

# **SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES: WHATSAPP AND THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS**

**Egielewa, Peter Eshioke, PhD**

Department of Mass Communication, Edo University Iyamho, Edo State, Nigeria  
peter.egielewa@edouniversity.edu.ng

## **Abstract**

Social Media has revolutionised political communication since its debut in 1995 with the first Social Networking site, “classmate.com”, established by Randy Conrads (Sajithra & Rajindra, 2013). Beginning with the Arab Springs of 2011, there has been a steady increase in the realisation of changes that social media engineers in the selection and eventual election of political leaders in many countries of the world. Based on the public participant theory and using quantitative research design method, and with questionnaires administered to 380 students of two higher institutions in Nigeria, this research concludes that Whatsapp broadcast messages about the age, ethnic group, religion, educational background and corruption status of the candidates of the 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria did not influence Nigerian undergraduates choice of political party candidates. This paper recommends that further researches should be conducted to interrogate why these qualities did not influence students’ choice and what influences students’ choices in presidential elections.

**Keywords:** Social media, politics, participation, undergraduates, elections.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social media use has doubled since 2008 (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011) to become what some scholars have termed the Internet revolutionary (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004). The number of people using social networking sites has nearly doubled since 2008 with Facebook having more than one billion active users. Some scholars view the rise of the Internet as a game changer in the history of mass communication, saying the Web has transformed the way people interact and communicate (Hung & Yuen, 2010),

However, there has been a steady decline in the popularity of Facebook (McIntyre, 2014) with Rainie, Smith and Duggan, (2013) asserting that sixty-one percent (61%) of heavy social media users were taking a break from Facebook and one quarter of users were spending less time on Facebook sites (Rainie, Smith, & Duggan, 2013). Facebook has even been described as evil (Anderson, 2019). With Facebook on the decline, another social media platform, Whatsapp, is taking its place.

Whatsapp is a mobile messaging application that was founded in 2009 by Brian Acton and Jan Koum, who were both former employees of Yahoo. (Alsanie, 2015). WhatsApp uses a user data plan or Wi-Fi connection to send and receive messages for free with anyone else who uses the app. (Family Online Safety Institute, 2019). It requires its users to be at least 16 years of age to be able to use the app and users can send unlimited text messages, images,

audios and videos to anyone anywhere in the world as long as both parties have data and use the application. However, a user does not need to “friend” someone or be in a user’s contacts before someone can send a message, but users can block other users if they do no longer want to receive messages from them. (Alsanie, 2015; Family Online Safety Institute, 2019). As at 2017, Whatsapp had 1.5 billion users globally (Iqbal, 2019) and has been tagged the most popular messaging application since 2014. (Rosenfeld, Sina, Sarne, Avidov & Kraus, 2018).

Whatsapp may be a means of political influence in electoral processes. However, voters also consider other factors in their choice of presidential candidates such as background, ethnicity, race, religious affiliation, party identification and incumbent’s previous performance. (Angela, 2018). In the 2008 US presidential elections, for example, 95% of Black Americans voted for the African-American candidate, Barrack Obama, and more women voters voted for the female candidate in that election, Hilary Clinton. (Angela, 2018).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Based on the power of social media in politics, this research aims to investigate whether Whatsapp messages sent to millions of undergraduate Whatsapp users in a bid to influence their choices in favour of candidates of their political parties or to discredit candidates of rival political parties before the Nigerian 2019 presidential elections actually did in fact change the students’ choices of candidates.

Specifically the research intends to interrogate if messages broadcast on Whatsapp about the candidates’ age, ethnic group, religion, educational background and corruption status influenced the students’ voters’ choices of candidates for the election.

### **Research Questions**

This research addresses the following two questions:

- i. Did Whatsapp broadcast messages influence respondents’ choice of candidates for the 2019 Nigerian presidential election?
- ii. Did Whatsapp broadcast messages about the age, ethnic group, religion, educational background and corruption perception of the candidates influence respondents’ choice of candidates for the 2019 Nigerian presidential election?

### **Review of Related Literature**

#### **Factors Influencing Voters’ Choice of candidate**

Several studies have analysed how attributes of election candidates can influence voters and their choices. Uslu, Bozkurt and Tufekcioglu (2017) had investigated the factors that influenced voters’ choice in a Turkish election. They looked at factors such as personality traits, experience, ethnic origin, education, age, gender, amongst others (Higgins, 2016; Goodrich, 2016) in order to find out if these influenced voters. The research found out that the higher the education level of candidates, the higher the chances that voters will prefer such a candidate. Other factors that were of importance to voters were honesty of candidates, experience and ethnic origin. (Uslu, Bozkurt and Tufekcioglu, 2017).

