital media for political participation in Nigeria. For instance, in the 2015 general elections, Facebook was used as a platform for political campaign organization, electioneering crusades, ideological trumpeting and mobilization of voters. This assertion is supported by Suntai and Tergema (2017) who found increased citizens participation in the referenced electoral process and pointed out that even during the voting process that Facebook and WhatsApp were inundated with pictures and videos of party agents arrested for vote-buying and other electoral offences such as underage voting which prompted immediate action by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). In a similar vein, Oseni (2015) reiterated that during the collation of results; citizen journalists and civil society organisations used social media to inform to inform the public as regards the results in several states across the country. To that end, Udoka (2015) declared "the 2015 election was decided, dominated and directed by social media because they played a central role as a watchdog".

In a related study, Okolo, Ugonna, Nebo and Obikeze (2017) found that there is a significant positive relationship between usage of Facebook as an awareness social media tool and projection of political candidate's image, suggesting that social media serve as creditable tools, and are capable of influencing the image of political candidates in Nigeria. What that means is that political candidates should carefully plan and execute communication strategies using various media tools so as to fully enjoy the inherent benefits of social media tools such as credibility and awareness. In keeping with that notion, Emetumah

(2016) declared that the role of social media in the Nigerian 2015 elections was inevitable because it was deployed to shape the opinions of many youths and increase their political awareness and consciousness.

In a study entitled "Social networking sites usage and social attitudes towards social behaviour in Northern Nigerian Universities"; Suleiman (2011) found out heavy usage of social networking sites among the respondents, with FaceBook topping the chart. Akpan, Akwaowo and Senam (2013, p.353) in their assessment of the uses and gratifications of social networking websites among youths in Uyo, the capital city of Akwa-Ibmo State, Nigeria; found out that youths in the area are active users of social networking websites and that they accessed the websites for various purposes and gratifications which included information gathering and exchange.

In his study on "social media culture among Nigeria youth: Uses and gratifications perspective; Odii (2014) found out that 79% of Nigerian youth use social media more than any other group in the country. Furthermore, the study found out that a total of 1325 respondents, representing 73% of the sample, attested to the fact that Facebook is the most popular of all the other social media platforms. There is this other finding of the study which indicates that Nigerian youth use the social media to satisfy various needs.

Also, Coyle and Vaughn (2008) carried out a research on how students in American College Campuses engage in social networking. Their study showed that about one-third of the people surveyed (37%) indicated that they have one social networking account, 53% has two accounts, whereas 9% reported having three accounts. The study equally showed that the respondents visited the various accounts about three times per day for social, economic and other reasons. This finding of Coyle and Vuaghn is consistent with that of Izuogu, Okpara and Ubani (2020) which observed that Nigerian youths not only have an average of three social media platforms; but spend a lot of man hours on those platforms

Theoretical Framework

This investigation is anchored on the Uses and Gratification theory which was posited by the trio of Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in the year 1974. The theory emphasizes communicators' motivations for the choice of mass media and their contents (Izuogu, Nwachukwu and Ugwu 2017, p.210). According to Folarin (2005, p.91), the theory perceives the recipient as actively influencing the effect process, given that he/she selectively chooses, attends to, perceives and retains media messages on the bases of his/her needs, beliefs etc. Invariably, the theory could be said to have shifted focus from media production and transmission functions to the media consumption function. Thus, instead of asking the question of the kind of effects that occur under given conditions; it ratter questions "who uses which contents from which media, under which conditions and for what reason?"

The truth of the matter is that the Uses and Gratification theory presupposes that consumers of media messages are naturally discriminatory in their approach to media selection and application because they select and use only those media that can guarantee the satisfaction of their communication needs. Just like every other theory, the Uses and Gratification equally has its own shortcomings. For instance, McQuail (2005) cited in Izuogu, Nwachukwu and Ugwu (2017, p.210) had rightly argued that the theory has not provided much successful prediction or causal explanation of media choice and use. In the case

under reference, McQuail submitted that much of mass media use is circumstantial and weakly motivated. He went further to argue that the approach (Uses and Gratification) appear to work best in examining specific types of media where motivation might be presented.

