

## Public Perception of Social Media Contributions to Political Participation Processes in Delta State, Nigeria

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**Abstract:** The social media have become a critical component of Nigeria's democracy, with widely acclaimed potentials for influencing public civic engagement. However, the nature and direction of such influence remains a source of debate among researchers. This study examined public perception of the contributions of social media to political participation processes in Delta State, Nigeria. It adopted the survey method using a sample of 500 respondents selected through a multistage sampling technique. A likert scale questionnaire was used to collect data which were analysed using descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that although the social media were perceived to have positively influenced Nigeria's democracy by enhancing the flow of political information and awakening public political consciousness, the news and information being disseminated on social media platforms were noted to have increased the spate of hate speech and stoked political unease. The study recommended that citizen journalists should imbibe online responsibility and be sensitive to public needs and expectations while using any of the social media platforms for political ends.

**Keywords:** Civic Engagement; Prosumer; Netizen; Nigerian Democracy; Web 2.0

### 1. Introduction

Social media tools have redefined the pattern of human communication around the world. The free and speedy flow of information, which is the major index of social media technologies, has promoted liberty and enhanced the actualization of man's inalienable right to freedom of speech and of expression. These digital tools have impacted on global commerce, culture, religion and, most essentially, politics (Ashiekpe & Mojaye, 2017; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013). Through the use of the social media, many authoritarian and sit-tight political regimes have been ousted and replaced with more democratic ones as evident in the 'political tsunami' that swept through some African countries in the wake of the 2011/2012 popular Arab spring (Ufuophu-Biri & Ojoboh, 2017). The Arab uprising was essentially organised on

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Facebook, Twitter and Youtube which were used to coordinate protests that ended the protracted reigns of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Tunisia's Ben Ali and Libya's Muammar al-Gaddafi. Okoro and Nwafor (2013) assert that the social media have actuated a situation where people can easily ventilate their opinions about government; empowered citizens to perform check and balancing roles on public officers; made it possible and easy for the ordinary citizens to demand probity, transparency and accountability in government; and encouraged a higher level of political participation among users, otherwise called 'netizens'.

Political participation is a basic principle of democracy that encompasses both the active and passive involvement of people in the governmental processes affecting their lives (Agu, 2015). Such involvement manifests in an array of activities performed by the citizens of a country with the primary purpose of influencing the structures, policies and/or programmes of government (Castertrione & Pieczka, 2018). The importance of citizens' involvement in politics cannot be overemphasized given that the absence of political participation breeds political apathy among citizens and encourages government failures. The social media provide ample opportunities for citizens to sustain their cadence of political interest and participation by making their voices heard across space and time. They foster increased level of political participation between the people and the government (Madueke, Ogbonna & Anumadu, 2017).

Across the globe, countries, groups and individuals have used the social media to curry the attention of electorates and stimulate higher levels of political participation from the public. In Nigeria, the potency of the social media in stimulating and enhancing political involvement has also been well demonstrated. During general elections, it is common to find politicians, political parties and the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) making frantic efforts to connect with Nigerians via their various social media platforms. Besides their general efficacy for electioneering campaign purposes, the social media have also been utilized to co-ordinate some of the most impactful social campaigns against perceived government failures, such as the *Occupy Nigeria* protest initiated against the removal of fuel subsidy by the Nigerian government in January 2012, and the *#BBOG* (Bring back Our Girls) campaign coordinated on Twitter and other social networking sites to draw public attention to the seemingly forgotten story of over 200 Chibok Community School girls abducted by Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria's North-east.

