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Incidental news exposure and political behaviour among young social media users in Nigeria

ABSTRACT

The explosion of social media is widely believed to have invigorated incidental exposure to news content, transforming how users in the present digital dispensation encounter and consume news. Consequently, scholars have examined the determinants of incidental news exposure and its consequences on different political outcomes among social media users, with studies reaching divergent conclusions. However, intellectual diagnosis into the rebranded concept of incidental news exposure has predominantly been concentrated in advanced, western democracies, hence having research conducted in settings other than advanced democracies is essential to cross-culturally generalize the resurged concept and consequences of incidental news exposure. Thus, this study investigates the factors that animate incidental news exposure and the corresponding effects on online and offline political participation among social media users between the ages of 18 and

KEYWORDS

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35 in Nigeria. The network sampling method was used to sample a total of 387 respondents who chiefly use social media routinely. The study found that generic social media use, social media use for news and political interest are significantly correlated with incidental news exposure among respondents. While incidental news exposure was a positive and significant predictor of online political participation, it did not correlate with offline political participation among respondents. We conclude that incidental news exposure contributes to aspects of political outcomes among social media users and recommend the need for further studies on this phenomenon as well as the introduction of political education to assist political enculturation of the youths within the Nigerian democratic space due to its strategic role on Africa's political emancipation.

INTRODUCTION

Digital media have exerted fundamental transformations on political communication (Kasmani 2022). Among these multifaceted alterations is the way users consume news (Newman et al. 2012; Freeman 2013). The popularity and centrality of social media to news consumption in the current digital era have accentuated incidental news exposure among users (Bode 2016). Due to the ubiquity of social networking sites, which allows for the accommodation of divergent content, social media users can encounter news without actively searching for it (Trilling and Schoenbach 2013). While incidental news exposure pre-dates the current digital era (Downs 1957), this epoch has magnified the ways users encounter news with differential consequences on political outcomes like never experienced before (Kim et al. 2013; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016; Yamamoto and Morey 2019). Before the emergence of digital networks as an indispensable part of daily life, political knowledge and political participation were facilitated due to incidental news exposure among users in the 'low choice' media environment (Prior 2007). At the outset of the improved media forms that featured numerous content choices, the effect of incidental news exposure on political participation was considered strong only among users who are disinterested in politics (Prior 2005, 2007). This conclusion was, however, drawn at a time when the internet and its appendages were in their infancy. The proliferation of social media is reported to have animated a scholastic resurgence in incidental news exposure (Fletcher and Nielsen 2018).

Due to the vast amount of information that is available online, individuals have largely become passive in seeking news (Trilling and Schoenbach 2013; Barthel and Shearer 2015) as online users depend on their social networks to keep them informed based on what they like, share or recommend (Doctor 2010; Yadamsuren and Erdelez 2010). Emanating from the convenient and easy-to-use tools of digital networks, online news sites, as well as social networking sites, enhance the recommendation and distribution of news content among various young network users, thus influencing users who are actively engaging in such sharing activities and those incidentally exposed to the shared content (Karnowski et al. 2017). There is unanimity among scholars that incidental news exposure is a typical way that young adults consume news on social media (Yadamsuren and Erdelez 2017; Ahmadi and Wohn 2018; Boczkowski et al. 2018), due to their abstention from active exposure to news (Blekesaune et al. 2012; Sveningsson 2015). Hence, the capacity of citizens who do not actively engage with news content to participate in politics has been questioned (Prior 2007).

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The current state of the internet, including search engines, social networking sites and microblogs like Twitter/X, suggests that random encounters with news articles can play a crucial role in informing individuals about politics and public affairs. This type of exposure can potentially impact users' political engagement and participation (Kim et al. 2013). Hence, a sea of studies has examined the contributory utility of incidental news exposure to political knowledge and political participation, predominantly establishing positive, significant effects (Tewksbury et al. 2001; Kim et al. 2013; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016; Lee and Kim 2017; Oeldorf-Hirsch 2018; Yamamoto and Morey 2019). With studies raising concerns regarding the potential of citizens who do not actively seek information to participate in the political process (e.g. Brundidge and Rice 2009; Rittenberg et al. 2012), the modest contributions of incidental news exposure to political participation partly allay these concerns. Being a re-emerging phenomenon, however, scholars have called for further investigations into the nature of the political consequences of incidental news exposure (Yadamsuren and Erdelez 2017).