Secondly, it is hard to keep track of exposure to a pattern through observation, thus, the theory relies on self-reports, which in themselves are products of personal memory that can be problematic. The argument, in this case, is that such respondents might inaccurately recall how they behave in media use, and as such distortion might occur in the study (Katz, Blumber and Gurevitch 1974).

Be that as it may, the fact remains that in so far as the media could be said not to be all-powerful; they certainly have some influence on their consumer. Obviously, the digital media platforms are today re-echoing the relevance of the Uses and Gratification theory in contemporary media research; as they provide answers to the questions of "who uses which content from which media, under which conditions and for what reason"?

Method of Study

The research made use of the survey method to do a quantitative and qualitative analyses of the subject matter. The chosen method of research was considered most appropriate going by the postulation of Creswell (2009), who argues that a researcher can begin a given study with either the qualitative or quantitative method, then determine an appropriate stage to inject the other method. Similarly, Padgett (2012 p.191) opines that studies using a qualitative approach might sometimes introduce quantitative aspects in their data analysis. For example, qualitative research may apply a quantitative aspect to indicate "the number of participants associated with" the different themes of the study. Thus, whereas the qualitative approach was the main method used in structuring the study and gathering data on the way and manner Nigerian youths used the digital media for political participation in the 2019 elections; the quantitative method was introduced in the data analysis segment of the research, in order to quantify some of the responses.

The study population comprises all undergraduate students of Abia State University-Uturu and University of Nigeria Nsukka, while the target population is one thousand, five hundred and thirty two (1,532) students of the departments of Mass Communication of the two Universities for the 2017/2018 academic session, purposively selected on the basis of ownership and years of existence. While the first University could be considered a second-generation University and is owned by Abia State government; the second one is a first-generation University which is owned by the Federal Government of Nigeria.

The choice of purposive sampling, in this case, is predicated on Lindlof and Taylor's (2011, p.110) sentiment which says that "most qualitative researchers choose to engage in purposive sampling". In other words, qualitative researchers are in the habit of making informed judgments about "what to observe or whom to interview". Considering the differences in the number of students admitted into the chosen Universities and departments for the 2017/2018 academic session which stood at: 965 students for Abia State University's Department of Mass Communication and 567 students for its University of Nigeria Nsukka, counterpart. Afterwards, the Finite Population Correction Factor (FPC) was employed to proportionately allocate samples. Consequently, the Department of Mass Communication, Abia State

University Uturu got 194 respondents while University of Nigeria Nsukka had 114 respondents. Therefore, the sample size for this study stands at 308 respondents.

Data presentation and Analysis

The data generated from the respondents of this study are presented in pie-charts. Out of the 308 copies of the questionnaire administered on the respondents; 288 copies were returned in usable form while 20 were not recovered. Thus, we have 96% return rate of the research instrument and 4% of mortality rate. Such a returned rate is considered adequate enough to represent the population of the study. Invariably, our data presentation and analysis shall be based on 288 copies of the questionnaire returned and found usable.

Fig. 1: Pie chart for responses on the most-frequently used digital media for political participation of Nigerian youths in the 2019 elections
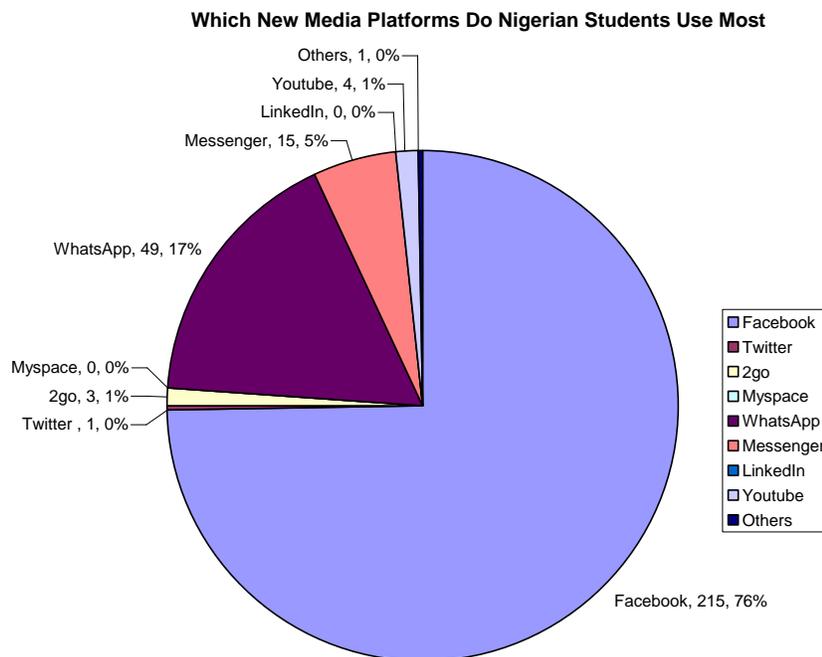