### **1.1. Problem Statement**

Despite the abundance of research on politics and social media use, there seems to be limited empirical studies on public perception of the much touted contributions of social media to democracy and political participation. Perception is the cognitive process through which individuals organise, interpret and make appropriate meaning from the information they are exposed to. It does not only create people's experience of the world around them, but also allows them to act appropriately within a predefined environment. Studies indicate that there is an overlapping relationship between perceptions and technology use (Segard, 2015). Thus, the way a phenomenon is perceived defines how it is assessed, embraced or rejected. In order to bridge this gap in knowledge and extend the frontiers of empirical discussions on the interplay between civic engagement and social media use, the present study was guided by three central objectives which were to: (i) determine the level of public exposure to social media political contents; (ii) ascertain public perception of the peculiar nature of social media political contents; and (iii) evaluate public perception of the contributions of social media to political participation processes in Delta State, Nigeria.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Emergence of the Information Society**

Social media represent the new variant of web-based platforms that promote interactivity and connectivity among users. They are essentially based on the web 2.0 technology and depend on computer-mediated tools that are capable of facilitating expressions, building online community of users, creating or co-creating social values known as Users Generated Content (UGC), and engendering discussions among people who may be spatially dispersed (Akpoghiran & Erubami, 2019). These tools, according to Kaplan & Haelin (2010), are broadly categorised into social networking sites (as in Facebook), blogs and micro blogs (as in Twitter), collaborative projects (as in Wikipedia), content communities (as in YouTube), virtual game world (as in World of Craft) and virtual social world (such as Second life).

In Nigeria, the social media ranks among the commonest platforms for interaction and exchange of ideas among people, hence they have been described as the newest platforms for experiencing the products of journalism (Ajayi & Adesote, 2015). About 30.9 million Nigerians are estimated to be active users of various social media platforms and this figure is projected to rise to 36.8 million in 2023 (Clement, 110

2019). The pervasiveness and popularity of the social media could be linked to their unwritten principle of 'share it and share in it'. Users do not only receive and consume contents on the social media, but are also empowered to produce and disseminate information they deem fit, making them 'prosumers' in the process. Similarly, the increasing number of Nigerians with access to the internet is another reason for the geometric growth in the number of active social media users in Nigeria. For example, about 126,078,999 Nigerians used the internet for various purposes in 2019 (Internet World Stats, 2020).

The use of the social media is usually not restricted. People deploy them for various purposes, ranging from mundane personal conversations (Ashiekpe & Mojaye, 2017; Akpoghiran & Erubami, 2019) to a more serious discussion on politics and democracy (Abdu et al., 2018). Interestingly, social media use has been found to be among the significant factors influencing politics and citizens' political participation (Aleyomi & Ajakaiye, 2014; Ekwueme & Folarin, 2018). As a concept, political participation has attracted numerous definitions and theorizations. Nonetheless, it incorporates all activities that people engage in chiefly for the purpose of influencing the structures, policies or officials of government. These activities could entail the direct or indirect and passive or active involvement of citizens in the acts that can shape the selection of political representatives and/or influencing the course of action of public office holders (Nwafor, Odoemelam, Orji-Egwu, Nwankwo & Nweze, 2013; Madueke et al., 2017). The processes of political participation are reflective of individuals' interest and psychological involvement in politics with the purpose of influencing the actions of government and the political behaviours of other individuals or group (Castertrione & Pieczka, 2018).

Political participation extends beyond merely voting in elections. Madueke et al. (2017) classify the concept into four broad categories of direct, indirect, conventional and unconventional forms of political participation, using the extent of individuals' involvement and conformity with existing regulations as the major parameters. In their classification, those activities involving the full physical involvement of citizens such as voting in elections or referenda, joining strikes and mass protests, etc, are direct forms of political participation, while the indirect forms involves participating in political discussions, tax payment, signing petitions and supporting boycotts. On the other hand, conventional form of political participation refers to the one in which citizens utilise the instrument of democracy- such as voting in elections, lawful strike and contributing to town hall meetings- which are sanctioned by the constitution to make inputs in government, while the unconventional method of

participation defies laid down rules and regulations as in open demonstration, violent protest march, organised rebellion, feral revolution and deference to government warnings.