While a plethora of studies have hearkened to this call, these studies have predominantly been conducted in advanced democracies (Yadamsuren and Heinström 2011; Weeks et al. 2017; Bergström and Belfrage 2018; Feezell 2018; Goyanes 2020; Kümpel 2020; Kaiser et al. 2021; Thorson et al. 2021). Besides, most studies on incidental news exposure have focused on either the determinants of incidental news exposure (e.g. Goyanes 2020; Kümpel 2020; Thorson et al. 2021) or its impact on political knowledge and political participation (e.g. Kim et al. 2013; Tewksbury et al. 2001; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016). This study advances the frontiers of this phenomenon from a hybridized prism by investigating the factors that facilitate incidental news exposure and its corresponding impact on political participation to offer a developing democratic perspective to this important phenomenon from the Nigerian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media use, political interest and incidental news exposure

Social media have found acceptance around the world as people of diverse backgrounds use the platforms for different purposes (Kushin and Yamamoto 2010; Coleman 2011; Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Honwana 2012; Kim et al. 2013; Yang and DeHart 2016; Yu 2016). In 2015, for example, up to 87 per cent of the online population in the United States reported using at least one social networking site the previous week for divergent purposes, which include interpersonal utility, passing time, maintenance, virtual community, coolness, companionship, socializing, self-status, entertainment, convenience and relationship (Park et al. 2009; Ruggiero 2009; Newman et al. 2015). A reported 58.4 per cent of the world's population belongs to the class of active social media users (Chaffey 2022). Due to the ubiquity of social media and an avalanche of diverse content, individuals have largely become passive in seeking news (Barthel and Shearer 2015), facilitating incidental news exposure (Bode 2016; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018), leading users, particularly young people, who are less motivated to seek news, to rely to a large extent on the news that is socially curated and presented by their social media networks (Yadamsuren and Erdelez 2010).

Employing an explanatory mixed-method design by using qualitative data to build on quantitative results, Yadamsuren and Erdelez (2017) found that respondents were increasingly dependent on chanced encounter to news

to stay informed. Relying on the 2015 Reuters Institute Digital News Report survey, Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) found that people who use Facebook, YouTube and Twitter/X for non-news-related purposes get incidentally exposed to news items. According to Ahmadi and Wohn (2018), individuals who use social media for relaxation, entertainment and social interaction, among other non-news-related purposes, are likely to experience instances of incidental news exposure. Equally, Pew Research Center polls found that about 62% of Facebook users get news predominantly by chance while on the platform for non-news purposes (Gottfried and Shearer 2016). Further to this finding, a Pew Research survey also showed that only 39% of respondents consume news by actively seeking it out on social media, with the remaining 61% encountering news as a by-product of non-news-seeking intention (Mitchell et al. 2017). Similarly, Tewksbury et al. (2001) alluded to the possibility of users stumbling upon news when they are engaged in non-news activities online. Based on an in-depth interview, Boczkowski et al. (2018) reported that young Argentinians (aged 18–29) encountered news incidentally on social media while surfing for a different purpose, thus adding an extra layer to editorial gatekeeping.

While social media have led to an accidental encounter with news (Bode 2016), it has been suggested that active information-seeking and incidental news exposure are not mutually exclusive (Tewksbury et al. 2001). In a survey of respondents drawn from Italy, Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, Fletcher and Nielsen (2018) found that those who were incidentally exposed to news on social media were using different sources of online news. Similarly, Tewksbury et al. posited that ‘following the uses and gratifications approach, the goals people have for surfing the Web could impact incidental exposure. If people are looking for particular current events information, they are more likely to come across other news items’ (2001: 537). Correspondingly, it has been documented that there is a correlation between the frequency of clicking on news-related links on social media and incidental news exposure (Ahmadi and Wohn 2018). For example, Goyanes (2020) found that the more online users use social media to get news, the more likely they are to be incidentally exposed. Equally, Erdelez (2004) regards incidental exposure to be located in conscious information-seeking because while users consciously seek information about an issue, their chances of encountering other news items increase. This shows that incidental news exposure is accentuated by the conscious use of social media platforms for news purposes, particularly due to the contemporary increased reliance on digital platforms for news (Gottfried and Shearer 2016).

