PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS AMONG STUDENTS OF SELECTED UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Every responsible government in participatory democracy has it as a major concern to ensure that the majority of the populace is carried along in the overall decision making in the political process. Presumably, a democratic election would characteristically be competitive, periodic, inclusive, definite, free and fair. To achieve this inclusiveness among the citizens in an election, the use of social media in politics has continued to attract wide attention and recognition. For instance, in the US presidential election in 2008, the Obama campaign team recognised the social media as a prominent innovator in the use of information and communication technology that have overshadowed the traditional media. Thus, this paper examined the Social Media and Youths' Participation in Politics among Students of Caleb University, Lagos and National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN),Abuja. Survey research design was adopted by the study, with the questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. The study sampled three hundred students of Caleb University, Lagos and three hundred students of NOUN, Abuja and 271 (90% return rate) and 263 (88% return rate) copies of the questionnaire were retrieved and used in the analysis. The study found that that even though traditional media still holds sway in Nigeria's political communication, the youth to a large extent, used social media platforms in the 2019 general elections by sending and receiving political messages. Moreover, social media greatly influenced the 2019 general elections. Students of both NOUN, Abuja and Caleb University Lagos very much used social media during the last general elections.

Keywords: Digital media, Social media, Youths and Political participation, Social Network and Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET).

Introduction

Digital technology has made it possible for global social media use within the realm of politics (Valenzuela, 2013), education, business and international relations (Olabimiji, 2014, cited in AbdulRauf, Abdul-Hamid and Ishak 2015).The use of social media in politics has continued to grow in recent times. Since Barack Obama broke the world record in the history of social media use for political purpose during the 2008 US Presidential election, many nations and politicians across the globe have continued to embrace the platform to mobilise their citizens and candidates towards active participation. In the process Nigeria had the first real test of social media use for political participation during the 2015 general election. Today, social media have become a natural part

of the everyday lives of people all over the world. Thus, the past few years have shown a rapid growth of user accounts and have been object of scientific analysis (Wigand, Wood &Mande, 2010; McAfee, 2006). It is noteworthy that the multiplicity of mass media platforms provides diverse channels for churning out political adverts. These platforms are radio, television, newspaper, magazines, outdoors, the Internet and most recently the social media (Tejumaiye, 2018).

According to Chatora (2012), political participation is citizens' involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/ or the actions taken by political representatives. The uses of various social media applications and software have tremendous impact on the activities of our youth in this present age and time. It has increased the level of the awareness of youths particularly as it relates to political and social inclusion. Amobi and McAdams (2014) state that "the web provides the most potent platform for political and civic mobilisation of young adults, a fact that is being exploited by politicians, the world over. According to World meters (2018), with an estimated population put at 195 million and 84.3 million Internet users as at September 2018 as reported by *Satista*, Nigeria is reportedly the biggest Internet market in Africa. Still, many have asserted that the reading culture has been severely affected by the growing popularity of the new media and that the traditional mass communication platforms like television, radio and newspaper are under imminent threats (Amobi and McAdams, 2014).

According to Instagram users demographics in Nigeria available on Napoleoncat.com (Kasia, 2017),research shows that out of 3,600,000 users on Instagram in Nigeria as at March 2017, 60% are male, while 40% are female. The breakdown shows that 36% are between the age brackets of 25 to 34 years of age. There is however no comprehensive study of activities of the users of social media particularly the Instagram. The social media has become a powerful medium which may affect voting behaviour because of its potential to provide direct and cheap access to the production and consumption of current information at any part of the world without editorial filtering (Sunstein, 2001). As observed in the 2019 Presidential elections in Nigeria, political parties, especially the two leading parties took to the social media platforms to campaign and mobilise mostly youths and other Internet users to vote for them.

According to Dwyer (2013, cited in Bandipo, 2016), in American politics, the campaign strategy of the Democrat's candidate, Barack Obama is fondly dubbed Obama 2.0. Its campaign success heralded the application of new media as a critical success factor in the electioneering process. Thereafter, American elections have remained at the vanguard in the use of these new media to interpret and analyse political strategy (Bandipo, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria had the first real test of social media use for political participation during 2015 general election with the adoption of social media especially, the Facebook by the politicians. The importance attached to social media in the 2015 general elections was better explained by President Goodluck Jonathan's decision to declare his intention to run for the highest political office in the land on Facebook. Jonathan informed his fans on the most popular networking platform (Facebook) of his intent, and 24hours later 4,000 fans joined his page adding to the 217,000 fan she already had. By the day of the election he had over half a million followers. His closest rival Alhaji Mohammadu Buhari of the APC, Nuhu Ribadu of the CAN and Alhaji Shakarau of the ANPP were also among those that made heavy presence on Facebook and other social media platforms.

