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The Impact of Social Media on Political Engagement

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the complex relationship between social media platforms and political engagement among youth and citizens globally. Drawing from studies conducted in Kenya, Nigeria, and broader historical contexts, the research highlights the dual nature of social media: while it offers a dynamic space for political participation, information sharing, and mobilization, it also fosters misinformation, superficial debates, and political disengagement. The rise of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube has reshaped political campaigning and voter turnout strategies, offering both opportunities and threats to democratic processes. Through an exploration of user behavior, platform characteristics, and the evolving nature of political communication, the paper analyzes how social media both amplifies civic participation and challenges traditional modes of political engagement. The findings suggest that while social media is a powerful tool for political mobilization, its true impact is contingent on the nature of citizen engagement and platform dynamics, emphasizing the need for critical media literacy and innovative political strategies.
Keywords: Social Media, Political Engagement, Voter Turnout, Political Campaigns, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube.

INTRODUCTION
Studies examining the impact of social media networks (SNSs) on citizens' political behavior reveal important insights. A study involving 37 young citizens in Nairobi found that 62% perceived social media political content as corrupt, with little incentive to vote. Approximately two-thirds reported that social media did not influence their political decisions, although 27% acknowledged changing their views based on online content. In Nigeria, the mobile phone and youth political participation were analyzed over the past decade. A survey revealed a high prevalence of mobile phone ownership (100%), with Facebook (97%) and Twitter (55%) being the primary platforms for political engagement. Most respondents acquired their phones through personal income, and about half found politics interesting, while 62% followed political news. The study indicated a notable level of political knowledge among youth and noted the growing significance of social media in political processes. Youth engagement in electioneering events showed increased participation, with SMS, voice calls, and Facebook being particularly engaging. However, only 35% deemed it important, highlighting mixed feelings regarding social media's role in their political involvement [1, 2].

Historical Context of Political Engagement
Young adults today have a unique perspective on life compared to older generations. Typically, aged 18 to their thirties, they thrive in a technologically advanced world filled with incredible innovations. The digital landscape—encompassing emails, smartphones, social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, and search engines like Google—enables them to access a wealth of information and resources. Their lives, influenced by technology, evoke emotions that may reflect outwardly. However, their awareness of global injustices and authority misconduct can be limited. The constant stream of grim news, often related to space and other distant issues, may cause discomfort, yet many young adults remain unaware of their capacity to effect change, opting instead for passive engagement through social media. A simple click can amplify a message, but low engagement may merely translate to indifference. Scholars have not yet fully defined how young adults communicate within their expansive social circles. Despite their awareness of a globalized world, their engagement levels are in question. They might casually browse without critically assessing their media choices or understanding their potential impact on their political

participation. While young adults may exhibit higher engagement than older individuals, they could remain politically uninformed. The interplay between sociability, media use, and political involvement raises questions: Does social media enhance or reduce political engagement among this generation? [3, 4].

The Rise of Social Media

Social media is a place where the blurb of a person's life can be documented. Social media provides a platform for individuals to express personal thoughts and ideals; it also provides a place for the citizenry to discuss social issues, including political debates, concerns, and the approach that the political office plans to take. Before the rise of social media, mass media were the most pertinent means of influencing a society's view of government and politics. In a sense, the invention of the television and radio created a proxy for politicians in a race. To engage the general population and influence their view of political action, politicians would use mass media to convey opinions and beliefs. The emergence of social media gave rise to "ordinary" people having a say and affecting the politics of a country, and popular movements such as the developments of 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt, also referred to as the Arab Spring, eventually gave mass media less relevance. Social media has worsened the context of political campaigning, although citizens are politically more active with the tool, they also tend to devote time to uninformed debate more than carefully following political candidates and cooperating with and supporting political parties. Social media has been successful for some, both as a tool for political campaigning and a means of citizen-targeted outreach efforts. Political campaigns have begun to rely more heavily on the use of social media as a tool for electioneering. As social interaction applications have gained widespread popularity, social media campaigning has recently grabbed the attention of political candidates. In turn, the demand for social media sites by the citizens has rapidly increased. Political blogs, fan pages, official candidate feeds, and news websites are now viewed daily by millions. The rise in the usage of social media has affected how information is disseminated. More than ever, an event or a story can become the focus of the public eye almost instantaneously [5, 6].

