

**EXAMINING SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND
POLITICAL POLARIZATION IN NIGERIA: INSIGHTS FROM OYO STATE 2019-2023
ELECTION**

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the influence of social media on freedom of expression and political polarization in Nigeria taking insight from Oyo state 2019 to 2023 election. The specific objectives were to to analyze the impact of social media on freedom of expression in Oyo state, assess the extent of political polarization fueled by social media discourse in Oyo state, study how government law on social media affect people's online rights in Oyo state, as well as propose policy recommendations that reduce social media-driven political polarization while protecting freedom of expression in Oyo State and Nigeria. The design of the research is survey research. The source of data collection for this research was derived from primary sources. In this study, primary data were collected automatically through the sharing of Google form questionnaire link. The study concluded that fear of consequence limits freedom of expression on political opinion on social media. However, social media has allowed marginalized group to have strong voices in public discourse. Also that social media is a major tool for political polarization in Oyo state. The study recommended that government should impose stronger regulation to curb misinformation on social media and also prioritize education on digital literacy as a policy to reduce polarization and enhance healthy freedom of expression on political matters.

Keywords: Social Media, Freedom of Expression, Political Polarization.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years the Internet has revolutionized how people can interact with each other by creating social media outlets. The internet has also changed how people can become involved in their society by allowing them to voice their own opinions about politics, culture, and other social topics. Through its creation of multiple venues for public dialogue about various issues affecting Nigeria, the Internet offers numerous pathways to engage the public regarding these issues.

Through the use of social media, people can exchange photos and videos, share news stories, post their thoughts on blogs, and participate in online discussions. Social media also allow individuals, companies, organizations, governments, and parliamentarians to interact with large numbers of people. The term “social media” refers to the wide range of Internet-based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities. The kinds of Internet services commonly associated with social media sometimes referred to as “Web 2.0”.

In Dewing (2010) work, he opined that in the late 1990s, as broadband Internet became more popular, websites that allowed users to create and upload content began to appear. The first social network site (SixDegrees.com) appeared in 1997. From 2002 onward, a large number of social network sites were launched. Some such as Friendster enjoyed a surge of popularity, only to fade. Others developed niche communities such as MySpace, for example, appealed to teenaged music aficionados.

By the late 2000s, social media had gained widespread acceptance and some services gained huge numbers of users. For example, in November 2012, Facebook announced it had 1 billion users worldwide, of whom 18 million were in Canada. In July 2012, Twitter had an estimated 517 million users, of whom 10 million were in Canada.

A number of factors have contributed to this rapid growth in social media participation include technological factors such as increased broadband availability, the improvement of software tools, and the development of more powerful computers and

mobile devices; social factors such as the rapid uptake of social media by younger age groups; and economic factors such as the increasing affordability of computers and software, and growing commercial interest in social media sites.

Social Media has had a profound effect on how we communicate and engage politically around the world. However one country that is at the forefront of this shift is Nigeria. In Nigeria, and elsewhere in the world, social media has become a major outlet for disseminating information about politics, elections, etc., via WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Twitter (X) providing an opportunity for politicians to interact directly with constituents and other citizens.

This makes it easier than ever for people to obtain large quantities of information almost instantly. Nigerians can vent about anything about society on social media. Social media outlets are always evolving which allows people to find newer and more innovative ways to communicate with others and spread information. Social media allowed #EndSARS to prove its strength when it comes to mobilizing the people of Nigeria to

take mass action to fix societal issues and dismantle many outdated systems of oppression (police brutality) (Udenze, 20th4).

Social media can be defined by any website which allows for some type of social interaction. Social media is also considered a dynamic source of entertainment and communication, social media continues to expand. In the Nigerian context, social media is described as the use of all internet based technologies to create, share, and disseminate information through online social interaction. Some of these platforms are WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Youtube, and Twitter (known as X" now). Social media allows information to be obtained instantly from government officials to constituents and allows voters to question these political candidates. Citizens can discuss and debate topics that will shape the minds of the future. Social media allows users to become informed about who they're voting for and become more involved in society.

For instance social media has allowed voters to have information about their leaders that are contesting for political office. Social media has been used tremendously and is being used in many organization such as

companies, churches, mosque, schools and industrial sectors to help create contents that help in spreading information about what the organizations exist for. Contents that state what the organization do, as providing people with the needed services they provide, creating awareness and also contents that advertise what the organizations are about. All of these are made possible by social media.

Traditional barriers to data sharing have been eroded with new digital communication technology. Walter & Rivera define Social Media as a platform of "people" and explains how social media has allowed people to express their political opinions, share personal stories, and even express emotions quickly. An example of how fast social media can move was displayed when #EndSARS use social media to mobilized millions of people to protest. This showed the world's acceptance of using social media for various means of interaction (Aboh, 2024).