In addition to the approximately 3 million registered Nigerians on Facebook and 60,000 on twitter, almost every institution involved in Nigeria's elections conducted an aggressive social networking outreach including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). It thus became very pertinent to examine the extent to which these precepts of the fundamental right of man have been observed in this context of Nigeria's politics and media practice, more importantly in the area of democratic election mostly by the youths. It must be noted that talks of democracy without the right to receive information and impact knowledge is unrealisable. A scholar like Wojcieszak (2012) has observed that researches in the area of social media and online political participation are not well theorised. Thus this paper examined the issue of digital media, social media and youths and political participation in Nigeria's political landscape by students in two institutions of learning. How well did the youths participate in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria? Objectives of this present paper are: (1) to determine the use of social media by the youth in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria; (2) to assess the impact of the use of social media in politics; and (3) to compare the extent of social media use in politics between the students of National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja and those of Caleb University, Lagos.

Research Questions

1. What is the rate of use of social media by the youth in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria?

2. What was the impact of the use of social media in Nigeria's 2019 elections?

3. What is the extent of social media use in politics between the students of National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja and those of Caleb University, Lagos?

Literature Review

Youths and Political Participation

Youth are a very integral set of people in any society. The thoughts, beliefs, actions and inactions of the youth have direct effect on a nation's political life (Gever, 2014). The National Youth Policy and Strategic Plan of Action of the Federal Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2001) defines the youth as individuals between the ages of 18 and 35. However, the Africa Youth Charter (AYC, 2006) which Nigeria is a signatory to, defines the youth as people of 15 and 35 years. The Charter which was adopted during the 7th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of the African Union held in Banjul, the Gambian capital on the 2nd of July, 2006 states in article 10(3a) that state parties shall "Encourage the media to disseminate information that will be of economic, political, social and cultural benefit to youth (Gever, 2014).

The large population of Nigeria's youth has made it possible for political parties to see them not only as a support base, but also see an opportunity to mobilise them in political campaigns. Social media was used extensively by youth and civil society. The social media encouraged young people to participate in political and electoral processes in order to make them relevant and their voices heard (Commonwealth, 2019). All major political parties, presidential candidates and INEC had a strong presence on social media, using it as a tool to issue statements and circulate information, in addition to traditional media.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on two relevant theoretical perspectives namely: Social Network Theory and Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET)

Social Network Theory

The social network is a theoretical construct useful in the social sciences to study relationships between individuals, groups, organisations, or even entire societies (social units). The term is used to describe a social structure determined by such interactions. The ties through which any given social unit connects represent the convergence of the various social contacts of that unit (Wikipedia, 2010). A diverse array of research traditions has shaped the current state of social network theory. Network cohesion measures the degree of interconnections among a group of nodes. This measure has long been useful to detect subgroups or cliques within the larger social network (Burt, 1987, citedin Liu, Valente, Sidhu and Beacom, 2017). Friedkin's (1993,cited in Liu, et al 2017), longitudinal study found that personal influence grows stronger within more cohesive social network than less cohesive ones.According to LittleJohn and Foss (2008) cited in Agbo (2014), "Networks are social structures created by communication among individuals and groups". The basic structural idea of social network theory is the connectedness.

Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET)

The concept of cognitive engagement is the extent to which individuals are willing and able to learn about politics which eventually leads to participation (Wang and Anderson, 2014).According to AbdulRauf, Abdul-Hamid and Ishak, (2015) the Cognitive Engagement Theory (CET) was propounded by Ronald F. Inglehart in 1977 as Cognitive Mobilisation Theory (Alaminos and Panalva, 2012; Dalton, 1984). The theory involves the amount of efforts youths are willing to invest in seeking to participate in politics and also how long they persist in doing so (Charles, 2010).Online political participation is basically political participation that takes place on the Internet. They are digital modes of participation which are categorised as non-conventional forms of political participation. These non-conventional (also known as non-electoral or non-institutional) forms of participation have been on the increase since the last decade (Shore, 2014 cited in AbdulRauf, Abdul-Hamid and Ishak, 2015). The relevance of this theory to the present study is that the Nigerian youths have found their voice on the social media which they can leverage to adequately participate in the political landscape in the country.

