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Do social media matter? Examining social media use and youths' political participation during the 2019 Nigerian general elections

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ABSTRACT
Since their arrival at the intersection of media as political landscapes social media have received tremendous attention among scholars and political actors, given their presumed information democratisation potential. This study contributes to the ongoing debate on the belief that social media provide expressive and mobilisation resources for youths' political engagement and the counter-argument that the platforms attenuate offline political participation as a side effect of enhancing online political activism. The authors sampled youths in Kwara State of Nigeria, considered one of the hotspots of the Nigerian 2019 general election, to explore the significant contributions of social media use to youths' political participation in a society craving political change. The findings reveal that the youths are more active in online political participation than offline politics, even after civic activism, political education and political efficacy have been controlled for. These results imply the need to motivate and mobilise the youths for offline political participation as an essential requisite for guaranteeing the future of Nigerian democracy, which has ebbed into a gerontocratic regimentation since 1999.

KEYWORDS
Social media; youths; civic volunteerism; political participation; 2019 Nigerian general election

Introduction

Concerns about young people's civic engagement and political participation have attracted the interest of scholars and triggered a deluge of studies from multi-theoretical and cross-disciplinary perspectives. From a media-centric prism, the quality and quantity of information as well as access to and representation in media spaces bear influence on youths' political participation (Golding & Murdock, 2000; Östman, 2012; Stromback & Shehata, 2010; Sveningsson, 2015). Scholars from a political economy paradigm have, for instance, condemned the mass media for being overly concerned about issues affecting political and economic elites at the expense of the masses (Durham & Kellner, 2006; Golding & Murdock, 2000; Wasko et al., 2014). This departs from a public interest orientation and leads to the shrinking of the public sphere, creates marginalisation of young people, and obliterates access to rational discourses needed to function as democratic citizens (Burton, 2005; Couldry et al., 2007; Croteau & Hoynes,

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2000). Hence, the arrival of social media becomes a paradigm-changing development. Fundamentally, social media broadened people's capacity for political expression and mobilisation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2014; Östman, 2012), offered great promises for the future of democracy (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Macnamara, 2012), enlarged political participation repertoires (Bennett, 2012; Sloam, 2012; Xia & Shen, 2018) and challenged the strongly-held notion that the world has ebbed into an era of 'democracy without citizens' in response to hyper-commercialisation of the post-materialist media environment (Entman, 1989; McChesney, 1999; Vaccari et al., 2013).

Social media favour horizontal and non-hierarchical communication, particularly among youths who have been shut out of the mainstream media milieu due to structural and ideological constraints (Baron, 2006; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Petrova, 2008). The euphoric expectations over the democratising prowess of social media are, however, being punctuated by their fragmentation potential, which threatens the consensual information environment germane to democratic politics (Garrett & Resnick, 2011; Sunstein, 2009). A retinue of studies have thus demonstrated what social media bodes for participatory politics, with mixed findings bifurcated along potentiating (Bode et al., 2014; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012) and attenuating (Anduiza et al., 2009; Bode, 2016; Kahne & Middaugh, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011) consequences. For a democracy-in-progress country like Nigeria, where digitally-inclined young people are challenging their political marginalisation, social media have become the sites of political contestations with great concerns for the future of democracy (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010; Adebayo, 2018; Dode, 2010; Okafor, 2011; Oyebode, 2014; Page & Tayo, 2018) in the same way that political participation faces a perilous prognosis in advanced democratic milieus (Bennett, 2012; Dalton, 2011; H. Milner, 2007).

Since the return of civil rule in 1999, the Nigerian political sphere has been dominated by the entrenched political class in ways that suffocate young people's political interests and aspirations. These inexorable politicians, who have been privileged to rule the country since independence, maintained a tight fist on the nation's political jugular to the detriment of the nation as a whole and the youth in particular (Badmus, 2017; Nwagboso & Duke, 2012; Nwokike & Chidolue, 2017). The lingering effects of this gerontocratic dominance gave rise to young people's diminishing interest in electoral politics and other civic activities until the arrival of social media.