In another studies, Bashir (2015) found out that rather than ethnicity, religion and other factors, voters in the presidential elections in Sabon-gari part of Nigeria considered the personality of the candidate, economic situation of the country and security situation as determining factors to vote for candidates. Similarly, voters in a local election Turkey in 2009 found out that candidate's former actions, their personality, their psychological attachment to the candidate's party, candidate's good knowledge of local problems, candidate's party's projects, and whether candidate's party was in power constitute the most important factors that influence voting behaviour. (Kurtbas, 2015).

## **Social Media and Politics**

Social media has begun to play a prominent role in politics world over. (Calderaro, 2018). It involves all actors in the society such as the normal citizens, activists, non-governmental organizations, telecommunications firms, software providers and governments. (Shirky, 2011). This role has made the communication landscape denser, more complex, and more participatory, giving citizens greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.

This possibility for a coordinated collective action led to it being attributed to the impeachment of Philippine President Joseph Estrada on January 20, 2001 in what Shirky (2011) has described as the "first time that social media had helped force out a national leader". This occurred after the Philippine Congress on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2001 decided to drop impeachment trial against President Joseph Estrada, and just barely two hours later, a protest was coordinated by forwarded text messages on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2001 reading, "Go 2 EDSA. Wear blk." (Meaning= Go to EDSA, wear black dress). EDSA is the acronym for "Epifanio de los Santos Avenue", which is a limited-access circumferential highway around Manila, the capital of the Philippines. The text message gathered over a million people over a few days causing traffic lockdown in downtown Manila. This led the Philippine Congress to reverse its earlier decision not to probe the president and in three days the president was impeached.

Similarly, the main opposition party in Malaysia, Barisan, that had dominated the Malaysian political space got its influence reduced in the 2008 parliamentary elections when through the influence of social media (Facebook and Twitter), an alliance of opposition parties, the People's Alliance, gained more than a third of the 222 seats in parliament and whittled down the power of the main party to make constitutional change without the required two-thirds majority.

The social media has also enabled a major shift in communication between political leaders and citizens. (Owen, 2018). In the United States, internet accessibility has given rise to a situation where citizens are increasingly turning away from main stream media e.g. Television and turning towards digital and social media particularly Twitter. Owen (2018) speaks of the idea of a "disappearance" of local media such that even the United States President, Donald Trump's favourite means of communication with his supporters is the social media platform, Twitter. This political communication is supported by a study by Jamil (2018) which reveals that social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, have enhanced political knowledge and participation in election process and political discourse amongst Karachi (Pakistan) citizens.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is hinged on the theory of Public Participation.

### **Theory of public participation**

The theory of public participation emphasizes a process through which citizens can raise their voices to demand, protect and defend their basic rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of information, freedom of association and religion, rights to justice, equality, access to basic facilities necessary for an individual living and growth, and for accountability of those with powers to influence their policies, reforms and decision-making (Jamil, 2018).

The theory postulates that citizens, through their active involvement and participation, constitute a fundamental part of political discourse and democratic and decision-making processes. (Kabeer, 2004; Esau, 2006 & Dahl, 2006). Other scholars emphasize that because such citizens' participation mechanism increases trust, legitimacy and relationship, society problems can be resolved. (Feldman & Kathryn, 2009; Ansell, 2011).

In the light of the above studies, this study posits that new media, particularly social media, with particularly emphasis on Whatsapp can indeed deepen democratic process if it becomes a public square where citizens get the required information that helps them to make informed choices which may include changing their minds about the preferred candidates of their choice as regards the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections.

### **Methodology**

Quantitative method was adopted for this study. The data collected were analysed using the SPSS tool.

### **Population of the Study**

This research studied how undergraduates of two higher institutions in Edo State of Nigeria used the social media platform, Whatsapp, during the 2019 Nigeria presidential election. The two selected institutions in Edo State are Edo University Iyamho, Edo State and Federal Polytechnic, Auchi.

The population of the students in the selected institutions is as follows:

- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| 1. Federal Polytechnic, Auchi, Edo state | = 21,000 |
| 2. Edo University Iyamho, Edo State      | = 1,300  |

**Total** **= 22, 300**

### **Sample Size and Sampling Technique**

Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) research sampling size, research sample size for populations between 20001 and 30000 is 379. To achieve this sample size and in other to have a balanced analysis for both institutions, equal number of one hundred and ninety (190) questionnaires received from each of the surveyed schools were used. Thus, a total of 380 questionnaires were prepared and obtained from students of both schools, as follows:

- |  |              |
|--|--------------|
| 1. Federal Polytechnic, Auchi, Edo State | 190 students |
| 2. Edo University Iyamho, Edo State      | 190 students |

**Total sample size of students** **190 + 190 = 380**

Questionnaires were used to elicit responses from the students. The specified number of students required from each institution was selected randomly irrespective of the year of

studies.