The introduction of the social media to politics has influenced the level of public political participation in diverse ways (Castertrione & Pieczka, 2018). The social media draw their strength from their speed, ease of use, and universality that make them globally accessible at a relatively low cost. Unlike the mainstream media, there is virtually no control, code of ethics or gate-keeping on most social media platforms, thereby opening their use to the intentions and discretions of users (Ufuophu-Biri & Ojoboh, 2017) This unfettered latitude offered by the social media also seems to constitute their weakness. Thus, it has been hypothesised that the wrongful deployment of these digital technologies could result in information overload and spread of half-truth (Akpoghiran & Erubami, 2019), moral panic, invasion of territorial sovereignty and promotion of violence (Nwafor et al., 2013). As argued by Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016), the unregulated nature of social media creates openings for mischief-makers to promote campaigns of hate, deceit and propaganda. An aggregate of these unsavory realities may likely influence the way members of the public perceive the social media in relation to their contributions to political participation and democracy.

## **2.2. Social Media and Political Participation: An Empirical Exploration**

Studies on social media and political participation are characterised by contrasting evidence, resulting in three dominant schools of thought: the optimists, the pessimists and the normalisers (Casteltrione & Pieczka, 2018). Proponents of the pessimist paradigm present a picture of limited or malaising influence of the social media on political participation. For instance, while assessing the contributions of the social media to the development of social capital, which is a crucial factor for healthy democracies, Valenzuela and Kee (2009) found a limited effect of Facebook on political participation among college students across Texas, USA. In the study involving 2,603 respondents selected through a random web survey, the researchers found a small relationship between intensity of Facebook use and social capital-students' life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement and political participation-, leading them to conclude that online networks were less effective in reversing the trend of youth political apathy. Similarly, in an ethnographic study to assess the potentials of social networking sites for the promotion of either political participation or the politics of individuation, Fenton and Barassi (2011) concluded that despite the

widely acclaimed positive potentials of the social media, the logic of self-centered participation promoted by these platforms represents a threat to political mobilisation and participation. They further contended that although the social media stir up civic consciousness among users, such users are usually so self-absorbed that they only see the unending possibility of online connectivity “against the banality of the social order”. Consequently, the political gains emanating from social media use were significantly undermined by their tendency to “deinstitutionalize politics, fragment communication and accelerate the pace of the public agenda” (Fenton & Barassi, 2011, pp. 193–194).

As opposed to the pessimists, the optimists argue in favour of the mobilising power of the social media on political participation. This paradigm was reflected in the work of Xenos, Vromen and Loader (2014) who found a strong positive relationship between social media use and individual political engagement among young people in Australia, the USA and the UK. Karamat and Farooq (2016) also found that online networking sites have become the most effective means of getting information and providing opportunities for young people to be part of popular political revolts and democratic activism. This view was further extended by Ahmad, Alvi and Ittefaq (2019) who found that social media use significantly influenced the respondents’ level of political efficacy, political awareness and offline political participation as their online political activities created the needed platform for participation in real-life political events.

However, the normalisers contend that the social media are neither powerless nor extremely powerful as they are strong enough to reinforce latent pattern of participation among citizens by offering them more ways to engage in politics, but too weak to change the nature of such latent pattern of participation. This argument is typified in the work of Yoo and Gil de Zúñiga (2014) who examined the use of Blog, Facebook and Twitter on the gaps in political knowledge and participation between the more educated users and their less educated counterparts in the US. The results of their two wave online survey showed that although Facebook use was positively associated with education in predicting knowledge of civic and political issues, the platform merely amplified or reinforced the existing inequality of political engagement as manifest in the wide gap of offline participation among heavy social media users than among light users. An earlier study by Carlisle and Patton (2013) had also shown that individual activity on Facebook was less extensive than predicted in most literatures. The result of their t-test involving 1,014 participants showed that contrary to belief that online tools enrich political engagement, the

existing inequalities in real life are translated and carried over into online experiences.