While Nigerian youth's political disengagement is in synchrony with contemporary political orientations among their cohorts the world over, it creates huge concern about the future of democracy in Africa given the country's osmotic influence on other countries in the continent (Adebayo, 2018; Badmus, 2017; Omede & Ojibara, 2017). Since youth political disengagement is a global phenomenon, scholars have been crystallising and cataloguing alternative political behaviours of the youth as engineered by the social media revolution with a view to prognosticate on the future of democratic political systems (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Bode, 2016; Bode et al., 2014; Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012, 2014). In view of the mixed and Western-centric nature of accumulated findings on this development (Dimitrova et al., 2014; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2014; Loader et al., 2014; Sloam, 2012; Vitak et al., 2011; Xenos et al., 2014) and calls for elaboration of the relationship between social media use and political participation, via incorporation of variables that crystallise the phenomenon (Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Hyun & Kim, 2015; Jung et al., 2011; Vaccari et al., 2013), we explore youth's social

media use and political participation within a civic volunteerism theoretical model, with a view to cross-culturally validating or punctuating extant findings from advanced democracies and offering important theoretical and policy recommendations.

Social media, political activism and civic volunteerism

Citizens' participation is at the heart of democracy. Hence, political philosophers and theorists consider an informed citizenry to be the lifeblood of democracy (Hochschild, 2010; Khan et al., 2019; Memoli, 2011; M. L. Mustapha et al., 2018). The belief that information is a critical resource in participatory politics thus led to idolisation of the media system in historic and contemporary societies (L. K. Mustapha et al., 2016; Mustapha & Mustapha, 2017). The monolithic power over macroscopic communication hitherto enjoyed by the mainstream media has, however, been challenged by social media via their decentralisation of information production and distribution (Kahne et al., 2014; N. Newman, 2009, 2011; N. Newman et al., 2012). Being an alternative and highly democratic media sphere, the social media are offering expressive and mobilising spaces to hitherto marginalised groups that have grown apathetic due to elite domination of the mainstream media (Kahne et al., 2014; Sveningsson, 2015). While social media use imbues citizens with communication gratification for an avalanche of motives (Cheng et al., 2015; Gan & Wang, 2015; Park et al., 2009), it has also been found to be an important sphere for both institutionalised and non-institutionalised forms of political participation (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Castells, 2012; Goerres, 2010; Nygard & Jakobsson, 2013; Xia & Shen, 2018). Owing to the fact that citizens need different motivations to become politically active, communication of essential political information becomes paramount (Hyun & Kim, 2015). Information stockpiled over a period of citizens' political socialisation thus has a direct relationship with the motivation to participate in both electoral and non-electoral politics (Leung & Lee, 2014; McLeod et al., 1999; Rubenson, 2000).

In an era of increasing youth marginalisation and political despondency occasioned by diminishing attention to young people's concerns (Kahne et al., 2014; Sveningsson, 2015), youth's political engagement, particularly in elections, has ebbed unimaginably. As an alternative, these political species have embraced a new range of political behaviours and actions that allow airing of their political grievances (Loader et al., 2014; Sloam, 2012). The new form of political activities engaged in by the youths is thus naturally compatible with the expressive, informative, interactive and engaging characters of social media. Hence, social media have become not only spheres for political activism, but also avenues for accumulating political capital needed to keep the youth politically alive (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Vaccari et al., 2013).

Previously, scholars have theorised about how inherent political capacities relate to political participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2013; Putnam, 2000). Among numerous theorisations of the connection between political motivation and political participation, the civic volunteerism model (CVM) has yielded enormous empirical support, albeit in developed democracies (Barkan, 2004; Bassoli & Lahusen, 2015; Kim & Khang, 2014; Rubenson, 2000). The CVM explains how citizens' enabling resources motivate political activism and political participation (Verba et al., 1995). Originally, the model envisaged that citizens' propensity for political participation is