Freedom is the state of being free, where individuals have the ability to act, speak, or think without hindrance or restraint. Freedom

of expression is the ability to express one's thoughts, ideas, and opinions without fear of censorship, retaliation, or legal consequences, encompassing various forms of communication, including speech, writing, and art. It can be said to be a state of not being a prisoner or slave. That is to say its full detail simply means having full enjoyment of one's liberty (Patrick, 2018).

Freedom of speech however has always been a controversial issue since time immemorial. Starting from when "democracy" was birthed by the Greeks at the middle of the 5th century BCE through the ages up till now, freedom of speech has been rightly celebrated as both a divine right and a pillar that holds freedom. Passed into law in 1791 as the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and later defended by British philosopher John Stuart Mill in his book *On Liberty* in 1859 and even reaffirmed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. John, R. R. (2019).

This ideal has been used over time to refer to acts that have religious liberals and activists who support democratic self-government

themselves relating well with others that have opposing opinions lifted. We still however experience this concept today as a heavy stone sitting on our shoulders in states that regard democracy.

Countries make laws either upholding this concept (ie. democracy) partially or as a whole or not factor in this concept at all (ie. non-democratic countries). We have social media here in Nigeria, in the democratic system of government of Nigeria which it's own is globe's known as the Giant of Africa. History has shown us that citizens right to express themselves have (not fully expressed) been somewhat restricted or limited (indirectly by the government or straight up unconstitutional punishment) since the invention of social media. Social media platforms have been used by Nigerians more than just sendingWhatsapps since the invention of social media. EZE, (2025). Everyone just like that pours out whatever they feel on their minds across every social media platform they have access.

Freedom of expression in Nigeria can be interpreted as the citizens right to freedom of speech as established by law in section 39 of the Constitution of Nigeria in 1999

(Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). This allows Nigerians to have a common playing ground to voice out their opinions which is beneficial as it allows for a peaceful run through of idea exchange, holding people accountable for their actions and words and allows for the ability to solve conflicts that are caused by the statement made. Regulatory factors such as Surveillance and Government actions in maintaining public order limited some of these aspects which ultimately caused infringement on the liberties of the average Nigerian citizens.

Regulation can also be tied to limiting the people's right to freedom of expression through attempted social media mogul Banky W once said " censorship" . The use of Surveillance, monitoring, and censorship are all forms of regulation that help keep the population in line but can also restrain civilians from exercising their rights as citizens. The implementation of the aforementioned technology helps our county Nigeria grow at a large but can also get be used to limit civilians right to freedom of expression through curtailment of the internet.

Ideological extremity (the growing extremity) between radical and moderates are concepts used to describe political polarization, both ideologically and politically, as individuals and parties move farther away from centrism toward a more radical ideology. Political polarization is often characterized as being “us vs them”. Hostility can increase towards those who are on the other side of political issues, decreasing cooperation within the political sphere. Polarization has been addressed in several classics and studies throughout various social science disciplines and sub disciplines. (e. g. Ross studied race relations in 19 20, Marx studied economy in 18 67).

Within the field of political science, polarization has been applied to political attitude polarization. Use of the concept has increased in recent years, propelled by an increasingly polarized political climate (Paul, 2019). Simply put, Political polarization in the English language means when two opposing opinions divides a group of people. Characterized by the rise in partisan opposition among political parties or ideological factions. In Nigeria political polarization is the rising divisions between

citizens and political groups whether against ethnic, religious or party affiliations.

Political polarization can cause less compromise between politicians, increase hostility and conflict, and increase social interaction with those who share similar political views. Someone who is more involved in social media will likely hear and interact more with others who share similar political views on these platforms. Social media allows users to crawl in whatever bubble they please, without feeling any form of neglect from other ideologies. These platforms allow users to create “filter bubbles” around themselves. Filter bubbles “isolate users from information that challenges their worldview, effectively creating “echo chambers” that further amplify beliefs” (Source: “Concerns Over.”). Increasing social media use could likely increase the amount of political discussion people have with others. Social media has also been used to spread politically polarizing speeches.