Social Media Platforms Overview

I. Facebook is a leading social media platform where users can engage with friends and family through messages and updates. It allows for asynchronous interactions, meaning users can create and respond to content on their schedules. A Facebook Business Page serves as a public brand profile for political candidates, helping them build a fan community during elections and showcase their professional backgrounds and policy visions. Unlike personal profiles, which limit viewer access, public profiles are open for sharing and discussion. By 2016, Facebook had 1.8 billion monthly active users, making it an attractive platform for political advertising due to its extensive user data and privacy settings. Importantly, many candidates maintain multiple accounts with varying privacy controls; about 30,000 candidate accounts existed, with roughly 18,000 being active. On average, only 7% of followers see an organic post unless it is boosted through payment. II. Twitter, a microblogging service, facilitates real-time sharing of concise messages. As a synchronous medium, tweets are often posted and consumed instantly, allowing followers to engage simultaneously. Instead of localized discussions, users share event information publicly, leveraging hashtags to enhance visibility. Trending topics often center around current events and can be used by political actors to control information flow. On days without elections, users typically engage in sharing important news rather than purely expressing opinions. Twitter has played a crucial role in significant protests, like the 2009 Iranian elections and the 2014 Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution, allowing politicians to connect with voters. However, the platform faced scrutiny during the 2016 campaigns over issues like false tweets and bot activity. Political accounts are frequently searched to stay updated on news, enhancing their authority but threatening journalistic integrity. Moreover, public dialogue allows candidates to engage with voters, fostering both constructive and critical discussions, while traditional media often competes with political accounts in framing narratives [7, 8].

Facebook

Facebook is primarily used to maintain established connections rather than create new ones. The platform allows users to showcase their relationships online, which can influence perceptions about their social status. Users may be viewed as odd with few friends, as phony with too many, or socially attractive with just the right number. Research indicates that Facebook users prioritize others' opinions over their messages in shaping their social presence. Political engagement varies globally, influenced by socio-economic conditions and government policies. In a study of 854 Kenyan youth Facebook users, two-thirds reported that social media posts did not influence their political views; however, 27% acknowledged changes in opinion due to political content. Interestingly, 49% found politics engaging, and 62% followed

political news, though 18% claimed they paid little attention, contradicting their prior engagement. The findings suggest a notable level of political knowledge among Kenyan youth. This underscores the growing role of social media in political discourse, as reliance on SNSs correlates with increased political participation, showing a significant but not overwhelming impact on political activities and campaigning [9].

Twitter

Twitter, launched in 2006, revolutionized communication with short messages. Users can follow friends, family, and influencers for real-time updates on mobile devices or online. Interaction occurs through re-tweeting and commenting with "@" signs. Hashtags enabled trending topics, leading to lively online discussions and the rise of micro-blogging. With 243 million active users and 173 million tweeting monthly, the platform sees an average of 454 million tweets daily, although 19% of users produce 75% of the content. It attracts a diverse user base, including 6% of the US population and 37% of 17–24-year-olds. Unique attributes of Twitter include anonymity, simplicity, and concise communication. In contrast, other social media platforms serve different purposes: Facebook for sharing and connecting, Wikipedia for collaborative information, and dating sites for finding partners. Blogs offer catalog-like entries, while platforms like Reddit prioritize content contribution without maintaining profiles. The blogosphere consists of numerous independent blogs, each offering unique viewpoints [10].

Instagram

Instagram, a leading social network, has seen declining user engagement since Facebook's acquisition. Nevertheless, it has emerged as a platform for political participation due to its extensive reach, high engagement, and ease of use compared to networks like Facebook and Twitter. The platform's perceived lack of hostile debates has made it an informal source for political news, particularly appealing to younger audiences and crucial for election mobilization. Despite this growth, Instagram faces common social media issues, such as disinformation, inauthentic accounts, and polarized political discourse. Its comment sections feature user mentions, emojis, and links, but are also riddled with account suspensions and diverse user experiences, including odd interactions with bot accounts. This complexity complicates political discussions on the platform. The core of this analysis focuses on influencer interactions related to political content, investigating how they communicate with political accounts and the nature of the comments. The study aims to provide an empirical perspective on the dynamics of political discourse within the context of Instagram's unique environment [11].