a function of resources (income, education and skill), psychological engagement (psychological motivation propelled by political knowledge, interest and capacity), and recruitment networks that encourage participation (Rubenson, 2000; Verba et al., 1995). More recently, scholars have argued for elaboration of the CVM to accommodate other participatory-inducing variables beyond its resource-based dimensions (Kaidesoja, 2013; Kim & Khang, 2014; Oni et al., 2017). In view of resourcefulness of social media for political participation, it could be argued that the politically-grieving youth benefit from sites for civic volunteerism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Theocharis & García-albacete, 2011). With increasing access to social media via low-cost Android devices, young people in developing countries such as Nigeria are becoming socially and politically active, challenging the political status quo, holding power accountable and expressing their political viewpoints (Nwagboso & Duke, 2012; Nwokike & Chidolue, 2017). This has significant motivation for youth's political engagement as envisaged by CVM.

Political marginalisation of the youth (Shiratuddin et al., 2017; Sveningsson, 2015) reinforced by poor media representation and limited access (Golding & Murdock, 2000; Herman & Chomsky, 2002) created game-changers out of social media as the youth now leverage on the low-cost, expressive spaces to voice their grievances (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Skoric et al., 2016). This new state of affairs calls for a re-exploration of CVM with a view to crystallising its dimensions to serve as antecedents and consequences of social media use for political participation (Kim & Khang, 2014). In effect, we argue that civic volunteerism, citizens' capacity to engage in politics, could trigger the use of social media, which could then motivate young people to acquire the necessary resources, psychological engagement and recruitment opportunities to become civically engaged and politically active. Hence, we propose that:

H1: Citizens' capacity to participate in politics, comprising resources (H1a), psychological engagement (H1b) and recruitment (H1c), is associated with social media use.

Social media-induced civic volunteerism and political participation

Political participation entails various forms of activities aimed at influencing a political system, political process and public policy by key stakeholders (Khan et al., 2019; Xia & Shen, 2018). Citizens' political participation is, however, a function of their inherent and acquired political capacity resulting from political socialisation (Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Lee et al., 2013; Leung & Lee, 2014; Rubenson, 2000; Verba et al., 1995). Being a communicative praxis, politics and political participation are associated with information and exchange of ideas among citizens (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Kahne et al., 2014; Sveningsson, 2015). Youth's political disenchantment that followed the hijacking of the mainstream media by the powerful political, economic and corporate elite, among other disempowering and marginalising problematics, thus elevated social media to the status of the Fifth Estate, an alternative political public sphere and societal sentinel that caters to the information and opinion expression needs of youth and triggers a plethora of political behaviours (Dutton, 2007; Mustapha & Mustapha, 2017; N. Newman et al., 2012).

Studies have, therefore, documented varying forms of youths' political engagement, particularly with respect to how changing media ecology alters the forms of political and

civic activities that are appealing to young people (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2013; Valenzuela et al., 2012; Vitak et al., 2011; Xia & Shen, 2018). While some scholars view overreliance on social media as detrimental to the future of classical democracy (Bode, 2016; Bowyer et al., 2017; Prior, 2007; Putnam, 2000), others see the emerging participatory culture as a 'political nursery' that prepares young people for more inclusive actions capable of sustaining participatory culture (Boulianne, 2009; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2014; Hyun & Kim, 2015; Lee & Kim, 2017; Vaccari et al., 2015; Yu, 2016).

Past studies underplaying the contribution of social media to political participation were premised on the notion that the sites house like minds whose narrow perspective, due to political homophily (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2018), leads to the creation of a communication ecology known as 'echo chamber', where people are only talking to and hearing themselves in an atmosphere devoid of opposing viewpoints (Flaxman et al., 2016; Garrett, 2009; Stroud, 2011). Another argument against the political significance of social media results from the possibility of 'filtering', a situation where social media audiences are likely to select and click soft, entertainment news at the expense of hard news, which contributes to political knowledge and stimulates political interest and participation (Heatherly et al., 2017; Pariser, 2015). Additionally, it has been argued that social media are used predominantly for social interaction rather than for seeking information (Livingstone, 2007). If these arguments are valid, the expectation that social media are capable of facilitating consumption of a variety of political news from many outlets (Kahne et al., 2014; Xia & Shen, 2018) is doubtful as audience members restricted to a narrow information sphere and/or heavy on consumption of soft, entertainment content are not likely to appropriate the social media for political ends (Valenzuela et al., 2009). On the contrary, using social media for informational needs has been found to have positive effects on political participation (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2012; Östman, 2012; Tang & Lee, 2013). Vaccari et al. (2013) explain that 'social media may be conducive to greater political engagement in various ways, by providing information about political issues, by offering social cues that motivate citizens to take action, and by reducing the costs of collective action' (p. 2).