Empirical Reviews

A study by Nwabueze, Obasi and Obi (2012), found that social media, native media and social entrepreneurship development in Nigeria has remarkably improved as a result of the social media. Nigeria has experienced massive turning point in the area of business as a result of the invention of social media.

Another study by Bandipo (2016) examined "The role of the New Media in the Electioneering Process of Developing Nations: A Case Study of Nigeria 2015". The study found that practically all stakeholders that participated in one way or the other relied on the new media to improve their operational capability and judgment. The study further revealed that the new media and its ability to disseminate information in geometric proportions is one of the critical factors responsible for the avoidance of post-election crisis in Nigeria.

Yet another related study by Okolo, Ugonna, Nebo and Obikeze (2017) examined the effects of social media in the marketing of political candidates in Nigeria. The study found significant positive relationship between usage of Facebook as an awareness social media tool and projection of a political candidate's image in Nigeria. The study thus concludes that social media serve credible tools and are capable of influencing the image of political candidates in Nigeria.

Another study by Adegbola and Gearhart (2019), examined the "Relationship between Social Media Use and Political Engagements: A Comparative Study among the United States, Kenya and Nigeria". The study found the influence of positive perceptions of the economy on political participation is found to differ in each nation.

A related study by Apuke and Apollos (2017) investigated the public perception towards facebook usage in the 2015 political campaigns in Nigeria. The study found that Facebook was used in the 2015 Senatorial electioneering campaigns in Southern Taraba, and this influenced the electorate to vote a particular candidate.

A similar study by Ndinojuo and Ihejirika (2015) examined "The Nigerian Political Parties and their Social Media Followership: Aftermath of 2015 General Elections." The study found an oddity where popularity on the social media does not equate to cast votes on election days. This paper therefore examined the issue of digital and social media and youths and political participation in Nigeria's political participation using students of Caleb University, Lagos and National Open University of Nigeria, (NOUN) Abuja as population sample.

Methodology

This paper examined the issue of digital media, social media and youths and political participation in National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), Abuja and Caleb University, Lagos, Nigeria. Three hundred copies of questionnaire were administered to a sample comprising students of National Open University of Nigeria. However, 263 copies were duly filled in and retrieved by the researchers. This indicates an 88% return rate for NOUN. Similarly, another set of three hundred copies of the questionnaire were administered to a sample comprising students of Caleb University, Imota, Lagos, while 271 copies were duly filled and retrieved. This indicates a 90% return rate for Caleb University, Lagos population. Data was therefore analysed based on the returned questionnaire.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Analysis of Data

Demographics of the sampled NOUN students show 51% of respondents were male while 49% were female. Four percent (4%) of respondents were between the ages of 16 and 20years; 23% were between 21 and 25 years; 40% were between 26 and 35years while 33% were 36years and above 36. This indicates that the majority of respondents were between the ages of 26 and 35, followed by those who were 36years and above. Seventy – eight percent (78%) of respondents were students of various faculties. For Caleb University, Lagos, the percentage of female, 74% is much higher than that of male with just 29%. According to the age group of Caleb University, Lagos students, 57% were between the age range of 16-20 years, 40% were between the ages of 21-25, while 3% were between 26 and 35 years.