TikTok

TikTok has gained popularity as a short-form video platform, particularly among younger users, but its role in political engagement is still emerging. Initially, TikTok was less impactful than traditional platforms in shaping political discourse. However, its algorithm and diverse content may enhance political participation among less-engaged demographics. In April 2020, TikTok achieved 2 billion downloads and saw a 70% increase in live viewership within three months, ranking as the top mobile app globally in Q1 2020. The app allows users to create and share a variety of videos, from entertainment to political content, guided by an algorithm that curates feeds based on user activity and trends. Hashtags, location, and sound enhance visibility, while content virality depends on factors like audience familiarity and authenticity. TikTok fosters unique communities, differing from earlier online environments by being participant-led and driven by an attention economy. It empowers diverse users to express their voices, presenting opportunities for challenging existing power dynamics and spotlighting underrepresented narratives. Content often provides perspectives overlooked by mainstream media. Countries that restrict TikTok highlight concerns over cultural and communicative control. Overall, TikTok is a potent platform for marginalized stories and viewpoints [12].

YouTube

It would be reductive to say that the impact of YouTube grew exponentially over TikTok. YouTube continues to be immensely popular, offering users room to be creative. It has been said to help develop 'a second screen effect' for many people, who can now watch television and comment on it in real time. This phenomenon has also drawn traditional media outlets' attention, and it has been said that 'nowadays, the question is no longer whether the news is on YouTube, but rather at what time'. United States Republicans such as Donald Trump and Ted Cruz have become exceptionally popular through social media (YouTube included). Trump, Cruz, Paul, and others have preferred solutions and ideas that are not mainstream. Moreover, YouTube is a more convenient and attractive platform for the broadcast of recent, traditionally non-mainstream media ideas. YouTube takes issues that, over time, would have been discarded and reexamines them, thereby gaining popularity. Due to its many advantages, YouTube gradually became grander, newer, and closer to the users than other grand news channels. As a new and

less sophisticated platform, YouTube attracted already developed Western criticism. Critics say YouTube will ruin society by allowing 'normal' and undeveloped (non-learned) ideas to be broadcast everywhere. All these objectives were welcomed by themselves in letters or by market positioning and location. Societal rules were cast aside, and a somewhat insulting society was built in such a way early on. In newly digitized societies, learned responses with harsh critique are still a newborn consequence that would subside in the future. The 'best practices' so far evolved by these learned partner countries are very specific and not sufficient. They do not narrate how the parties and state can win the lost board game of discourses in diverse non-sorted local partners. Non-standard cases are not shared [13].

Theories of Political Engagement

Political engagement is not new. The changing notions of who has a say in major decisions are more recent. The voting franchise has expanded, but even in democratic countries, not all have a say, and throughout the world, the DUI masses have no influence at all over the most important 'political' decisions affecting their lives. Voter apathy and disillusionment are, in part, an involuntary response to the chronic failure of modern Western governments to satisfy the great expectations they have themselves created in the populace. For those who wish for change, there are two complementary approaches. The obvious is to try and encourage more people to vote. Redressing the balance of who has a say and who does not is a difficult task and a hopelessly naïve one if the social, economic, and communication inequalities already built into the democratic polity are not squarely addressed. The greater the gulf between the few in control and the many outside looking in, the more difficult it will be to effect change. One method of encouraging future politicians is to educate them in the art of democratic dissent while facilitating their activism through perceived 'safe' channels. With the implementation of social networks, the opportunity for political engagement increased. Political parties and candidates made use of the eventual turnout by sending mass political messages and advertising roadblocks across accounts. The election scene on social media escalated into polarizing behavior by the politicians and damaging 'viral' information, both seen as expensive for democracy. Social media evolved as both an opportunity and a threat, creating the need for political modeling concerning technology-based activities. Analysis of content that might be damaging to candidates and the parties came along as an attempt to process and monitor the statements made by competitors [6, 14].

Social Media and Voter Turnout

The capacity of social media to create nonlinear interactions makes it inherently less predictable than traditional media. The findings should provide realistic expectations about the efficacy of social media as a tool for citizen engagement. Research overwhelmingly finds that consumption of traditional media results in increased likelihood of voting, but mixed results exist regarding social media. The most likely explanation for this is the diverse ways in which citizens are using and engaging with social media. It may result in greater efficacy of social media in mobilizing same-day voting and turnout than in encouraging consideration of the election as a worthwhile activity. The second major finding is that television news consumption conveys a positive increase in voter turnout, tenor, and precinct-based. This is in line with the expectations that formal avenues of media would still mobilize voters better than informal venues by promoting their efficacy and civic interest. Social media, by contrast, had no statistically significant relationship with voter turnout or tenor. Negative results were less likely in first-day social media consumption than last-day consumption, with the same day being either in relation to now or 1 day ago. Increasing voter transparency is a long-term goal of digital discussion, and thus, the effects of social media should result in mobilization and turnout tenor certainty. These effects may have been realized, indicating that it takes time for a large-scale network intervention to unfold in a large debate. Although previous mobilization may not have resulted in turnout or same-day turnout, this does not mean that it could not do so in the future. Given that organizing behind the scenes is commonplace, this result is believed, and thus, slightly more patient discourse-based interventions would likely be effective in increasing turnout [15, 16].