In Nigeria however, studies interrogating the interplay between social media and political participation show much bias for the optimism paradigm. In their analysis of the role of social media in the enhancement of political participation, Madueke et al. (2017) found that the use of online political engagements through social media platforms have significantly affected the day-to-day participation of Nigerians in the country's political processes. According to them, the salutary positive political effect of social media use stem from their capacity to connect users to a large, geographically dispersed audience at a relatively low cost, irrespective of their demographic compositions and social status. Consequently, these inherent advantages of the social media have stimulated public interest in politics. Results of the multiple regression analysis in the study by Abdu et al. (2018) also affirmed democratizing effect of the social media on users as the respondents' extent of offline participation in politics was positively and significantly associated with their Facebook use (.827), interactivity with politicians (.789), perceived Facebook information quality (.725) and political interest (.776).

The use of social media for political purposes was first experimented in Nigeria during the 2011 general elections. Given its novelty, Okoro and Nwafor (2013) examined the drawbacks and lessons learnt from the experimental deployment of online platforms during the elections, and found sufficient evidence to conclude that although online media were used to make vital inputs in Nigeria's political discourse, the platforms were explored by users to attack perceived political opponents, spread false rumours, fake news, hate speeches and inciting messages that precipitated the tension and violence recorded before, during and after the elections in many parts of the country. Aleyomi and Ajakaiye (2014) also found that the social media had a significant positive influence on citizens' mobilisation and participation in the 2011 general elections. They concluded that online platforms were among the contributory factors that ensured the success of the 2011 general elections which was adjudged the freest and fairest in Nigeria since the country returned democracy in 1999.

Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) assert that despite the challenges associated with the use of social media, the platforms provide ample opportunities for political change and consolidation of democracy. The result of their cross-sectional survey revealed that majority of the respondents were exposed to various social networking sites, engaged in political discussions across various online media platforms and believed that the social media had political mobilisation effects on them. Ekwueme and

Folarin (2018) also found that the social media played key roles in mobilising electorates, creating the needed awareness on political happenings and engendering a high level of citizens' participation in the 2015 electioneering process in Nigeria, although they were also used to promote hate messages, negative memes and smear opposition political parties/candidates. This was also affirmed by Apuke and Appollos (2017)

### **2.3. Theoretical Framework**

The study was anchored on the Social Judgment Theory (SJT) and the Technological Frame of Reference theory. Propounded in 1961 by Muzafer Sherif, Carolyn Sherif and Carl Hovland, the SJT explains the underlying factors that may actuate people's acceptance, rejection or non-commitment to a communication encounter based on their perception and cognitive map. In relation to the current study, the SJT suggests that exposure to political information on the (social) media will encourage people to assimilate or equate their feelings about related pre-existing attitudes, and people's reactions to such political information (be it positive or negative) will be determined by their disposition at the time of exposure (Ekwueme & Folarin, 2018).

On the other hand, the TFR espoused in the 1994 works of Wanda Orlikowski and Debra Gash assumes that different people have different perspectives on the usefulness, importance and significance of technological artifacts and these differences significantly define how they perceive and relate with such technology (Segaard, 2015). According to the theory, people develop different frames-assumptions, expectations and knowledge- about a technology while trying to make sense of such technology and these developed frames shape their subsequent actions and dispositions towards the technology. Deductively, the TFR suggests that different people will hold different perceptions on the contributions of the social media to political participation processes based on their experiences, assumptions, expectations and knowledge about online communication platforms.

### 3. Methodology

The study adopted the survey research method which is suitable for examining people's perception and opinion towards issues (Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekharefo & Okpanachi, 2017). The population of study comprised 5,663,362 people resident in Delta State (National Bureau of Statistics, 2018.). A sample size of 500 was drawn for the study in line with Comrey and Lee's 1992 recommendations that a sample of 50 is very poor; 100 is poor; 200 is fair; 300 is good; 500 is very good; and 1,000 is excellent (Asemah et al., 2017).