Research objective of this study is evaluate how social media contributed to people’s right to freedom of expression in Oyo state.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Politics in Nigeria

Social media have penetrated all levels of the information society and have catalyzed the process of demonetization and political development. The media, a modern trend in information and knowledge dissemination, has taken communication beyond the limitations of the traditional way of communicating and socializing, making it an essential part of peoples lives; affecting their social, political and economic activities. While some decades ago, the Internet was considered a news media, societies now turn to social media as sources of information. One of the major applications of social media is social networks, where millions of people are connected to utilize an open domain for interacting with others and socializing with all types of media such as text, voice, images, or videos

To comprehend the word social media, there is the need to examine the concept of media itself. Media, according to Hasan (2013) is defined as a term which is referred to as

"those organized means of dissemination of fact, opinion, entertainment, and other information, such as newspapers, magazines, cinema films, radio, television, the World Wide Web, CDs, DVDs, videocassette, video games and other forms of publishing. Media in other word is every means of communication to a scattered audience.

According to Sambe (2014) social media is a new media technology, a product of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Social media has altered our communication patterns by way of providing instant feedback, viral content, popular accessibility and availability.

In a modern democracy, social media can be used by governments to involve citizens in decision making, and make civil society to engage people in specific issues. Social media has transformed political communication in a number of ways, like segmentation of audience, weakening gate keeping capacity of traditional media, releasing most recent news and influences and political settings. Social media has great impact on the voting pattern of the electorates, especially youths who constitute the largest proportion of social media users in Nigeria.

Impact of Social Media on Freedom of Speech/Oppression

The impact social media has on freedom of speech/oppression is extremely vast. The capability that each individual has to be able to access the internet allows people to express their opinion whether it may be within their geographical location or outside of that and can receive responses from people within their location and abroad. Social Media Speech in Nigeria. Social media serves as a tool to allow Nigerians to express themselves freely and is used to bypass limits set on traditional media outlets (Obi, 2020). Social media can affect our freedom of speech and privacy.

Social media allows everyone around the world, and in Nigeria the opportunity to express themselves freely. It's granted users a platform to share their opinions, criticize government officials and participate in politics. While other conventional media outlets are closed to censorship or government monitoring social media

platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter (X), Facebook have provided Nigerians a platform to speak about political matters, start movements (#EndSARS) and speak about Nigerias leaders. When Nigeria faced shutdowns from Twitter in 2021 because they posed a threat to National Security. The use of social media isn't without risk, but it has been vital to political engagement. Social media can influence voters during election periods, swaying public opinion on how campaigns are run, and can even improve transparency.

The 2019 & 2023 Elections in Oyo state served as a prime example of how Social Media can affect Political Affairs both positively and negatively. Social media allowed politicians like PDP Defendant Seyi Makinde and APC Defendant Adebayo Adelabu bypass journalists and communicate their agenda directly to the people via Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. (Oyedele, 2023)

Social media was also used to spread false information about each opponent. With the click of a button candidates manipulated pictures and made false claims in hopes of

damaging the reputation of their opponents. “Social Media In Nigeria can be used for good or bad.”

Theoretical Framework

Habermas’ Public Sphere Theory

Jürgen Habermas (born June 18, 19 ; German: [ˈjuːʁŋ ˈhaːbəʁmaːs] ; THEHG ; Haus 15 ; Huni 19) is a German philosopher and sociologist in the second half of the 20th century. A prominent social and political theorist, Habermas has been frequently associated with the tradition of critical social theory established during the 1920s by the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt am Main, Germany, popularly known as the Frankfurt School. Habermas was among the second-generation members of the Frankfurt Institute, coming after its first-generation and foundational figures, notably Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse.

Well known both outside the academy for his contributions to social criticism and public intellectual life and inside it for his massive treatises and essays in which he developed a grand vision of modern society and the

prospects for human freedom in it, Habermas has been among the most influential thinkers of the past century. His work has had a major impact on communication studies, cultural studies, moral and political theory, law, linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, political science, religious studies and theology, sociology, and democratic theory.

Written in 1962, Habermas’s most popular work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. While he was articulating a theory, he was also telling the history of how this new idea of “the public” came to be formed, flourish, and in his view, degrade.

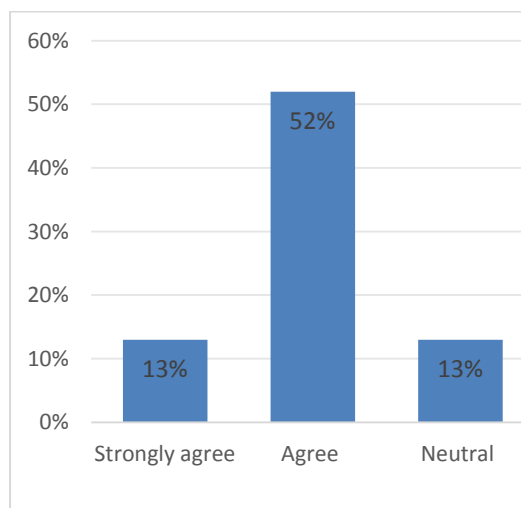
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quantitative research design will be used for this study. In a survey research, descriptive statistics, questions are asked and structured responses on topics are collected from large population. With this method, statistics will be used to study social media use and political engagement among student/citizen's that involved themselves in political matters and discourse during the year of electioneering 2019-2023, it will also allowed generalization of result on social media

impact on voters in Oyo state at large. Also by using quantitative method, it will help measure social media influence perception on people

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Fear of online harassment or abuse limits my willingness to speak freely on social media.