### Data Presentation/Analysis

The data generated for the study are discussed under the research questions they address. The data were analysed using SPSS tools.

The results of the research are presented as follows:

#### Research Question One

This research question was formulated to address the research question thus: **Did Whatsapp broadcast messages influence respondents' choice of candidates for the 2019 Nigerian presidential election?**

This research question attempts to investigate if WhatsApp broadcast messages about certain information relating to the candidates of the 2019 presidential elections led to student voters changing their minds about the candidates they originally wanted to vote for.

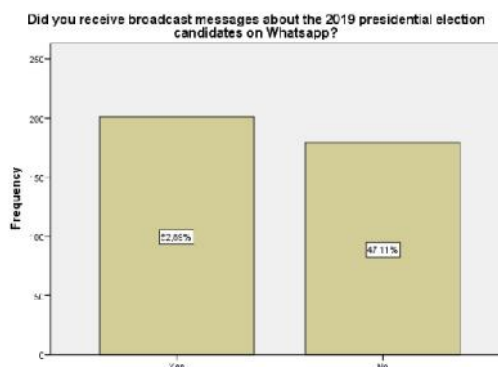


Figure 1: Showing the percentage of those who received Whatsapp broadcast messages about the 2019 presidential results.

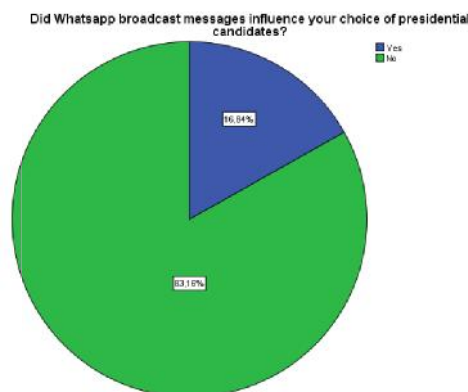


Figure 2: Showing the percentage of those who were influenced by Whatsapp broadcast messages in the 2019 presidential results.

Figure 1 above shows that only slightly above a half of all respondents (approximately 53%)

admitted that they received WhatsApp broadcast messages about the presidential candidates of the 2019 elections and of this number an overwhelming percentage (83.16%), which represents four out of every five student voters were not influenced by the broadcast messages they received via Whatsapp concerning the 2019 presidential candidates (Figure 2). Only about one out of every five such student voters actually changed their minds about the 2019 presidential candidates.

### Research Question Two

This research question was formulated to address the research question thus: Did Whatsapp broadcast messages about the age, ethnic group, religion, educational background and corrupt nature of the candidates influence respondents' choice of candidates for the 2019 Nigerian presidential election?

This research question attempts to investigate if WhatsApp broadcast messages about certain information relating to the candidates of the 2019 presidential elections influenced their choice of candidates.

#### \$Qualities\*Q5 Crosstabulation

	Did Whatsapp broadcast messages influence your choice of presidential candidates?		Total
	Yes	No	
Did knowledge of the Count age of the presidential % within candidate make you \$Qualities change your mind on who to vote for?	21 5,5%	359 94,5%	380
Did knowledge of the Count religion of the % within presidential candidate \$Qualities make you change your mind on who to vote for?	42 11,1%	338 88,9%	380
Did knowledge of the Count ethnic background of % within the presidential \$Qualities candidate make you change your mind on who to vote for?	52 13,7%	328 86,3%	380
Did knowledge of the Count educational background % within of the presidential \$Qualities	25 6,6%	355 93,4%	380

candidate make you change your mind on who to vote for?			
Did knowledge of the Count corrupt nature or % within otherwise of the \$Qualities presidential candidate make you change your mind on who to vote for?	96 25,3%	284 74,7%	380
<b>Total</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>236</b>	<b>1,664</b>
		<b>1900</b>	

Table 1: Showing if certain qualities of the presidential candidates influence students' voters' choice of presidential candidates.

The table above shows that the age, ethnic group, religion, educational background and corrupt nature of the candidates of the 2019 presidential elections did not influence students voters' choice of who to vote for. Significant in the above results is that the age (94,5%) and educational background (93,4%) have very little role to play when student voters made their choices for which candidate to vote for in the 2019 presidential elections. However, the corrupt nature of the candidate received the highest number of students' voters (25,3%) who would consider it as an important factor in deciding who to vote for the 2019 presidential elections.