Influence of Social Media on Political Campaigns

The high visibility of social networks for political campaigning at all levels of governance is astonishing. Users can communicate ideas, defend beliefs, challenge counterarguments, and explore evolving ideas, mostly for free. However, as the Internet's ever-evolving form has changed children's childhood experience, a generation has emerged that knows no other world but the Internet, with a speck of social media like Facebook. From there, an exercise of political debate, expressions of political beliefs, campaign preparations, mingling of potential candidates, political bickering, and political jocular posts is now common. The 2012 presidential election in the United States brought forth a social media boom that had not been seen before. The use of social networks in the campaign strategy is no longer limited to

fundraising, voter turnout, and attack ads on rival candidates, but for direct messages to voters. During the campaign process, social media posts, tweets, and even videos could impact not only voters' visions of the candidates but affect many aspects of their opportunity to participate or disengage in the political process. The results of the 2012 election are sobering. With social media on the verge of a universal communicative platform that many are familiar with and engaging in, politicians in any country worldwide over have a tool that has reached some standardization, which offers great opportunities to connect with constituents and the electorate. Social media sites were misused in several cases, pressuring teenagers of different social classes to engage in cyberbullying and even leading several to eventual suicide. Therefore, this research was done to examine how much social media could impact political campaigns and how this process works. Social networks have changed economic activity globally. With growing speeds of broadband Internet penetration, users spend more time on social networks, driving profits and consequently share prices of social media companies to astronomically high. As a result of this growth, social networks have become a relevant aspect of political campaigns at any level, leading candidates to ponder their engagement in the process. Similarly to several researchers who have written considerably upon the impact of social media on political campaigns, such a work was undertaken too. As there is so much information to process regarding that subject over time, a case study was conducted to analyze the overall impact of social media, through the political campaign of Barack Obama [17, 18].

Role of Influencers in Political Discourse

In recent years, more scholars have begun to explore how influencers shape political discourse. Influencers are individuals who have the power to affect the purchasing decisions of others due to their authority, knowledge, position, or relationship with their audience. Influencers come in all shapes and sizes, with each level of social capital attracting specific audiences. Influencers have a unique position of power and influence due to their money, reach, and the ability to control which brands and products get attention. Influencers regularly post content, stories, and events that help form and disseminate a particular narrative surrounding that topic. Potentially, political speech could be communicated in this same manner, especially since political speech is often emotionally driven social speech. As such, the question arises as to whether political speech is being further co-opted by influencers who shape society's understanding of political discourse. Specifically, political influencers are sought out as trusted sources of political discourse to follow, who speak on political topics in a relaxed and informal manner. Political influencers have proliferated, and there has been a growing interest in understanding how they shape political discourse and what motivates their audience to consume this content. Although many democratic societies have engaged with political influencers, there is a growing awareness of the need for transparency and accountability concerning both the influencer and the platform, and how those shape political discourse. At the same time, in recent months, there have been multiple high-profile events that echo concerns regarding the trustworthiness of political influencers and the discourse they help shape [19, 20].

Social Media as A Tool for Activism

The issue of how social media is changing activism and, consequently, the potential for societal change has gained interest in the last ten years. Can social media be used for activism? Can it bring about meaningful political change? Or is social media just contributing to a growing interest in so-called "slacktivism," where people show concern about a social justice issue by clicking "like" on Facebook but otherwise do very little outside the virtual world? How do social relations affect social media activism? In what ways do social media activists use their social media tools? Do users promote their activist work? And on account of structural conditions, what factors limit individuals' desires to use social media for activism? These issues are addressed with qualitative interviews of various social media activists. These interviews present that social media is an effective tool for raising awareness, particularly for spreading information about a cause to out-group members, but there are other important roles of this communication medium that promote mutual education within activists' networks. Limitations of social media activism relate to the inequality of social relations and conditions, not with individual users or the medium itself. As a result, these issues provide a better understanding of the growing interest in social media activism. In the past couple of years, there have been several seemingly unrelated incidents in terms of the effects of social media on the political agenda. Originally, this behavior was termed "cyberactivism." In the age of development of social media, such discussions on such political engagement through social media tools, termed "slacktivism," are becoming common. This paper discusses how social media, especially Twitter, have had an effect on cyberspace activism and movements against four different social issues in diverse socio-political contexts around the world. It argues that social media, as an open communication medium, played an important role as a stage for civic activism, bringing about social

change through continuous collective communication and social mobilization against the target institutions. At the same time, social media operates as a double-edged sword. It shapes the users as they shape social media. There are negative impacts of social media in civic activism, causing limited scope activism, unequal activists' network, and disinformation [21, 22].