A multi stage sampling technique was used to select the respondents. At the first stage, stratified sampling was used to divide the population into three senatorial districts- Delta South, Delta North and Delta Central. Delta Central was selected through a lucky dip. At the second stage, Ethiope West and Ughelli North local government areas (LGAs) were selected using the simple random sampling technique. The simple random sampling technique was also used at the third stage to select five towns each from the two selected LGAs: Ethiope West- Jesse, Mosogar, Otefe, Ogharefe and Oghareki; Ughelli North- Oteri, Afiesere, Ekiugbo, Ododegho and Iwhremaragha. At the last stage, accidental sampling technique was used to select 50 respondents from each of the ten towns. Data were collected using a structured likert scale questionnaire with responses ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Prior to administration, the instrument was subjected to content validity by two experts in research and media studies who affirmed that the contents were intelligible enough to elicit responses that would actualize the objectives of the study. On reliability, a pilot survey was conducted using 20 residents of Effurun, a town outside the study area. The result yielded a Cronbach Alpha of .878 (87.8%), implying reliability of the data set.

The descriptive statistics of percentage (%), mean ( $\bar{X}$ ) and Standard Deviation (SD) were used to analyse the data. The mean and standard deviation are considered the strongest and most widely used descriptive statistical tools in social science research (Nworgu, 2006; Asemah et al., 2017). The responses to each statement were averaged to determine the mean cut-off point for the study at 3.00, while the SD benchmark for the study was 1.41. The decision to either accept or reject a statement was adapted from Nworgu's (2006) recommendation that where a computed mean score is equal to or less than the bench mark (cut off point), the outcome is negative (rejected) but where a computed mean is greater than the benchmark, the outcome is positive (accepted). Accordingly, a high mean and low or moderate standard deviation indicated that the responses were markedly different (high variability),

while a low mean and a low or moderate standard deviation indicated a low variability in the responses.

#### 4. Results

Out of the 500 copies of the distributed questionnaire, 475 copies were appropriately filled, returned and found usable, representing a 95% response rate. 54.4% of the respondents were male; the least possible age of the respondents was 18 and the highest was 65, the modal age rang was 26-35 years. A total of 10.7% of the respondents have had primary education, 53% have had secondary education, while the remaining 36.3% have received various levels of tertiary education. Most of the respondents (55.8%) were self employed, 14.8% were civil servants, while the remaining 29.4% were either students or unemployed at the time of data collection.

**Table 1. Respondents' Use of Social Media and Exposure to Online Political Contents**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Respondents' use of social media	Yes	475 (100)
	No	-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>475 (100)</b>
Most frequently used social media platforms	Whatsapp	151 (31.8)
	Twitter	66 (13.9)
	Facebook	191 (40.2)
	Instagram	58 (12.2)
	YouTube	09 (1.9)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>475 (100)</b>
Extent of social media usage	Daily	305 (64.2)
	Weekly	112 (23.6)
	Monthly	58 (12.2)
	<b>Total</b>	<b>475 (100)</b>
Frequency of exposure to political contents on social media	Always	78 (16.4)
	Very often	263 (55.4)
	Sometime	99 (20.8)
	Rarely	35 (7.4)
	Never	-
	<b>Total</b>	<b>475 (100)</b>

*Source: Researcher's field survey, 2020*

Table 1 showed that all the respondents (100%) used the social media, with Facebook (40.2%), Whatsapp (31.8%) and Twitter (13.9%) ranking as the most frequently used platforms. Daily access topped the pattern of social media use among the respondents (64.2%) and during the usage, exposure to online political contents has become a very often experience among majority of the survey respondents (55.4%). This indicates the commonality of the social media as communication platforms and ubiquity of online political contents on social media platforms.

**Table 2. Respondents' Perception of the Nature of Social Media Political Contents**

S/ N	ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	X (SD)	Dec.
1	Social media contents on political contents are mostly negative	73 (15)	43 (9)	57 (12)	208 (44)	94 (20)	2.6 (1.3)	Rejec t
2	Most political contents on social media are false and unreliable	177 (37)	97 (20)	13 (3)	131 (28)	57 (12)	3.4 (1.5)	Acce pt
3	Political contents found on the social media are never current and up to date	26 (6)	26 (3)	12 (5)	243 (51)	168 (35)	1.9 (1.0)	Rejec t
4	Political conversations on social media are often mundane, trivial and rarely highlight important issues of the society	326 (69)	42 (9)	5 (1)	40 (8)	62 (13)	4.1 (1.5)	Acce pt
5	Social media political contents are generated by anyone and everyone	266 (56)	85 (18)	4 (1)	66 (14)	54 (11)	3.9 (1.5)	Acce pt