Which New Media Platforms Do Nigerian Students Use Most

Figure1above presents responses on the most frequently used digital media for the political participation of Nigerian youths in the 2019 elections. Out of the 288 questionnaire returned in usable form, 215, that is 70% of the sample of the study attested to using Facebook most frequently. 49 respondents representing 17% of the sample of the study indicated that they used WhatsApp most frequently, while 15 respondents which translates to 5% of the sample of the study professed using the Messenger most frequently. YouTube had 4 respondents = 1%, 2go had 3 respondents = 1% while Twitter and "others" which means other digital media platforms not specified in the questionnaire had 1 respondent respectively which amounts to 0% of the sample of the study. As for the digital media platforms of Myspace and LinkedIn, none of the respondents, that i.e. 0% respectively attested to using them.

Fig. 2: Pie chart for responses on the amount of time Nigerian youths spent on the digital media for political participation in the 2019 election

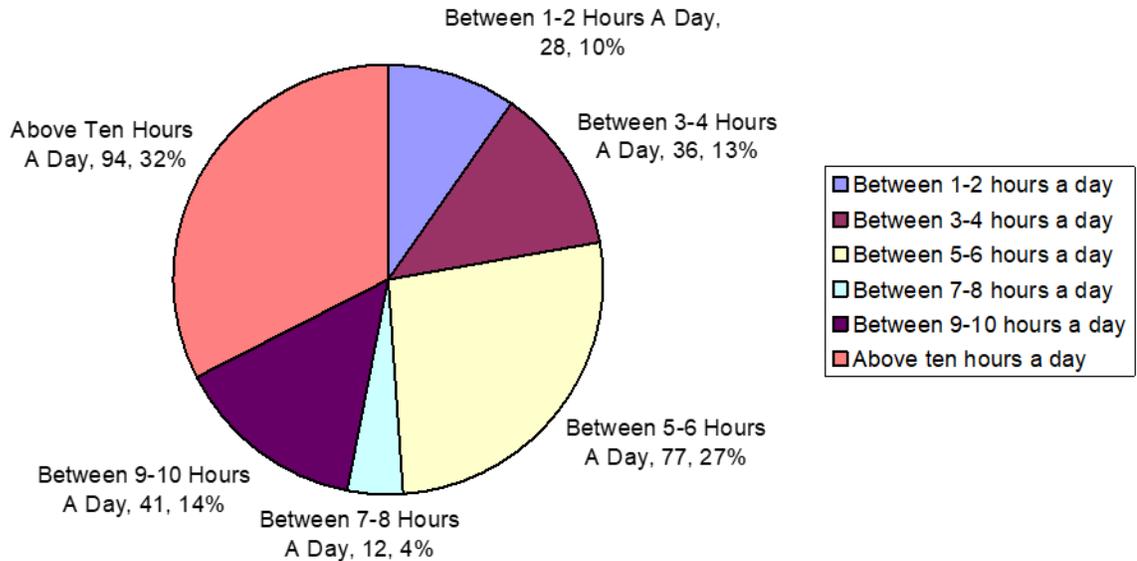**How Much Time Do Nigerian Students Spend On The New Media Platforms.**

Figure 2 presents responses on the amount of time Nigerian youths spent on the digital media for political participation in the 2019 elections. Out of the 288 respondents, 94 which represents 32% of the sample of the study submitted that they spent above ten hours a day on the digital media platforms. 77 respondents which translate to 27% of the study sample agreed that they spent between 5-6 hours a day on the digital media platforms. Those who spent between 9-10 hours a day were found to be 41 in number, which translates to 14% of the sample of the study. Those in the category that spent between 3-4 hours a day numbered 36 persons, which constitutes 13% of the sample of the study. Respondents who spent 1-2 a day on the digital media platforms were found to be 28 in number, which is equal to 10% of the sample of the study. Those that spent between 7-8 hours a day on the digital media platforms amounted to 12 respondents, which represents 4% of the sample of the study.