According to Gottfried and Shearer (2016), 44 per cent of adults in the United States get news from Facebook and 62 per cent of the adult population get news from various social media platforms. YouTube and Twitter/X, for instance, have become popular social networks for obtaining news in western countries and other parts of the world (Newman et al. 2015). Though these networks focused on user-generated content at their early stages of development, they now serve as ‘intermediaries’ between successful publishers and content consumers (Pew Research 2016; Nielsen and Ganter 2018). Consequently, the increasing dependence on social media for news is having displacement effects on other media platforms as sources of information (Bucholtz 2015; Mustapha and Mustapha 2017). As users in the current digital environment have been reported to be increasingly dependent on social media for news (Raynauld et al. 2016; Pew Research 2018), there is an increased

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possibility of incidental exposure to online news. Against this backdrop, we can formulate the following hypotheses:

H1a: Generic social media use is a significant predictor of incidental news exposure.

H1b: Social media use for news is a significant predictor of incidental news exposure.

Meanwhile, it has been stated that political interest is a key variable in predicting exposure to news content (Skovsgaard et al. 2016; Thorson et al. 2021). The potential of political interest to predict news consumption has grown because individuals with greater levels of political interest are increasingly likely to seek news more than individuals who are disinterested in politics (Prior 2005; Strömbäck et al. 2013; Lecheler and de Vreese 2017). Contemporary media ecology, characterized by a high-choice media environment, provides more media content choices than the low-choice broadcast era, making the impact of political interest in content selection to become an important factor (e.g. Bimber 2003; Prior 2007; Aelst et al. 2017; Xenos and Moy 2007). Hence, a gamut of studies has argued that citizens who are interested in politics have the potential to actively search out news content on digital platforms (Prior 2005, 2007; Rittenberg et al. 2012). Consequently, it has been suggested that political interest not only predicts users' active engagement with news but also determines incidental exposure, which shows that individuals who are interested in politics are likely to be incidentally exposed to news content on social media (Kümpel 2020). Against this backdrop, we formulate the following hypotheses:

H2a: Political interest is a significant predictor of social media use for news.

H2b: Political interest is a significant predictor of incidental news exposure.

Incidental news exposure and political participation

Several decades ago, Downs (1957) stated that there is a connection between incidental news exposure and political knowledge. Often cited as the seminal work on the phenomenon of incidental news exposure, the study focussed on chanced encounters with news in traditional media (Downs 1957). Subsequently, Tewksbury et al. (2001) empirically tested the effects of incidental news exposure on political knowledge with a focus on new media. Using a longitudinal research design, the authors tested the effects of incidental online news exposure on political knowledge in 1996 and 1998 in the United States. Data collected in 1996 showed a negative relationship between incidental news exposure and political knowledge. Conversely, data collected in 1998 found a positive relationship between incidental exposure to online news and political knowledge. This motivated further empirical investigations into the contributions of incidental news exposure to political knowledge and political participation in the expanding landscape of divergent media and contents.

A substantial body of studies in Euro-American regions as well as in developing democracies has documented interesting findings on the association between incidental news exposure and varieties of political behaviours. For example, Kim et al. (2013) conducted an online survey of US adults which examined the nexus between incidental news exposure, relative entertainment use and political participation. The authors found that while there is a significant and positive relationship between incidental news exposure and online/offline political participation, relative entertainment use was negatively

associated with online and offline political participation. Similarly, Valeriani and Vaccari (2016) conducted three online surveys comprising German, Italian and British internet users after the 2014 European parliament elections. The study found that chanced encounter with political news on social media was positively and significantly related to online political participation in all three countries, particularly in Germany where total levels of participation were lower. The relationship between incidental news exposure and political participation was, however, weak among British and Italian users. The study also found that interest in politics did not moderate this relationship, in that the correlation was more potent among the less interested than among those with high interest in politics. However, incidental news exposure was found to mediate the impact of entertainment preference on political participation among young Nigerians (Mande et al. 2022).