*Source: Researcher's field survey, 2020*

Table 2 showed that although the respondents identified the peculiar nature of social media political contents to be false, unreliable (N =58%; X = 3.4; SD =1.5) and largely centered on trivial issues of the society (N =52%; X = 3.1; SD =1.6), the contents are often current (N = 86%; X =1.9; SD =1.0) and targeted at majority of citizens (N = 77%; X = 4.1; SD=1.5).

**Table 3. Respondents' perception of social media contributions to political participation processes in Delta State**

S/ N	ITEMS	SA (%)	A (%)	UD (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	X (SD)	Dec. ept
1	Social media political contents fueled the hate speech phenomenon in Nigeria	308 (65)	86 (18)	4 (1)	57 (12)	20 (4)	4.3 (1.2)	Acc ept
2	Social media have facilitated the unhindered dissemination of political information at reduced cost and without needless censorship	315 (66)	140 (29)	9 (2)	7 (2)	4 (1)	4.6 (0.7)	Acc ept
3	The increasing level of political tension and violence in Nigeria is traceable to the use of social media in politics	237 (50)	142 (30)	13 (3)	67 (14)	16 (3)	4.1 (1.2)	Acc ept
4	Social media contents on politics have stirred up public interest in activities of political parties, groups and candidates	211 (44)	112 (23)	9 (2)	93 (20)	51 (11)	3.7 (1.5)	Acc ept
5	Exposure to social media political contents have given me a better understanding of political happenings	261 (55)	100 (21)	11 (2)	86 (18)	17 (4)	4.1 (1.3)	Acc ept
6	Social media merely empower users to discuss politics online without enough motivation to act offline	113 (24)	207 (44)	25 (5)	99 (21)	31 (7)	3.6 (1.2)	Acc ept
7	Exposure to political contents on social media has encouraged me to fight for a particular political cause	219 (46)	136 (29)	16 (3)	94 (20)	10 (2)	4.0 (1.2)	Acc ept
8	Social media have provided me the opportunity to get feedback from political leaders	251 (53)	112 (24)	12 (2)	73 (16)	27 (6)	4.0 (1.3)	Acc ept
9	Social media contents on political participation have made it easier to hold powerful people accountable	272 (57)	136 (29)	1 (.2)	36 (8)	30 (6)	4.2 (1.2)	Acc ept

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2020

Data in Table 3 indicated that some of the perceived positive contributions of the social media to politics were the enhancement of the flow of political information (N= 96%; X = 4.6; SD = 0.7), creation of opportunity for direct interaction with and feedback from public officers (N = 77%; X =4.0; SD = 1.3) as well as hold government accountable (N = 86%; X =4.2; SD = 1.2), awakening of political interests among users (N = 68%; X = 3.7; SD = 1.5),enhancement of public understanding of political issues (N = 76%; X =4.1; SD = 1.3), and encouragement of citizens to agitate for a popular cause (N = 75%; X = 4.0; SD =1.3). On the negative side, the online media were also perceived to have contributed to the growing phenomenon of hate speech in Nigeria (N= 83%; X = 4.3; SD =1.2), increased political unease (N= 80%; X =4.1; SD =1.2) and turned the average users to much of a talker with less offline action (N=66%; X =3.6; SD =1.2).