In addition to the mixed perspectives on the significance of social media use for political participation, scholars have also considered the mediating roles of political will, interest and capacity of the people (Carlisle & Patton, 2013; Verba et al., 1995). Carlisle and Patton (2013), for example, emphasised the limited influence of social media, which are communication tools, on political participation, which is interest-driven action. Concertedly, Vaccari et al. (2013) also argued that the impact of social media on political participation is not limited to mere information provision but encompasses how the platforms stimulate online and offline conversation that mobilises a broader audience, including those not on the digital platforms. While scholars have queried the ability of social media to unilaterally stimulate civic and political engagement, they have agreed on the plausibility of their effects in conjunction with other variables such as users' characteristics, personal motivation and other psychological factors (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Nygard & Jakobsson, 2013). In effect, access to the expressive, communicative and mobilisation resources offered by social media could be a determinant of political participation as envisaged by the civic volunteerism resource-based model (Kim & Khang, 2014; Verba et al., 1995). In Nigeria, as in many other countries, social media aid exposure, create awareness, facilitate exchange of ideas and

prepare the youth for the challenges of holding government accountable through the Occupy movement and the use of hashtags (Adaugo et al., 2015; L. K. Mustapha et al., 2016). All these portend great promise and show that under certain circumstances and with a certain kind of citizens, social media have certain participatory consequences. In view of the foregoing, we propose the following hypotheses:

H2: Citizens' capacity to participate in politics comprising resources (H2a), psychological engagement (H2b) and recruitment opportunity (H2c) is associated with political participation (online and offline).

H3: Social media use (generic and political) is positively related to online political participation (H3a) and offline political participation (H3b).

Method

Data

The data used in this study were collected via online surveys attached to some political groups on social media with a focus on Kwara State, North Central Nigeria. Kwara, known for hegemonic and dynastic politics, witnessed vigorous media-induced political activism, with social media providing viral information dissemination among the citizens during the 2019 Nigerian general election (Obi, 2019; Premium Times, 1 March 2019), thus providing a perfect laboratory to explore the phenomenon. The survey was conducted between December 2018 and January 2019. While more than 500 respondents completed the survey, only 380 questionnaires were found to be suitable for our analysis, given the intention to limit the study to those between the ages of 18 and 35, recognised as youth by Nigerian law (National Youth Policy, 2009).

Measurement

Generic social media use (α =.78, M = 3.02, SD = 1.44): to measure generic social media use, respondents were asked to indicate their level of use of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and blog on a five-point scale where 1 = never and 5 = always.

Political social media use (α = .88, M = 3.42, SD = 1.29): the survey asked respondents to indicate their degree of usage of social media for political information such as information seeking, updates, discussion, campaigns, mobilisation and following political issues, using a scale where 1 = never and 5 = always.

Resources (α = .83, M = 3.47, SD = 1.38): this civic volunteerism construct was measured by asking respondents' level of agreement to possessing time, money and civic skill to participate in social media political discussion and actual, formal politics on a five-point scale where 1 denoted strongly disagree and 5 denoted strongly agree.

Psychological engagement (α = .75, M = 3.42, SD = 1.14): operationalised by asking respondents' level of agreement on three variables consisting of awareness of political issue, interest and competence in discussing the issue, and ease of discussing the issue on a five-point scale with 1 meaning strongly disagree and 5 meaning strongly agree.

Recruitment (α = .88, M = 3.35, SD = 1.06): respondents' level of agreement to belonging to several networks, being motivated to participate in politics and being mobilised to engage in politics was sought to measure this construct, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree.