Furthermore, Lee and Kim (2017) conducted two studies among US adults which examined the relationship between incidental news exposure and individual learning about politics. Based on an experimental design, study 1 found a positive relationship between incidental news exposure and political knowledge. Relying on a national survey, study 2 found that heterogeneous social media networks and the level of weak ties were positively related to the likelihood of incidental exposure to online news. Correspondingly, Oeldorf-Hirsch (2018) conducted an online survey of internet users in the United States which examined the relationship between active and incidental news exposure on Twitter/X and Facebook, participation in shared news content, cognitive elaboration and political knowledge. Findings showed that both active and incidental news exposure on Facebook and Twitter/X were linked to political engagements.

Exposure to political information shared by friends on Facebook was reported to influence users' political participation (Tang and Lee 2013). Based on an analysis of two-wave panel data collected before the 2016 US presidential election, Yamamoto and Morey (2019) found that incidental news exposure on social media is correlated with increases in offline and online political participation through online political information-seeking and online political expression in serial. Conversely, the study found that incidental news exposure has a direct negative relationship with offline and online political participation. Moreover, some scholars have argued that intentional processing of incidentally encountered content (second-level incidental news exposure) has stronger effects on political outcomes than passive scanning of incidentally encountered political information (first-level incidental news exposure), equally demonstrating that the effects of incidental news exposure on political outcome variables are potent for individuals with high interest in politics (Heiss and Matthes 2019; Matthes et al. 2020; Nanz and Matthes 2022). Consequently, we can hypothesize that:

H3a: Incidental news exposure is a significant predictor of online political participation.

H3b: Incidental news exposure is a significant predictor of offline political participation.

METHODOLOGY

Data

We collected cross-sectional data through an online survey, characteristic of studies on incidental news exposure (Kim et al. 2013; Valeriani and Vaccari

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2016; Oeldorf-Hirsch 2018), between September and December 2021. Our study used a network sampling procedure, which is also known as chain referral (Babbie 2013), to reach active social media users between the ages of 18 and 35 in line with the definition of youth in the Federal Republic of Nigeria (National Youth Policy 2009). The link to the survey was advertised on various social media platforms and users were invited to complete the survey and share the link with their networks. Social media influencers were solicited to spread the link among their followers due to their large followership base. While over five hundred respondents completed the survey, we found only 387 suitable for our analysis, following the decision to circumscribe the study to those between the ages of 18 and 35. Youths were targeted because they have been identified to constitute up to 70 per cent of social media users in Nigeria (NOIPolls 2019), reminiscent of their potential to engage in politics due to online engagements (Mustapha and Omar 2020), as well as constituting the dominant population accidentally exposed to news on social media platforms (Yadamsuren and Erdelez 2017; Boczkowski et al. 2018; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018).

We included certain demographic variables in the study which served as control variables in the analysis based on the literature submission that gender, education and age often correlate with social media use and political participation (Barkan 2004; Hyun and Kim 2015). The age of respondents in this study ranged between 18 and 35, with 50.9% between the ages of 26 and 33. The majority of our respondents (60%) were males, while females constituted 40% of the study population. These closely reflected data on demographic profiles of social media users for our target population as reported by www.statista.com (2022), wherein female users between 18 and 35 years represented 42%, while their male counterparts accounted for 58%, even as young adults aged 25 and 34 years constituted the largest user base in the country (33.2%) followed by those aged 18 to 24 years (Dixon 2022a, 2022b). Meanwhile, a substantial number of participants reported having a bachelor's degree (53.5%), which was followed by respondents with a postgraduate degree (40.8%). The least academic qualification among respondents was high school (5.7%). We used SPSS version 25.0 to analyse the data. The reliability of constructs was tested using Cronbach's alpha coefficients. A series of hierarchical regressions were conducted to test the hypotheses advanced in the study.

Measures

Generic social media use. Respondents reported their generic social media use for purposes such as interpersonal utility, passing time, socializing, self-status and entertainment (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*) across five platforms: Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp and YouTube ($\alpha = 0.61$, $M = 4.24$, standard deviation [SD] = 1.06).

Social media use for news. Validated items measuring online political news use were adapted from previous research (Kaye and Johnson 2002). Four items measured this construct on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Respondents reported their level of agreement on social media use 'to get news and stay informed', 'to get news about public and government affairs', 'to get updates about public officials' and 'to stay informed and get news during elections' ($\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 4.02$, $SD = 1.04$).