Chart1:
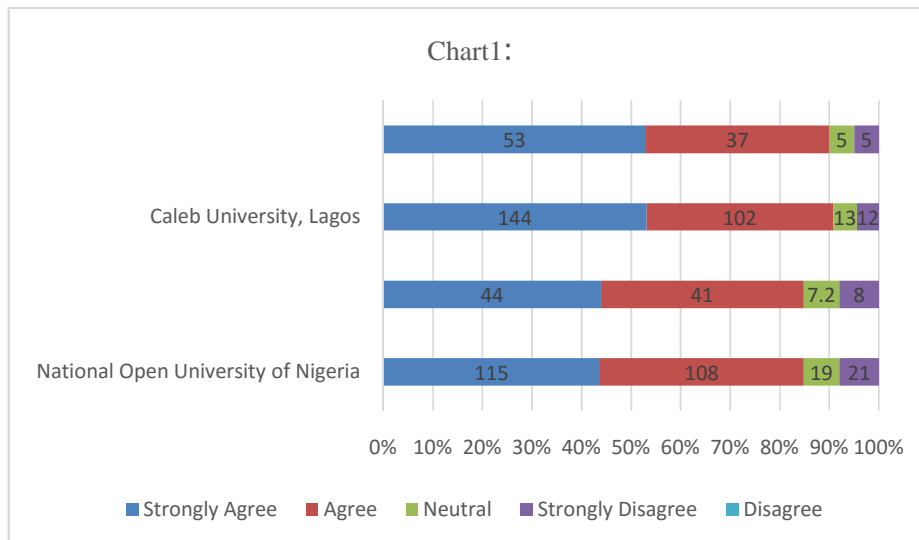
As to whether social media platforms had become a proper tool for election campaigns among people running for political office and their parties, 44% of those who were sampled, strongly agreed while 41% simply agreed. This shows that students of NOUN, Abuja are of the opinion that politicians and their parties find social media a veritable tool for their campaigns. Similarly, in the response of Caleb University Lagos, students, 59% of them sampled strongly agreed, while 36% simply agreed. However, 8% disagreed. This equally shows that students of Caleb University, Lagos, just like their counterparts at the NOUN are of the opinion that politicians and their parties find social media as a veritable tool for their campaigns.


Chart 2:
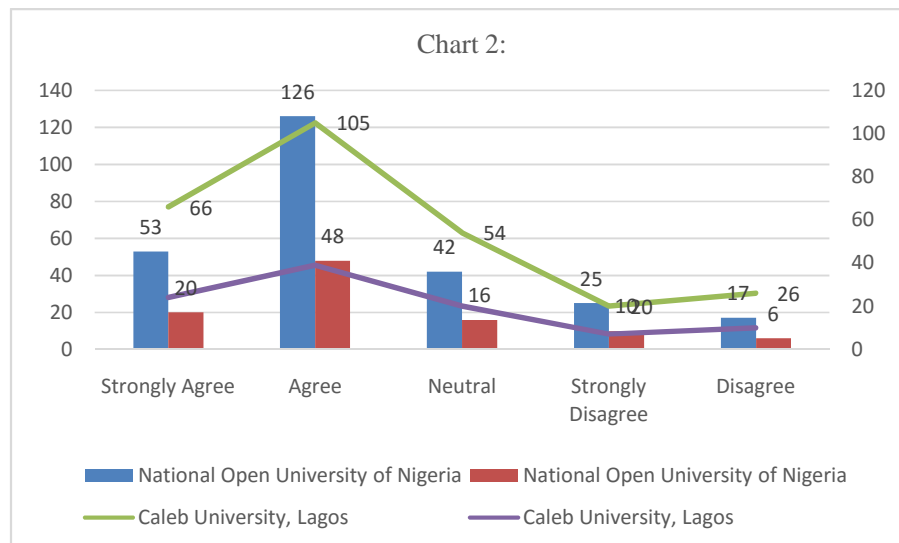
Forty – eight percent (48%) agreed that youths' participation in the campaign and election process on social media platforms in the 2019 presidential elections was successful and 20% strongly agreed. This indicates that 68%, which is in the majority, agreed that the youth successfully participated in the process on social media. However, 10% disagreed with this. Similarly, thirty-five percent (35%) of Caleb University Lagos, students agreed that youths' participation in the campaign and election process on social media platforms in the 2019 presidential elections was successful, 27% strongly agreed. This indicates that 62%, which is in the majority