Fig. 3: Pie chart for responses on the number of times Nigerian youths visited the digital media for political participation in the 2019 elections.

How Often Nigerian Students Visit The New Media Platforms.
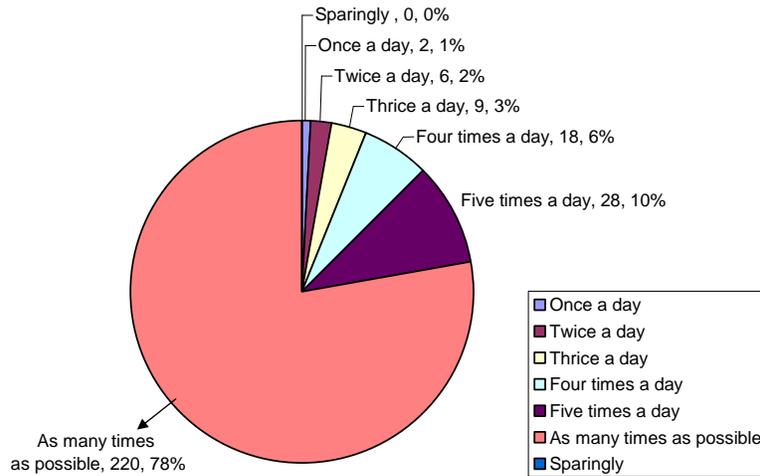
As indicated in figure 3 for responses on the number of times Nigerian youths visited the digital media platforms for political participation in the 2019 elections; it is evident that 220 out of 228 respondents, representing 78% of the sample of the study affirmed visiting the digital media platforms as many times as possible. Those who visited the digital media platforms five times in a day numbered 28 which accounts for 10% of the sample of the study. In the category of those who visited the digital media platforms four times in a day, there are 18 respondents, which represents 6% of the sample of the study. Down the line, those respondents who indicated visiting the digital media platforms thrice a day were 9 in number = 3%, those who visited twice a day were 6 = 2%, those who visited once a day were 2 = 1% of the sample of the study; whereas none of the respondents = 0% subscribed to the 'sparingly' option.