Incidental news exposure. Incidental news exposure was measured based on previous studies (Tewksbury et al. 2001; Kim et al. 2013). On a seven-point

scale (1 = *never* to 7 = *always*), respondents reported how often they accidentally encountered news while online for a different purpose: via Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, Telegram, WhatsApp and YouTube ($\alpha = 0.71$, $M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.13$).

Political interest. We adapted four items from Banerjee and Chaudhuri (2016) to measure political interest on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Respondents reported their level of agreement with the following items: 'I am interested in politics', 'Politics means a lot to me', 'I am interested in how I am governed' and 'I enjoy keeping up with news on politics' ($\alpha = 0.86$, $M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.01$).

Online political participation. We adapted four items from previous research to measure this construct (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012) on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Respondents reported their agreement with the following items: 'I write to a politician on social media', 'I contribute to a political campaign on social media', 'I sign up to volunteer for a political campaign/issue online' and 'I contribute to political discussions online' ($\alpha = 0.84$, $M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.02$).

Offline political participation. We adapted six validated items from previous research to measure this construct (Holt et al. 2013) on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Respondents reported their agreement with the following items: 'I attend political meetings', 'I participate in political rallies', 'I persuade others to vote for a political party', 'I am a registered voter', 'I vote during elections' and 'I belong to a political party' ($\alpha = 0.80$, $M = 2.82$, $SD = 1.03$).

Control variables. We controlled for the effects of age (18–35), gender (male, 60%; female, 40%), and education (high school, 5.7%; bachelor's degree, 53.5%; postgraduate degree, 40.8%) across the board.

RESULTS

Social media use profile

From our study, WhatsApp ($M = 6.43$, $SD = 0.91$) and Facebook ($M = 4.60$, $SD = 1.77$) were the social media platforms that respondents predominantly used. These were followed by YouTube ($M = 4.36$, $SD = 1.64$), Instagram ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.97$) and Twitter/X ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 2.02$), while Telegram ($M = 3.09$, $SD = 1.68$) was the least used among respondents. Relatedly, data for the most used social media platforms in Nigeria for the third quarter of 2021 showed that WhatsApp was the most used platform (91.1%), followed by Facebook (86.4%), Instagram (77.9%) and Twitter/X (57.4%), while Telegram accounted for 50.3% (Sasu 2022). It is noteworthy that WhatsApp continues to be the most predominant social media platform, followed by Facebook. This is due to its extensive dependence on communication in both personal and professional settings. This aligns with other studies that reported WhatsApp as the most widely used social media platform (Ahmed et al. 2022). Understanding these usage patterns can guide media houses and business corporations to meet the growing demands of the youth.

Test of hypotheses

H1a predicted the association between generic social media use and incidental news exposure (Table 1). Consistent with *H1a*, using social media for general purposes was positively and significantly associated with incidental news

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exposure ($b = 0.21, p < 0.001$) among young social media users in Nigeria. Therefore, social media users are increasingly likely to be incidentally exposed to news items irrespective of the purpose(s) for surfing these platforms, hence supporting *H1a*. This result implies that social media platforms present itself as an essential medium of news dissemination, regardless of whether users actively seek news. Consequently, incidental news exposure boosts the chances of staying updated about current affairs. *H1b* posited that social media use for news is associated with incidental news exposure. We found support for *H1b* ($b = 0.32, p < 0.001$) with positive and significant effects of social media use for news on incidental news exposure among respondents. This finding suggests that individuals who intentionally search for news via social media platforms are not only encountering news they wish to read but inadvertently discovering other news stories. Thus, this notion corresponds with the existing views in the literature (e.g. Goyanes 2020; Tewksbury et al. 2001).

The second model of the regression analysis revealed a significant improvement in R^2 (11.5, $p < 0.001$), with the two models predicting a 13.8% variance in incidental news exposure among respondents. Gender was the only control variable that had positive and significant effects on incidental news exposure among respondents, with males more incidentally exposed to news than females ($b = 0.24, p < 0.05$). This result implies that the model is moderately effective in accounting for the variance in incidental news exposure, which indicates that, even though social media use is an essential factor, other predictors may also explain this phenomenon. The notable disparity between males and females reinforces a potential gap about how different genders engage with these platforms and come across the news. This finding is in contrast with Goyanes (2020) who found that females were more incidentally exposed to online news than males (Table 1).