## 5. Discussion of Findings

The study has affirmed the popularity of the social media among Nigerians. All the respondents admitted to have used, at least, one of the various web 2.0 based platforms for communication, with Facebook (40.2%), Whatsapp (31.8%) and Twitter (13.9%) being the most frequently used social media platforms. This is consistent with previous studies (Ajayi & Adesote, 2015; Akpoghiran & Erubami, 2019; Clement, 2019). The popularity of the social media could be linked to their peculiar traits of convenience, interactivity, affordability and universality which allow geographically detached users to connect among themselves on the virtual space, and to do so with little or no restriction on the content of communication. Daily usage was found to be the dominant pattern of social media use among majority of the respondents (64.2%). This corroborated the findings of Ashiekpe and Mojaye (2017). Observably, most social media platforms such as Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter are often very personal and engaging. Countless messages are constantly shared to users either by their direct friends or members of a networked group to which they subscribe, thereby making their visitation and use of these platforms a continuum. Many of the messages shared on the social media are laced with political contents (Abdu et al., 2018), and this was reflected in the views of the respondents who admitted to getting exposed to political issues on the social media either always (16.4%) or very often (55.4%).

The respondents held both positive and negative perception towards the peculiar nature of political news and information shared on the social media. Data in Table 2 indicated that the respondents largely perceived social media political contents as

false, unreliable and often times centered on mundane discussions. This is in agreement with previous study in which online communication media were found to be harbinger/promoter of half truth and outright falsehood (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Apuke & Appollos, 2017). Credibility deficit remains a pending challenge undermining the adoption of social media as alternative communication platform and until the issue is sufficiently addressed, it may continue to significantly weaken the success of online communication efforts.

On the positive side, social media political contents were perceived to be current, tailored towards majority of citizens and based on UGC. Undoubtedly, the advantage of currency is one of the main gains of the social media which are often touted as 'the media of the now'. Their essential features enable users to post news, photos and videos about events simultaneously as they are taking place. Online tools like Twitter and Facebook do not just break the major news of the day, but also play some loosely defined roles in shaping public response to the news. By sharing and commenting on daily societal happenings, social media users do not only share the news of the day but also share in it. It was this UGC phenomenon that birthed the 'prosumer' concept, a situation whereby the ordinary consumers of news are also producing news for others to guzzle.

Regarding the specific contributions of the social media to political participation processes, our result showed that the respondents perceived online platforms to have positively contributed to the growth of democracy by facilitating the unrestricted flow of political information at reduced cost and without needless censorship. Inadvertently, the social media have also stimulated public interest in the activities of government, political parties, groups and individual politicians; enhanced public understanding of political events; provided a citizens-government interaction and feedback mechanism; as well as enhanced citizens' capacity to hold public officers accountable for their actions and inactions. Evidently, the information power shift made possible by the social media remains one of the notable contributions of online communication media to politics and democracy in Nigeria. The alteration of the conventional top-down communication paradigm typified by the mainstream media has taken the world some steps closer to the ideals of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO). Similarly, the 'prosumer' experience activated by social media tools has partly brought to fruition Karl Marx's principle of power redistribution and control in which the tools and means of distribution are in the hands of the workers. In this case, what is being distributed is political information which is crucial to informed decision making.

However, the perceived positive contributions of the social media to political participation processes seem to be dwarfed by their perceived negative contributions. The respondents agreed that social media political contents have significantly contributed to the growing phenomenon of hate speech, stoked political tension and violence; and given rise to politically active 'netizens' with inadequate motivation for offline political engagement. This affirms the conclusion of previous studies (Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Apuke & Appollos, 2017) that online communication tools promote subtle political cynicism and other harmful political outcomes.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

The study has shown that the social media are popular means through which people get exposed to political news and information in Nigeria and using online communication platforms has become a daily ritual among users in Delta State, Nigeria. Most users perceive the political contents shared on social media platforms to be false, unreliable and often woven around mundane issues, even though such contents may be current and user generated. Consequently, the perceived positive contributions of the social media to political processes in Delta State, Nigeria are being undermined by the impact of the perceived negativities associated with online media political contents.

In the light of these findings, it is recommended that social media users should act responsibly, be more sensitive to public needs and expectations, and where possible, adopt a self-censoring technique to check the correctness and appropriateness of the political information they share and receive online. As much as will be consistent with the right to freedom of speech and of expression, the society should device democratically appropriate measures to check the callous and unregulated use of social media tools for negative purposes. Governments and civil society organisations should engage in the mass sensitisation of users on the most beneficial ways to use the social media, particularly in relation to politics.

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