Online political participation (α = .90, M = 3.12, SD = 1.44): a dependent variable in the study measured by respondents' level of agreement on using online media for six online political activities including sharing political posts online, supporting a political candidate online, contacting online political groups, etc. on a five-point scale where 1 denoted strongly disagree and 5 denoted strongly agree.

Offline political participation (α = .89, M = 3.42, SD = 1.34): another dependent variable measured by respondents' level of agreement on six offline political activities including attending political meetings and rallies, volunteering for the political party and candidate, belonging to a political party, etc. on a five-point scale where 1 denoted strongly disagree and 5 denoted strongly agree.

Control variables

Political knowledge (α = .88, M = 4.00, SD = 1.21): asked respondents' level of knowledge about key political institutions and mechanisms such as types of government, tenure of elected officers, tiers of government, etc. on a scale where 1 = not knowledgeable at all and 5 = very knowledgeable.

Political efficacy (α = .92, M = 3.27, SD = 1.31): sought degree of respondents' confidence in undertaking certain political actions such as challenging policy, opening up political discussion, participation in protest, etc. on a scale where 1 meant not confident at all and 5 meant very confident.

Results

Demographics

A number of demographic variables were included in the study and were also added to control variables at some points in the analysis based on the literature positions that gender, education and age often have relationships with social media use as well as political participation (Barkan, 2004; Hyun & Kim, 2015). The age of the respondents in the study ranged between 18 and 35 (M = 24.5, SD = 5.17), with 62.2% being 25 years and below.

Test of hypotheses

To test the hypotheses advanced in this study, a series of hierarchical regressions were conducted. Prior to the testing of the hypotheses, all scale items used in measuring the key constructs were indexed, correlated and screened to eschew problems of multi-collinearity and variance inflation. At the end, the data were found to be perfect to test the hypotheses advanced.

Hypothesis 1 predicted associations between civic volunteerism and social media use. As shown in Table 1, the overall model predicts 15.3% variance.

For generic social media use psychological engagement was the best predictor (b = .24, p < .01). Similarly, psychological engagement contributed positively to social media use

Table 1. Civic volunteerism as predictor of social media use.

	Generic				Political			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
Variables	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE
Demographics								
Age	−.11	.12	−.16	.12	−.08	.11	−.13	.10
Gender	.18	.12	.21*	.11	.03	.10	.06	.10
Education	.42***	.12	.37***	.11	.19*	.11	.12	.10
Civic volunteerism								
Resources			.16**	.07			.05	.06
Psychological engagement			.24**	.10			.41***	.08
Recruitment			−.01	.08			.10	.07
Constant	2.74***	0.11	1.43	0.23	3.33***	0.10	1.45	0.19
R^2 (%)	0.04**		15.3***		0.01		26.1***	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

for political purposes ($b = .41$, $p < .001$). In all, the three civic volunteerism constructs contribute positively to social media use, together with demographic variables, accounting for 26.1% in social media use for political purposes. While education and gender have positive association with generic social media use, they have no significant relationship with social media use for political purpose. In view of the significant contribution of two of the three civic volunteerism variables to social media use, Hypothesis 1 is supported.

The results of the test of Hypothesis 2 (Table 2) revealed that civic volunteerism contributed 45.3% and 53.1% variances to online and offline political participation, respectively. While resources ($b = .11$, $p < .05$) was the only variable positively associated with online participation, resources ($b = .15$, $p < .01$) and recruitment ($b = .11$, $p < .05$) were associated with offline political participation. With these results, Hypothesis 2 of the study is partially affirmed.

Hypothesis 3 predicted an association between social media use (generic and political) and political participation (online and offline). The results (Tables 3 and 4) explained overall variance of 48.1% and 53.7% for online and offline political participation, respectively. Besides revealing incremental R^2 across the blocks, the models showed that social media use (generic: $b = .08$, $p < .05$; and for political purpose: $b = .19$, $p < .001$) only has

Table 2. Civic volunteerism predicting political participation.