H2a predicted a positive association between political interest and social media use for news. Consistent with *H2a*, political interest was positively and significantly associated with social media use for news ($b = 0.28, p < 0.001$). Therefore, social media users interested in politics are increasingly likely to seek news on various platforms, thus supporting *H2a* (Table 2). This implies that individuals with a stronger interest in politics habitually seek news content through social media platforms, employing it as a key information source. This result indicates that these platforms can act as an essential

Table 1: Regression predicting incidental news exposure.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Age	0.13*	0.06	0.07	0.05
Gender (female = 0; male = 1)	0.15	0.12	0.24*	0.11
Education	0.01	0.11	0.05	0.10
Generic social media use	4.04***	0.30	0.21***	0.05
Social media use for news	2.3***		0.32***	0.06
Constant			1.72***	0.43
R^2 (%)			13.8***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2: Regression predicting social media use for news and incidental news exposure.

Variables	Social media use for news				Incidental news exposure			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Age	0.02	0.04	0.00	0.04	0.13*	0.06	0.13*	0.05
Gender (female = 0; male = 1)	0.14	0.09	0.06	0.09	0.15	0.12	0.31*	0.13
Education	0.06	0.08	0.06	0.07	0.01	0.11	0.00	0.11
Political interest	4.05***	0.21	0.28***	0.04	4.04***	0.30	0.21***	0.06
Constant	1.1		2.76***	0.30	2.3*		3.06***	0.43
R ² (%)			9.3***				4.8***	

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

resource for politically engaged users to keep updated about public discourse. It should be noted that none of the control variables had effects on social media use for news. This means that factors such as age, gender, education or other demographic characteristics did not significantly influence whether individuals used social media to follow the news.

H2b held that political interest is associated with incidental news exposure. We found support for *H2b* ($b = 0.21$, $p < 0.001$) with positive and significant effects of political interest on incidental news exposure. Thus, people who are interested in politics are increasingly likely to encounter news they did not look for. The implication of this finding is that political interest significantly shapes how youth engage with news on these platforms, even passively. Youth who demonstrate a greater interest in politics are more apt to discover news unintentionally, as they surf these platforms for other purposes. Of the control variables, age had a positive, significant effect on incidental news exposure ($b = 0.13$, $p < 0.05$), likewise gender ($b = 0.31$, $p < 0.05$) with males more politically interested than women, reaffirming previous findings (Verba et al. 1997) (Table 2).

H3a predicted an association between incidental news exposure and online political participation among young social media users in Nigeria. The result of our regression analysis showed a statistically significant and positive relationship between incidental news exposure and online political participation ($b = 0.12$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, *H3a* was supported. This finding suggests that youth who are incidentally exposed to news on social media platforms are more likely to participate in online political activities such as sharing, commenting on political content or participating in online discussions about politics (Table 3).

The result revealed an improvement in R^2 (0.019, $p < 0.001$). Hence, the two models predicted 8.9 per cent variance in online political participation among respondents. Gender was the only positive and significant predictor of online political participation among the control variables ($b = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that the effects of incidental news exposure on online political participation are higher for males. *H3b* proposed an association between incidental news exposure and offline political participation. Conversely, data did not support *H3b* among respondents ($b = 0.06$, $p > 0.05$) (Table 3). However, gender was a positive and significant predictor of offline political participation ($b = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$). The insignificance of the impact of incidental news exposure on offline political participation implies that this

Table 3: Regression analysis predicting political participation.

Variables	Online political participation				Offline political participation			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE	<i>b</i>	SE
Age	−0.02	0.05	−0.09	0.05	0.07	0.04	0.07	0.04
Gender (female = 0; male = 1)	0.52***	0.10	0.54***	0.10	0.55***	0.09	0.56***	0.09
Education	0.15	0.09	0.15	0.09	0.05	0.08	0.04	0.08
Incidental news exposure	3.04***	0.25	0.12***	0.04	3.28***	0.22	0.06	0.03
Constant	7.0***		2.54***	0.30	10.8***		3.04***	0.27
<i>R</i> ² (%)			8.9***				11.4	

Note: **p* < 0.05; ***p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001.

variable does not inherently result in offline political participation, highlighting the possibility that other factors may shape online and offline political behaviours.