Demographic Differences in Social Media Use

The rapid growth of social media technologies has given citizens significant opportunities to connect and communicate in real time, overcoming geographical distances and temporal limitations. These platforms have established an interconnected public space that facilitates interaction among governments, political leaders, movements, and citizens. This study aimed to explore how Kenyan youth utilize social media to engage in the political process and the impact of this technology on that engagement. Political engagement involves active participation in political activities, and although individuals can possess political opinions without direct involvement, engagement is not seen as passive. Social networking sites (SNSs) are recognized as key channels for political involvement. Social media is credited with rejuvenating democracy through increased political awareness, participation, and activism. By 2014, Kenya had approximately 6 million active Facebook users and 700,000 Twitter accounts. The emergence of social media has prompted a reevaluation of traditional notions of political engagement, particularly in developing democracies like Kenya, where the implications of social media on political participation remain insufficiently examined. Various methodological and conceptual challenges exist in gauging social media's political impact. While it's generally accepted that SNSs engage young users politically, opinions diverge on the nature and quality of that engagement. The 2013 General Elections exemplified this issue, as both candidates who effectively used social media underperformed in actual voting amid an internet blackout. This scenario prompted the media and political sphere in Kenya to reconsider social media's societal effects. Complaints were lodged against Ismaillah Wako Omar, a supporter of one candidate, for using social media to spur hateful exchanges with opposing candidates [23, 24].

Challenges and Risks of Social Media in Politics

The emergence of the internet in the 1990s and social media in the mid-2000s transformed citizen participation in democratic politics, challenging traditional ideas about 'politics' and 'the political'. Online platforms facilitate new ways of thinking, allowing diverse voices to be heard. However, these technologies also pose risks of manipulation and new forms of 'non-participation'. Such challenges are central to global debates on participatory democracy. In Africa, while youth are familiar with social media, evidence shows limited substantive political engagement via these platforms. Traditional participation methods, like attending meetings or discussing politics, are more common (63% to 73%). Active participation, such as protests or joining associations, remains rare among youth. Previous studies show that young Africans wish to engage politically but prefer informal methods. Though many active social media users express political interest, their engagement often occurs through trolling leaders or sharing satirical content, rather than substantive dialogue. These observations highlight the need to further explore the barriers to deeper political engagement among African youth, a group that has been largely under-researched [25, 26].

Future Trends in Political Engagement

In Kenya, two-thirds of the youth surveyed stated that social networking sites (SNSs) had never impacted their political decisions. However, 27 percent admitted to changing their political views after seeing social media posts. About 49 percent found politics interesting, while 62 percent paid attention to political news. The study shows a relatively high political knowledge among Kenyan youth and highlights the growing role of social media in politics. SNS reliance positively correlates with political participation, indicating a notable yet modest influence on political campaigns. This is reflected in measures like political engagement and civic involvement. The 2016 US presidential elections illustrated the trend of high political engagement via social media, with 78 percent of Facebook users participating in political activities. New forms of engagement emerged, such as hashtag campaigns and live streams. In Europe, social media has become central to political movements, evident in protests organized via platforms like Facebook and Twitter, termed Tweeting Revolutions. However, social media was not the sole factor in protests in Tunisia, Egypt, or across the Middle East, where traditional media also played a crucial role in facilitating political change. Pew Research noted an increase in political engagement in Middle Eastern social media spaces as well [27, 28].

CONCLUSION

Social media has undoubtedly transformed the landscape of political engagement, offering unprecedented access to information and avenues for participation. However, its impact remains complex and multifaceted. While platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have empowered

citizens, especially youth, to voice their political opinions and mobilize support, they have also introduced new challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and superficial engagement. The findings highlight that social media can both enhance and undermine political involvement, depending largely on how users interact with these platforms and how political actors leverage them. As digital spaces continue to evolve, fostering critical media literacy, encouraging meaningful discourse, and promoting responsible political participation are essential for ensuring that social media catalyzes democratic engagement rather than detracting from it. The future of political engagement in the digital age will depend on society's ability to harness the strengths of social media while mitigating its risks.

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