Fig. 4: Pie chart for responses on the gratifications Nigerian youths sought from the digital media during the 2019 elections.
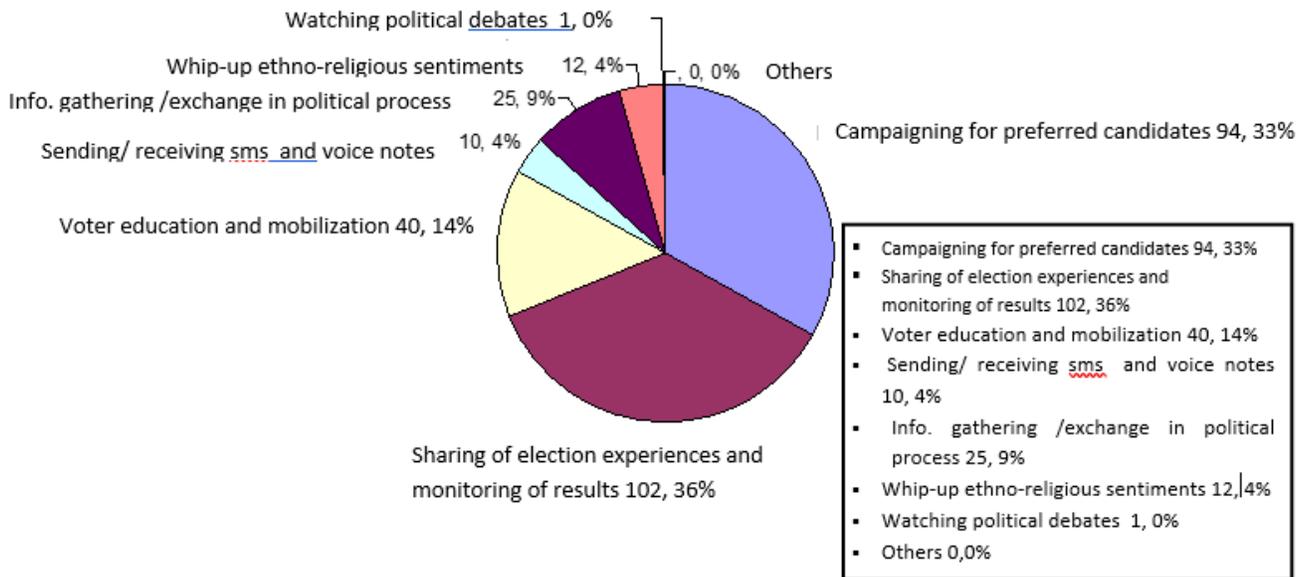
The information on figure 4 shows responses on the gratifications which Nigerian youths sought from the digital media platforms during the 2019 elections. Out of the 288 respondents; 102 representing 36% of the sample of the study signified that the gratification they sought from the digital media platforms was to share election experiences and monitor results. Secondly, 94 respondents representing 33% of the sample of the study confirmed campaigning for preferred candidates as the gratification they sought from the digital media platforms during the 2019 elections. Voter education/mobilization got 14% of the sample of the study, having been ticked by 40 respondents. Information-gathering and exchange in the political process ranked fourth in the gratifications which Nigerian youths sought from the digital media platforms during the 2019 elections as there were 25 respondents in that category which represents 9% of the sample of the study. The gratification of whipping-up ethno-religious sentiments was ticked by 12 respondents which represent 4% of the study sample, while that of sending/receiving bulk sms and voice notes got the nod of 10 respondents which translates to 4% of the sample of the study. As for the gratification of watching political debates, only 1 respondent subscribed to that; whereas none of the respondents subscribed to the "others" option.

Test of hypothesis

Ho: There is no significant relationship between the use of the digital media and political needs-gratification of Nigerian youths in the 2019 elections.

Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Gratifications_Sought	38.5000	23.86270	8
Digital_Media	55.0000	23.56753	8

Correlations

		Gratifications_Sought	Digital_Media
Pearson Correlation	Gratifications_Sought	1.000	.800
	Digital_Media	.800	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	Gratifications_Sought	.	.009
	Digital_Media	.009	.
N	Gratifications_Sought	8	8
	Digital_Media	8	8

a. Dependent Variable: Gratifications_Sought

b. All requested variables entered.

Model Summaryb

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.800ᵃ	.639	.579	15.47663	2.037

ANOVA[a]

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Regression	2548.844	1	2548.844	10.641	.017[b]
1	Residual	1437.156	6	239.526		
	Total	3986.000	7			

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	Correlations	
		B	Std. Error	Beta			Zero-order	Partial
1	(Constant)	-6.032	14.707		-.410	.696		
	Digital_Media	.810	.248	.800	3.262	.017	.800	.800

Coefficients[a]

Model		Correlations
		Part
1	(Constant)	
	Digital_Media	.800

a. Dependent Variable: Gratifications_Sought

From the above data analysis, the Mean and Std. Deviation for Gratifications_Sought by Nigerian youths during the 2019 elections are 38.50 and 23.86; while the Digital_Media had 55.00 and 23.57.

The Correlation coefficient is 0.80 while the correlation coefficient of determination is 63.9%. The autocorrelation is 2.037. In the analysis of variance table, the sums of squares due to regression, residual and total are 2548.84, 1437.16 and 3986.00 while the mean square for total regression and residual are 2548.84 and 239.53 respectively. The F-ratio is 10.64 with a P-value of 0.017 less than 0.05.

The Unstandardized Coefficients B is -6.032 for the constant while 0.810 for the Digital Media with a Std. Error of 14.707 and 0.248 respectively. The Standardized Coefficients Beta is 0.800, with a youthnized test of -0.410 for the constant and 3.262 for the Digital Media. The Digital Media is significant at 0.017, while the constant is not significant, since the value is 0.696. Therefore, since the P-value is 0.017 less than 0.05, we rejected the Null hypothesis and conclude that, there is significant relationship between use of the Digital Media Platforms and Political needs Gratification of Nigerian youths.