agreed that the youth successfully participated in the process on social media. However, 19% of the students in this institution disagreed with this.
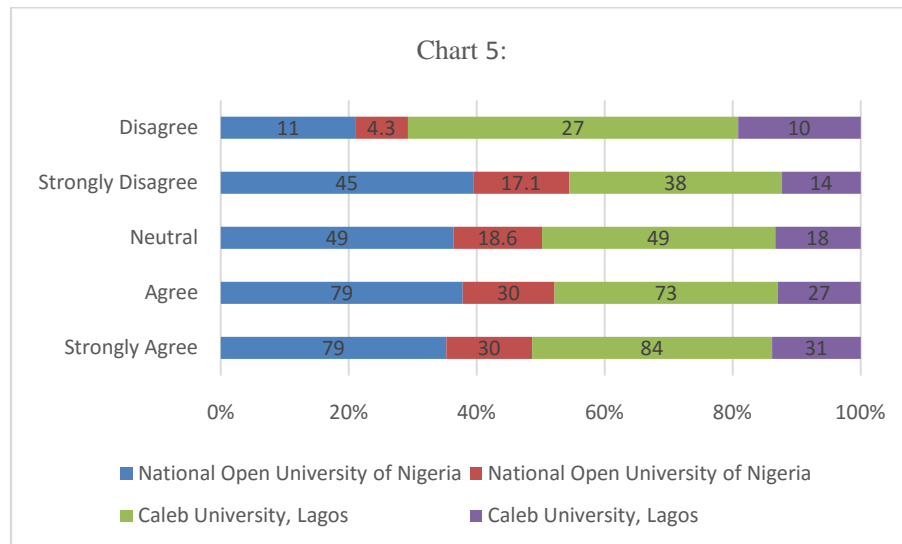
Chart 3:
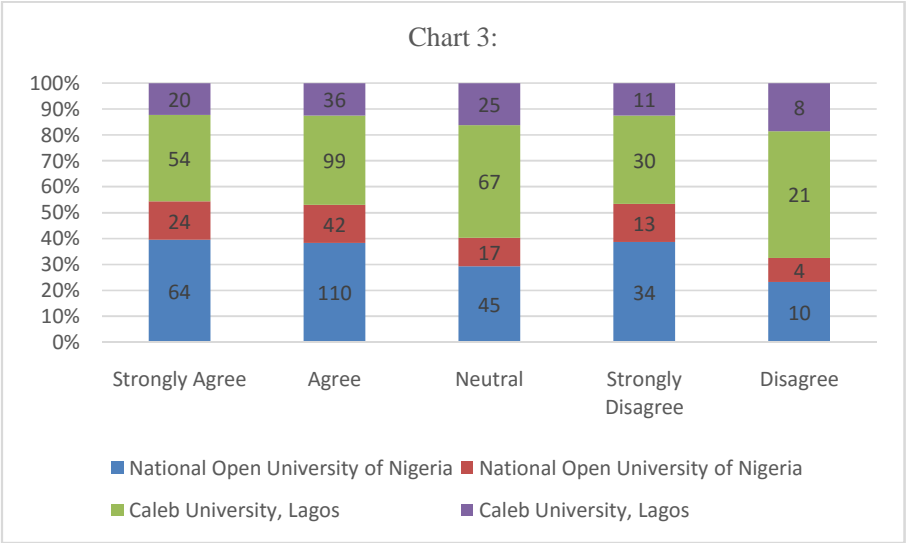
Twenty –four percent (24%) of respondents strongly agreed that the youths proved their awareness of Nigeria's 2019 elections on social media platforms, while 42% agreed that this was so. This shows that precisely 66% of students sampled were of this view. Students of Caleb University, Lagos, equally reacted positively to this question, with 20% strongly agreeing and 36% agreeing. This shows that 56% of the sample shared this view. However, 19% had contrary views on this. However, 10% differentiated the views of the students of these two institutions on how well they agreed in their response on the issue.
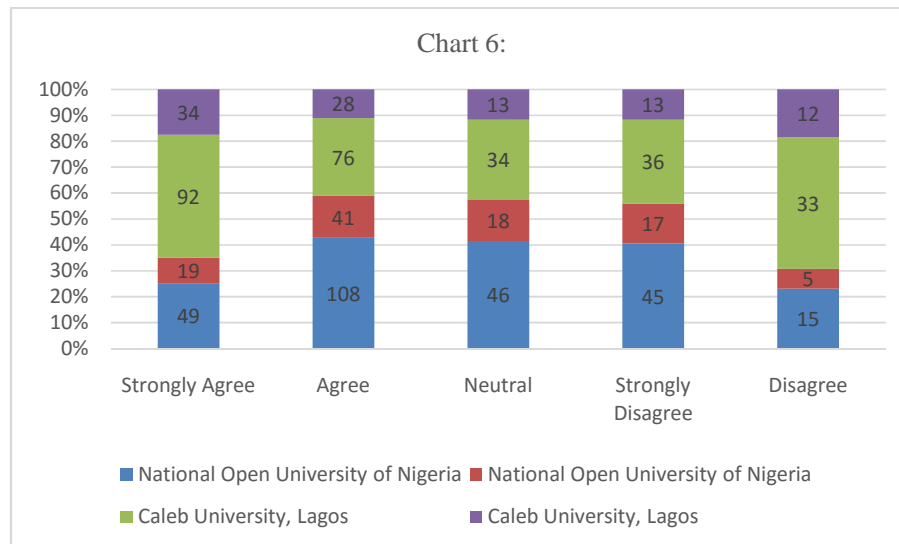
Chart 4:
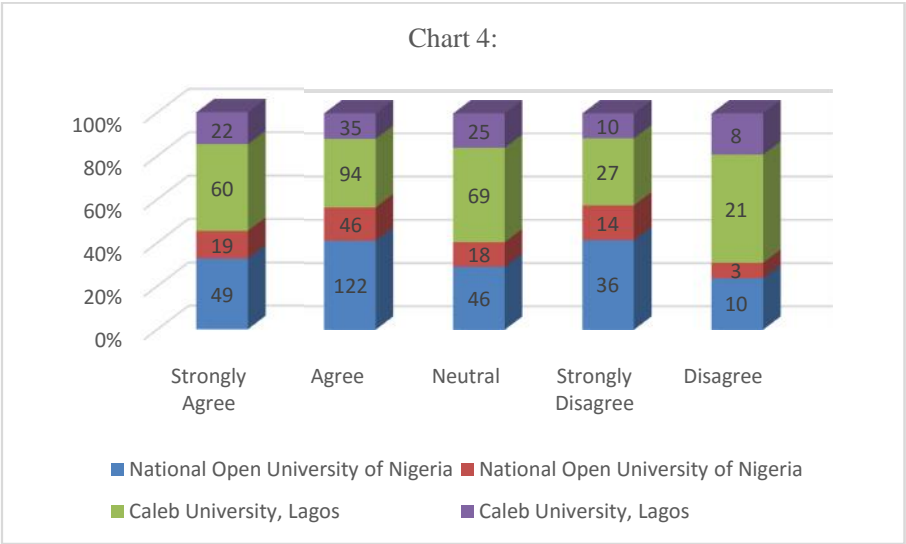
Forty –six percent (46%) indicated that they agreed that there was a positive relationship between social media use among the youth and the election process, which provided positive results; 19% strongly agreed, showing that approximately 65% of respondents agreed with this view. Thirty-five percent (35%) among Caleb