DISCUSSION

Major findings of our study show that generic social media use, social media use for news and political interest are facilitators of consequences of incidental news exposure on political participation among young Nigerians. This is consistent with extant literature establishing the causal association between chanced news encounters and political participation seen in advanced democracies (Erdelez 2004; Fletcher and Nielsen 2018; Goyanes 2020; Kümpel 2020). Consistent with Heiss and Matthes’s (2019) finding, political interest potentiates the association between incidental news exposure and political participation. While our study found significant effects of incidental news exposure on online political participation, it did not correlate with offline political participation against initial findings (Kim et al. 2013; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016). However, this is somewhat consistent with a previous finding wherein incidental news exposure on social media has negative effects on online and offline political participation (Yamamoto and Morey 2019).

The reason behind the negative correlation between incidental news exposure and offline political participation on the Nigerian democratic turf may be attributed to certain contextual reasons. A possible explanation, for instance, is that the youth in the contemporary Nigerian political milieu is just experiencing a political awakening following the domination of the media and political ecosystems by dynastic gerontocrats that have seized the nation’s political space by its jugular and created political apathy (Mustapha and Omar 2020). Limited offline political participation among Nigerian youth, even with incidental news encounters, may also derive from a deeply rooted mistrust of the political system. Moreover, the prevalent influence of social media has cultivated an inimitable online activism culture, where political engagement is more likely to occur online than through traditional platforms. This shift may unintentionally emphasize political passivity in offline spaces, as digital discourse alone is inadequate to foster impactful transformation within Nigeria’s political landscape. It is, however, envisaged that a transmogrification of online political activism to offline engagement such as voting, among others, is in the offing, exemplified by many hashtag movements, particularly

the #EndSARS protest, a revolutionary agitation against police brutality in Nigeria, that started on Twitter/X and took offline form through street protest of highest grotesqueness in the annals of Nigerian political protest (Dambo et al. 2022). The burgeoning involvement of young people in party politics, especially at a time when scholars are reporting a decline in political engagements among the youth population (Henn and Foard 2012; Holt et al. 2013), is also a better prognosis from the morphing of online participation into offline one.

Meanwhile, the findings of this study partly assuage fears that separation from the political world is detrimental to political participation (Putnam 2000; Prior 2005), as some scholars have stated that inattentiveness to politics leads to ignorance with an increased possibility of political manipulation (e.g. Fishkin 2009; Zaller 1991). Albeit some scholars have argued that active exposure to news (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012; Hargittai and Shaw 2013) is an indispensable requirement for cultivating an informed citizenry (Memoli 2011), which improves citizens' civic engagements. Remarkably, this study suggests that incidental exposure to news, even without deep engagement, could continue to promote civic participation by providing minimal awareness. While some scholars contend that disengagement from participation can make individuals more vulnerable to manipulation, others argue that even incidental exposure can improve fundamental political awareness. This is more important for an emerging democracy like Nigeria's, as young people could be drafted into the political spectrum through non-informational engagement on social media. Over time, young people have become disinterested in seeking political information, opting for entertainment-oriented programming, thereby advancing the contours of non-involvement in the electoral process in Africa's most populous democracy. This result implies that social platforms create opportunities for young people to interact with political issues, often via dialogues triggered by entertainment or viral media rather than traditional news platforms. Nevertheless, this approach can promote passive participation, causing young individuals to lean towards entertainment-related content instead of proactively seeking political insights. This phenomenon potentially constrains their influence in the electoral process, creating obstacles to democratic growth as the younger generation becomes increasingly detached from informed political engagement.

Furthermore, our study reaffirms the centrality of social media as sprouting platforms that encourage civic engagements (Gil de Zúñiga et al. 2012, 2014b; Valenzuela et al. 2012; Holt et al. 2013; Dimitrova et al. 2014). A panel study conducted by Dimitrova et al. (2014) contended that social media plays an essential role in promoting civic engagement, especially during elections. Through its dynamic features, these platforms facilitate political participation, making it easier for youth to connect and share opinions. This interaction supports both online and offline engagements, thus enhancing social media's role in fostering a politically active citizenry. While Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2014a) argue that social media use significantly fosters political consumerism behaviours such as boycotts, their findings indicate that political consumerism is more strongly linked to civic engagement than to political participation, with social media usage acting as a mediator between general internet use and political consumerism. Employing a four-wave panel study in the Swedish context, Holt et al. (2013) concluded that consistent use of social media by young citizens can act as a catalyst for motivating political engagement. While younger individuals are less engaged with political news from traditional

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media compared to older generations, they tend to use social media for political purposes more frequently.