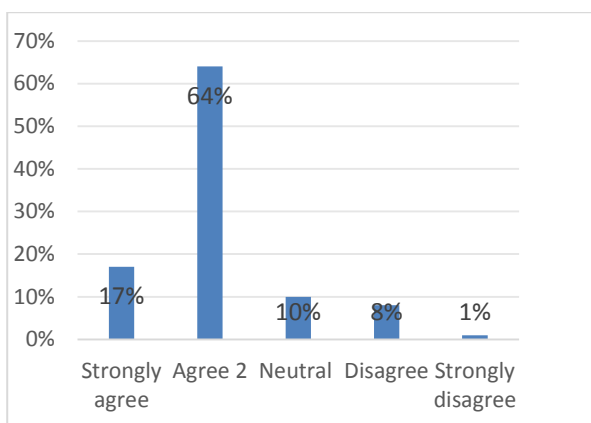


Source: Field Survey (2026)

The figure present the distribution based on whether fear of online harassment or abuse

limits respondents willingness to speak freely on social media. According to the result of the analysis, 13 percent indicated strongly agree, 52 percent indicated agree, 13 percent indicated neutral, 15 percent indicated disagree, and 7 percent indicated strongly disagree. It can be deduced that fear of online harassment or abuse limits the willingness of majority of the respondent to speak freely on social media with a total of 65%.

Social media platforms allow a wide range of political voices to be heard.



Source: Field Survey (2026)

The figure present the distribution based on whether social media platforms allow a wide range of political voices to be heard. According to the result of the analysis, 17 percent indicated strongly agree, 64 percent indicated agree, 10 percent indicated neutral, 8 percent indicated disagree, and 1 percent indicated strongly disagree. It can be deduced that the use of social media platforms has allowed quite a wide range of political voices to be heard going by a 81% responses in agreement from respondents.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

1: Social Media And Freedom Of Expression.

Going by the data presented, it can be deduced that the respondent that constitute the sample size spent between 1 to 5 hours on social media network on a daily basis. Not only that, it also appears that Tiktok is the most used social media platform. Findings above further showed that respondent do not really feel free to express their political opinion on social media due to the fear of consequence.

While it revealed that social media has however allowed marginalized group to have stronger voice in public discourse. In addition, quite a number of the respondents feel free to express their political opinion on social media without fear of online harassment or abuse. Lastly, findings revealed that social media platform allowed a wide range of political voices to be heard. This findings is however supported by Eze (2025) that social media is a platform that allows individual to express their political opinion without fear of consequences and as well allows marginalized group to have stronger voice in public discourse.

CONCLUSION

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of social media on freedom of expression and political polarization in Nigeria. Four research questions guided the study. In this study, a survey research design was adopted; the population comprises students, citizens within voting age, social media users in Oyo state who participated in political discourse during the 2019-2023 election. The researcher

employed online questionnaire administration which gave room for instant collection method. Relevant literature were reviewed which guided the objective of this study.

As a result of the data obtained online, the following findings were made; fear of consequence limits freedom of expression on political opinion on social media, social media has allowed marginalized group to have strong voices in public discourse. Concerns about misinformation justify restriction on social media content to protect public interest. Social media is a major tool for political polarization in Oyo state.

The research gave the conceptual review of the key words in the project. It analyzed the intersection between social media and politics in Nigeria WHILE linking their relationship together and how they influence each other. it also further examine the influence of social media on freedom of expression and how individual can freely express themselves on social media without fear or restriction. It examined the concept of social Media as a tool for political polarization. Lastly it enumerated the concept of regulation on

social media freedom in Nigeria, such as policies against online polarization.

The result indicated that fear of consequence limits freedom of expression on political opinion on social media. However, social media has allowed marginalized group to have strong voices in public discourse. The result also deduced that due to concerns about misinformation encountered by social media users, restriction on content to protect public interest is justified.

The result deduced that social media is a major tool for political polarization in Oyo state. Lastly, result deduced that government should impose stronger regulation to curb misinformation on social media and also prioritize education on digital literacy as a policy to reduce polarization and enhance healthy freedom of expression on political matters.

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