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University students indicated that they strongly agreed, 22% agreed, showing that approximately 55% of the respondents agreed with this view. However, a total of 18% had contrary view on this that they strongly agreed, 22% agreed, showing that approximately 55% of the respondents agreed with this view. However, a total of 18% had contrary view on this. Here again, 2% differentiated the extent students of the two institutions agreed on this issue which is insignificant.

Chart 5:

|	National Open University of Nigeria	National Open University of Nigeria	Caleb University, Lagos	Caleb University, Lagos
Disagree	11	4.3	27	10
Strongly Disagree	45	17.1	38	14
Neutral	49	18.6	49	18
Agree	79	30	73	27
Strongly Agree	79	30	84	31

As to the kind of media outlet that got more attention in the 2019 electoral process, 30% of those sampled strongly agreed that the conventional media channels got more attention than social media; another 30% indicated their agreement with this, meaning that approximately 60% were of the opinion that conventional media got more attention than social media. Twenty–one per cent (21%) disagreed with this however, while 19% were neutral. However, 31% of students of Caleb University, Lagos, strongly agreed that the conventional media channels got more attention than the social media: another 27% equally agreed with this, meaning that approximately 55% were of the opinion that conventional media got more attention than social media. However, 24% disagreed with this view, while 18% were neutral. Again, less than 1% differentiated the views of students in the two institutions, which is very insignificant.

Social Media and Youths' participation in politics among students of selected universities in Nigeria.

Chart 6:

Forty – one per cent (41%) of respondents indicated their agreement with the notion that participation of the youth in the political process on social media was commendable; 19% strongly agreed to this, indicating that 60% were actually of this opinion. Twenty – two percent (22%) however, disagreed while 18% were neutral. Thirty-four per cent (34%) of Caleb University students indicated their agreement that they strongly agreed, 24% that agreed, indicating that 62% were actually of this opinion. Twenty-three percent (25%) however disagreed, while 13% were neutral.