The elitist domination of traditional media, which marginalizes divergent viewpoints and facilitates the dissemination of negative political content, has been reported to foster political apathy and limit democratic advancement (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; McChesney 1999; Herman and Chomsky 2002). Within the Nigerian democratic turf, it has equally been reported that young people's discontent with political involvement stems from the elitist domination of mainstream media (Mustapha and Omar 2020). They argue that social media has provided a vital alternative for Nigerian youth marginalized by elite control of mainstream media, allowing them a space for political expression and activism. This shift reflects young people's move towards online civic engagement due to political alienation in traditional media channels dominated by older, entrenched political figures. Social media, therefore, provide alternative avenues for citizens to engage with diverse content and civic life, further affirming the transformations of the political space by social media. With young people constituting the dominant demographic group of online users in Nigeria (Mustapha et al. 2019), social media, with their expressive, performative and collaborative features, portend good omens for revitalizing political participation among young Nigerians (Östman 2012). This implies that social platforms act as an alternative for the youth to mobilize, discuss and voice grievances, which might not find representation in mainstream outlets. This redefines youth engagement in an age-based power structure where social media democratizes political participation by circumventing elitist gatekeeping.

CONCLUSION

Based on the availability of diverse content on social media, which leads to unrestrained exposure to news in an accidental manner (Ahmadi and Wohn 2018), we investigated how differential uses of social media and political interest vitalize the association between incidental news exposure and political participation among young social media users in Nigeria. While previous studies have been western-centric and either focused on the determinants of incidental news exposure (e.g. Goyanes 2020; Kümpel 2020; Thorson et al. 2021) or on its impact on political knowledge and political participation (Kim et al. 2013; Yamamoto and Morey 2019), our study investigated the determinants of incidental news exposure as well as its impact on political participation thus extending and cross-culturally validating extant findings concomitantly.

To carry out our investigation, we collected data via an online survey from young social media users in Nigeria. Findings revealed that online users appropriate the platforms for generic and informational purposes and thus are likely to increasingly encounter news that they did not look for. This is consistent with the submission that social media have facilitated chanced encounters with news (Bode 2016; Ahmadi and Wohn 2018; Boczowski et al. 2018), and the findings that people who use social media to get news are likely to be incidentally exposed to unsolicited news contents (Tewksbury et al. 2001; Goyanes 2020).

In consonance with extant literature, political interest was found to be a determinant of incidental news exposure among young Nigerians (e.g. Kümpel 2020). On the political influence of incidental news exposure, this

study cross-culturally validates previous findings that registered significant contributions of incidental news exposure to online political participation (Kim et al. 2013; Valeriani and Vaccari 2016). However, it failed to establish evidence of the significant effects of incidental news exposure on offline political participation (Yamamoto and Morey 2019).

Despite these significant findings, the study has limitations that necessitate attention in future research. Our reliance on cross-sectional data limited our understanding of respondents' behaviours over an extended period with particular reference to the influence of incidental news exposure on offline political participation. Thus, future studies could rely on longitudinal data to revalidate the relationship between incidental news exposure and other contingent democratic variables. This line of exploration could also benefit from a mixed-methods research design to have a broader understanding of the phenomenon. With incidental news exposure being an emerging phenomenon that requires further empirical prognostications, scholars should explore the mediating role of message intensity, online political discussion and issue familiarity, among others, on the impact of incidental news exposure on political participation. Equally, there is a need to introduce political education that could assist the political enculturation of the youths who are the natural future successors of the Nigerian political system. Besides, there is an increasing need for the incorporation of online mechanisms into Nigeria's political system, given the youths' valorization of the platforms for virtually all their daily engagements.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This article was researched and written to the standards of Intellect's Ethical Guidelines: <https://www.intellectbooks.com/ethical-guidelines>. No approvals or subject consent were required.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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