### Discussion of Findings

From the research findings, more than half (52.89%) of the entire respondents (undergraduates) agree to receiving WhatsApp broadcast messages about presidential candidates in the 2019 presidential election. However, an overwhelming percentage of the students (83.16%), say such messages did not influence their choice of the presidential candidates.

Also significant in the research finding is that many student voters were hardly influenced by the age, ethnic group, religion, educational background and corrupt nature of the candidates to change their minds about which candidates to vote for in the 2019 presidential elections. In other words, these qualities do not make them change their minds about candidates to vote for. Age and educational background least interested the student voters when considering the candidates to vote for. However, the corrupt nature of the candidates got a fairly significant consideration amongst the student voters (25, 3%). This means that a quarter of the students considered whether the candidate was corrupt or not before they voted in the 2019 presidential elections.

### Conclusion

Based on the findings of this research, it can be concluded that students of higher institutions received Whatsapp messages concerning the 2019 presidential elections. Students' choices were, however, not influence by the Whatsapp broadcast messages they received.

Also, many students do not see qualities or factors such as age, ethnic group, religion, educational background and corrupt nature as important when making decisions for candidates to vote for in the 2019 presidential elections, although a quarter believe that the corrupt nature of the candidate is an important factor to consider.

In relation to the public participation theory, which posits that citizens' participate in the political process through their active engagement in political discourse, it can be concluded that the posting of broadcast messages on Whatsapp as a platform for deepening voters' knowledge of presidential candidates enabled undergraduate students to participate in the electoral process by receiving and reading political messages even though these message hardly influenced their choices.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the foregoing research findings, the following are recommended:

1. Further research should be conducted to find out why the age, ethnic group, religion, educational background and corrupt nature of candidates do not matter to student voters when making their choices for presidential elections.
2. Further research should be conducted to find out what really interests student voters in presidential elections.
3. Research should be carried out to investigate if the qualities of age, ethnic group, religion, educational background and corrupt nature of candidates do not also matter to other voters who are not students.

### **References**

- Allcott, H. & Matthew, G. (2017). Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. In *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), pp. 211-236.
- Alsanie, S. I. (2015). Social Media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp) Used, and it's Relationship with the University Students Contact with their Families in Saudi Arabia. In *Universal Journal of Psychology* 3(3), pp.69-72.
- Anderson, V. (2019). Why do we trust Whatsapp when we hate Facebook? Retrieved on 13 September from <https://medium.com/swlh/why-do-we-trust-whatsapp-when-we-hate-facebook-f43730a64b97>.
- Angela, J. (2018). Factors that Influence Voters During Presidential Elections. Retrieved on 13 September, 2019 from <https://study.com/academy/lesson/factors-that-influence-voters-during-presidential-elections.html>
- Ansell, C.K. (2011). *Pragmatist Democracy: Evolutionary Learning as Public Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bashir, U.A. (2015). Factors that influenced Voters' Behaviour in the 2015 Presidential Election in Sabon-Gari Local Government Area of Kaduna State. Retrieved on 13 September, 2019 from [https://www.academia.edu/17004693/factors\\_that\\_influenced\\_voters\\_behaviour\\_in\\_the\\_](https://www.academia.edu/17004693/factors_that_influenced_voters_behaviour_in_the_)