	Online						Offline					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Variables	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE
Controls												
Age	.14	.13	.07	.10	.05	.10	.14	.12	.08	.08	.07	.08
Education	.27*	.13	.13	.10	.11	.10	.09	.11	−.03	.08	−.05	.08
Gender	.12	.12	.10	.09	.10	.09	.04	.11	.06	.08	.05	.08
Political knowledge			.18**	.05	.12*	.06			.28***	.04	.20***	.05
Political efficacy			.62***	.05	.57***	.05			.54***	.04	.47***	.04
Civic volunteerism												
Resources					.11*	.06					.15**	.05
Psychological engagement					.02	.08					−.04	.07
Recruitment					.04	.07					.11*	.06
Constant	2.90**	0.12	0.25	0.22	0.18	0.24	3.31***	0.11	0.47*	0.19	0.31	0.19
R^2 (%)	0.2*		44.3***		45.3***		0.1		50.1***		53.1***	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 3. Social media use predicting online political participation.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Variables	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE
Controls								
Age	.17	.13	.09	.10	.07	.10	.11	.10
Education	.26	.16	.13	.10	.11	.10	.07	.10
Gender	.14	.13	.11	.09	.12	.10	.09	.09
Political knowledge			.17**	.05	.12*	.06	.07	.06
Political efficacy			.61***	.05	.57**	.05	.49***	.06
Civic volunteerism								
Resources					.11*	.06	.12*	.06
Psychological engagement					.03	.09	−.05	.09
Recruitment					.04	.07	.02	.07
Social media use								
Generic							.08*	.05
Political							.19**	.06
Constant	2.87***	0.12	0.25	0.22	0.18	0.23	−0.04	0.24
R^2 (%)	2.6		44.4***		45.5***		48.1***	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Table 4. Social media use predicting offline political participation.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Variables	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE	*b*	SE
Controls								
Age	.15	.12	.08	.09	.07	.08	.09	.08
Education	.09	.11	−.03	.08	−.05	.08	−.07	.08
Gender	.06	.12	.07	.08	.05	.08	.04	.08
Political knowledge			.28***	.04	.20***	.05	.18***	.05
Political efficacy			.54***	.04	.47***	.04	.44***	.05
Civic volunteerism								
Resources					.15**	.05	.15**	.05
Psychological engagement					−.05	.07	−.08	.07
Recruitment					.12*	.06	.12*	.06
Social media use								
Generic							.05	.04
Political							.06	.05
Constant	3.31***	0.11	0.47**	0.19	0.32	0.20	0.24	0.20
R^2 (%)	0.09		50.2***		53.2***		53.7***	

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

a significant contribution to online political participation. Though not significant, the associations between social media use (generic and political) and offline political participation were also positive. These results confirm the extant notion that young people's political behaviour, related to social media use, is tilted towards alternative, non-hierarchical and non-institutionalised online political participation (Loader et al., 2014; Sloam, 2012; Xia & Shen, 2018).

Across the board, the control variables (political knowledge and political efficacy) showed robust contributions to social media use on the one hand and political participation on the other hand. These findings signal a serious warning about the need to embark on systematic and programmatic conscientisation of young people, who are the future custodians of democratic political values.

Discussion

We explore the contributions of social media use to youth political participation in response to mixed results, Western-centric dominance of the extant findings, calls for further crystallisation of political significance of social media, and increasing influence of social media on youth's social and political actions in developing democracies. Using Kwara State, North Central Nigeria, reputed to be the heartbeat of youth's political activism during the 2019 Nigerian general election, we elaborate the established model of social media–politics symbiosis by incorporating factors promoting media-centric political behaviour, mainly capacity to engage in politics as theorised by CVM and conceptually bolstered by political knowledge and political efficacy. The findings confirmed the argument that decreasing political participation among the youth is not total and final as young people are finding a safe heaven in alternative, online political engagement (Bennett, 2008; Castells, 2012; Sloam, 2012). This form of soft politics compensates for youth's mainstream political disempowerment occasioned by hierarchical, cost-intensive, and power-based politics that have been mastered and dominated by an entrenched political class (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2018; Kahne et al., 2014). The ebbing of democracy into gerontocracy in the developing world in general and Nigeria in particular, coupled with a contractionary economy that is threatening survival and upward mobility of the youth, fits the grievance model of political apathy and civic alienation that privilege alternative political paradigm among young people (Badmus, 2017; Nwagboso & Duke, 2012; Nwokike & Chidolue, 2017).