Discussion of Findings

Going by data made available in this research, Facebook was found to be the most-frequently used digital media platform by Nigerian youths. It topped the list by scoring 76% of the sample of the study. This finding is a confirmation of that of (Odii, 2014) which found that 73% of the respondents of that study attested to Facebook as the most popular of all the other digital media platforms. Way behind Facebook are the WhatsApp and Messenger which got 17% and 5% respectively.

The study further found out that Nigerian youths spent a lot of man hours on the digital media platforms during the 2019 elections. For instance, 32% of the respondents attested to spending above 10 hours a day, 27% indicated that they spent 5-6 hours a day, while 14% of the sample of the study said they spent 9-10 hours a day on the digital media platforms. Again, this finding of the study corroborates the finding of Idakwo cited in (Eze 2016, p.5) which shows that youngsters between the ages of 16-30 spend a lot of man hours on the new media platforms. The implication of the above finding is that Nigerian youths participated actively in the 2019 elections by devoting quality time to the use of digital media for political needs gratification.

Available data in this study also show that a greater percentage of the respondents, precisely 78% attested to visiting the digital media platforms as many times as possible. This finding lends credence to that of Akpan, Akwaowo and Senam (2013, p.353) which showed that youths in Uyo, the capital city of Akwa-Ibom state Nigeria are active users of social networking web-sites.

On the question of what gratifications Nigerian youths sought from the digital media platforms during the 2019 elections, it was found that "sharing of election experiences and monitoring of results" topped the list with 36% of the sample of the study. Another significant percentage of the sample of the study, precisely 33% confirmed campaigning for preferred candidates as the gratification which Nigerian youths sought from the new media platforms during the 2019 elections. The implication of this finding is that Nigerian youths used the digital media platforms for various political needs-gratification; ranging from: sharing of election experiences and monitoring of results, voter education/mobilisation, campaigning for preferred candidates, gathering and exchange of political information, sending/ receiving sms and voice notes, whipping-up ethno/religious sentiments etc. These numerous gratifications which Nigerian youths sought from the digital media platforms during the 2019 elections in Nigeria attest to the relevance of the consumption nature of the Uses and Gratification theory in political communication circles.

Summary and Conclusion

This study examined the use of digital media platforms for political participation among Nigerian youths in the 2019 elections vis a viz the most frequently used platform, amount of time spent on the platforms, number of times visited and gratifications sought from the platforms. It then tested the null hypothesis which says "there is no significant relationship between use of the digital media platforms and political needs gratification of Nigerian youths. Consequent upon the findings of this research which had been discussed earlier, the researchers concluded that Nigerian youths used the digital media platforms for a variety of political needs gratification of which sharing of election experiences and monitoring of results were topmost on their preference list. We also concluded that Nigerian youths actively participated in the 2019 elections. This assertion is evident in the amount of time used in the digital media platforms and the gratifications sought therefrom. The study also concluded that there is a significant relationship between the use of the digital media platforms and the political needs gratification of Nigerian youths during the 2019 elections.

Recommendations

1. Nigerian youths should endeavor to explore and expand the use of such other digital media platforms like WhatsApp and Messenger. This recommendation for wider exploration and expansion will no doubt create room for more grassroots participation in the electoral process as well as cause communication to be are more interactional and interpersonal.

2. Whereas the amount of time spent on the digital media platforms by Nigerian youths could be said to be adequate, it is seriously recommended that such volume of time had better been largely devoted to voter education/mobilization than on monitoring of results. This recommendation is in recognition of the fact that it is not the primary duty of the youths to monitor election results. In fact, what is expected of the youths is to be adequately armed with quality information that will enable them take the right electoral decisions.

3. Even though the frequency of visits of Nigerian youths to the digital media platforms during the 2019 elections could be adjudged reasonable, it is hereby recommended that such frequency be improved upon in subsequent election in the country.

4. We recommend that Nigerian youths should avoid using the digital media platforms to perpetuate electoral crimes such as, whipping up ethno/religious sentiments, manipulation of messages etc. during elections.

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