- 2015\_presidential\_election\_in\_sabon-gari\_local\_government\_area\_of\_kaduna\_state?auto=download
- Bryson, J.B., Crosby, B.C., & Bloomerget, L. (2014). Public value governance: Moving beyond traditional public administration and new public management. In *Public Administration Review*, 74, pp. 445-456.
- Calderaro, A. (2018). Social Media and Politics. Retrieved on 14 September, 2019 from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322273564\\_Social\\_Media\\_and\\_Politics](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322273564_Social_Media_and_Politics)
- Dahl, R. (2006). *Democracy and its Critics*. Yale University Press: New Haven.
- Esau, M.V. (2006). Citizen Participation and the poor: A participatory approach to achieving political, social and economic freedom. In *Politikon*. 34, pp.187-203.
- Family Online Safety Institute, (2019). WhatsApp: What is it? Retrieved on 13 September from [https://www.fosi.org/documents/71/GdP\\_Tech\\_Tips\\_Sheets\\_WhatsApp.pdf](https://www.fosi.org/documents/71/GdP_Tech_Tips_Sheets_WhatsApp.pdf)
- Feldman, M. & Kathryn, Q. (2009). Generating resources and energizing frameworks through inclusive public management. In *International Public Management Journal*, 12, pp.137-171.
- Goodrich, K. (2016). What Makes Us Vote the Way We Vote? – The Psychology of Voting. Retrieved on 13 September, 2019 from <https://www.brainscape.com/blog/2016/10/psychology-of-voting/>
- Hampton, K. N., Goulet, L. S., Rainie, L., & Purcell K. (2011). Social networking sites and our lives. Retrieved from the Pew Internet and American Life Project: <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Technology-and-socialnetworks.aspx>
- Higgins, O. (2016). Voters and Voter Behaviour. Retrieved on 13 September, 2019 from <https://slideplayer.com/slide/8329612/>
- Huckfeldt, R. & Sprague, J. (1995). *Citizens, politics, and social communication: Information and influence in an election campaign*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hung, H.T. & Yuen, S. C.Y. (2004). Educational use of social networking technology in higher education. In *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15, pp. 703-714.
- Iqbal, M. (2019). WhatsApp Revenue and Usage Statistics 2019. Retrieved on 13 September, 2019 from <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/whatsapp-statistics/>
- Jamil, S. (2018). Politics in a Digital Age: The Impact of New Media Technologies on Public Participation and Political Campaign in Pakistan's 2018 Elections – A Case Study of Karachi. In *Global Media Journal*, 16 (31).
- Kabeer, N. (2004). *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*. New York: Verso.
- Keefe, G.J. (1980). Political malaise and reliance on media. In *Journalism Quarterly*, 57, pp. 122-128.
- Krejcie, R. V. & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining Sample Size for Research Activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 30, 607-610. Retrieved on 16

September 2019 from  
[https://home.kku.ac.th/sompong/guest\\_speaker/KrejcieandMorgan\\_article.pdf](https://home.kku.ac.th/sompong/guest_speaker/KrejcieandMorgan_article.pdf)

- Kurtbas, I. (2015). The Factors Influencing Voting Preferences in Local Elections: An Empirical Study. In *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 5(9), pp.197-210.
- McClosky, H. (1968). Political Participation. In David L. S. (Ed) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, (vol.12). New York: Macmillan.
- McIntyre, K., (2014). The Evolution of Social Media from 1969 to 2013: A Change in Competition and a Trend Toward Complementary, Niche Sites. In *The Journal of Social Media in Society* 3(2).
- One billion – Key metrics. (2012). Retrieved on 18 July 2019 from <http://newsroom.fb.com/download-media/4227>
- Owen, D. (2017). The New Media's Role in Politics. In *The Age of Perplexity. Rethinking The World we knew*. Madrid: BBVA.
- Owen, D. (2018). The Past Decade and Future of Political Media: The Ascendance of Social Media. Retrieved on 14 September, 2019 from <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/en/articles/the-past-decade-and-future-of-political-media-the-ascendance-of-social-media/>
- Robinson, J.P. & Levy, M.R. (1996). News media use and the informed public: A 1990s update. In *Journal of Communication*, 46, pp.29-135.
- Rosenfeld, A; Sina, S; Sarne, D; Avidov O; & Kraus, S. (2018). A Study of WhatsApp Usage Patterns and Prediction Models without Message Content. Retrieved on 13 September, 2019 from <https://arxiv.org/pdf/1802.03393.pdf>
- Shirky, C. (2011). The political power of social media: Technology, the Public Sphere and Political Change. Retrieved on 13 September, 2019 from <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/The-Political-Power-of-Social-Media-Shirky/601d9343b617baea82876686a9ad18e8b00dbd81>
- Smith, H.H. (1986). Newspaper readership as a determinant of political knowledge and activity. In *Newspaper Research Journal*, 7, pp. 47-54.
- Stafford, T. F., Stafford, M. R., & Schkade, L. L. (2004). Determining uses and gratifications for the Internet. In *Decision Sciences*, 35, pp. 259-288.
- Stamm, K.R., Emig, A.G. & Hesse, M.B. (1997). The contribution of local media to community involvement. In *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 74, pp. 97-107.
- Uslu, Bozkurt And Tufekcioglu (2017). The Factors Affecting Voter Behaviour in Local Elections Kocaeli Sample. In *International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, 12(3), pp. 1-18.
- Van Dijk, J.A. (2006). *The network society: social aspects of new media*. Thousand Oaks,

CA: Sage.

Vocabulary.com. (2019). Undergraduate. Retrieved on 13 September, 2019 from <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/undergraduate>

Xie, B. & Jaeger, P.T. (2008). Older Adults and Political Participation on the Internet: A Cross-cultural Comparison of the USA and China. In *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology*, pp: 1-15.