Our findings also affirmed scholars' conclusions that, far from disengaging, youths are compensating for their political marginalisation through action-oriented engagement and using the highly democratised space of social media to communicate, discuss, mobilise and coordinate social actions aimed at holding power accountable (Gil de Zuniga et al., 2014; Skoric et al., 2016; Yu, 2016). This much is evidenced by the plausible contribution of social media use to online political participation. By incorporating the CVM, an established resource-based theory of political participation, the study not only espoused the heuristic value of the model, but also affirmed its amenability to the new public sphere of digital politics (see also Kim & Khang, 2014). Besides lowering the cost of participation (Oni et al., 2017; Vaccari et al., 2013; Xenos et al., 2014), thus diminishing the centrality of economic resources in political engagement, social media facilitate affordance of other dimensions of civic volunteerism by offering means of enhancing citizens' political efficacy and civic competence (psychological engagement) while facilitating opportunities for attraction and mobilisation of the youth through various social networks existing on the platform (recruitment).

Across the levels of analysis, the study found significant contributions of political knowledge and political efficacy to the relationship between social media use and political participation. While this has been a long-established truism in media–politics calculus (Jung et al., 2011; Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Oni et al., 2017), it is reassuring that the social media platforms offer opportunities for citizens to acquire political knowledge via online discussion thus increasing their internal and external political efficacy and stimulating participation (Nygard & Jakobsson, 2013; Vaccari et al., 2013). The success of the youth in the Occupy movement and other forms of 'soft' political engagements, including volunteerism during disaster (Dimitrova et al., 2014; Kuan & Uldam, 2017; Leung &

Lee, 2014; McLeod et al., 1999), is a signal to their capacity to function not only as actualising citizens, but also as dutiful ones known with previous generations (Loader et al., 2014). This finding also confirmed the long-held notion that an informed and critical citizenry is the lifeblood of democracy (Milner, 2002, 2007; M. L. Mustapha et al., 2018; Vaccari et al., 2013).

The limited contribution of social media to offline political participation calls for concern about the future of democratic and participatory culture. This disquieting development associated with youth indulgence in a comforting and compatible information atmosphere, which limits encounters with pluralistic viewpoints necessary to build civic competence, is fundamentally rooted in social media algorithmic mechanisms that narrow information to the needs of members of a network (Flaxman et al., 2016; Stroud, 2011). Hence, young people on the social network sites are exposed to a limited societal agenda with consequences for their inability to coalesce efforts with other members of society on critical political projects for the benefit of all. The consequence of these findings in a fragmented polity like Nigeria is ominous, given the penchant of members of the entrenched political class for exploitation of political loopholes (Nwagboso & Duke, 2012; Nwokike & Chidolue, 2017). It is thus imperative to continue exploring factors that could facilitate young citizens' return to a political culture of institutionalised engagement.

These findings undergird the need for key political stakeholders to renegotiate their communications and engagements with the youth. The dialogic potential of social media should be annexed to reach out to and appreciate the concerns of young people. Genuine communication through these platforms would engender mutual trust that could gear the youth towards taking up new political challenges. More importantly, proactive engagement of the youth with government activities could create a transparent outlook that attenuates the potency of fake news, which is one of the most challenging socio-political infirmities of the contemporary media–political ecosystem. Being interactive platforms, government should take genuine and progressive social media comments seriously, including appropriating relevant comments for policy action. The election system should also be transformed to meet the contemporary reality of the digital age through electronic reforms (Onapajo, 2015). Rather than undermining youth's radical approaches to politics and governance, young people need to be altruistically engaged with a view to channelling their creative energy towards creating a better society for all.

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