Chart 7
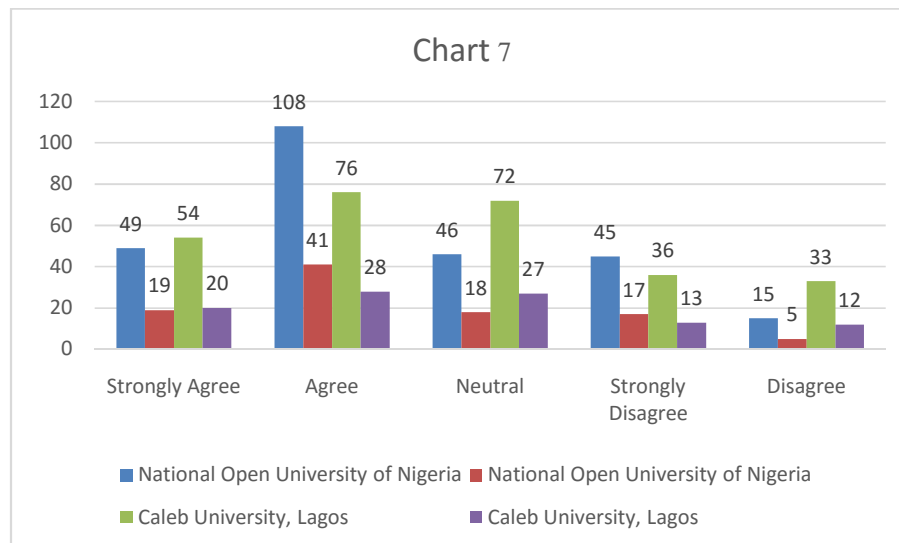
As to whether the 2019 presidential election on social media encouraged online campaign process, approximately 75% of respondents agreed to this (as 32% strongly agreed while 43% agreed). Thirteen per cent disagreed with this opinion and 12% were neutral. Twenty –four percent (24%) of Caleb University students strongly agreed, 38% agreed, approximately 62%. Twelve per cent disagreed with this opinion and 26% were neutral. This shows a differential of less than 3% between the two institutions.

Chart 8:
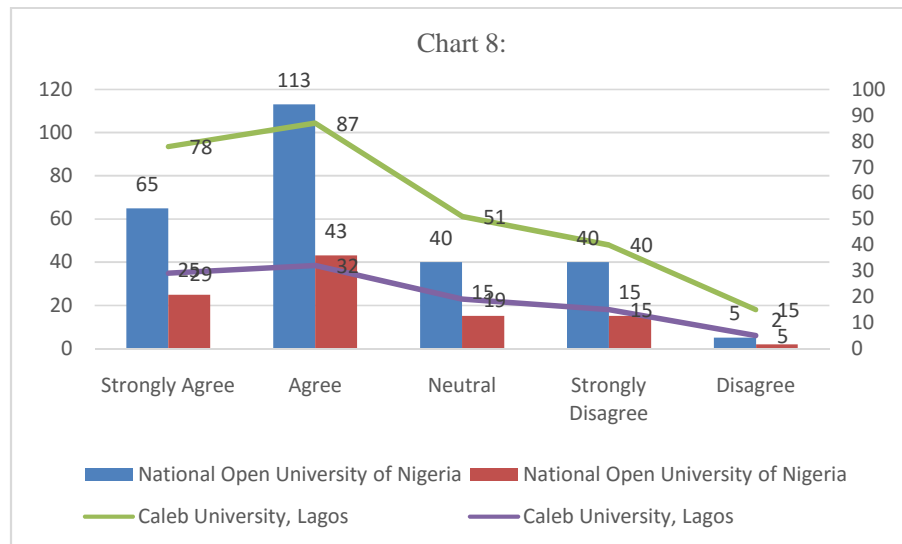
Forty – three percent (43%) of those who participated in this study agreed that activities on social media by the massive involvement of the youth were tools that helped politicians and their parties in their campaign during Nigeria's 2019 elections. Twenty – five per cent (25%) strongly agreed; this shows that 68% agreed with this notion. Twenty-nine percent of the students in Caleb University, Lagos, strongly agreed to this view, 32% agreed, approximately 61% of the students agreed to this. Twenty percent (20%) disagreed, while 19% were neutral. There was less than 2% differential between the two institutions which is insignificant.


Chart 9:
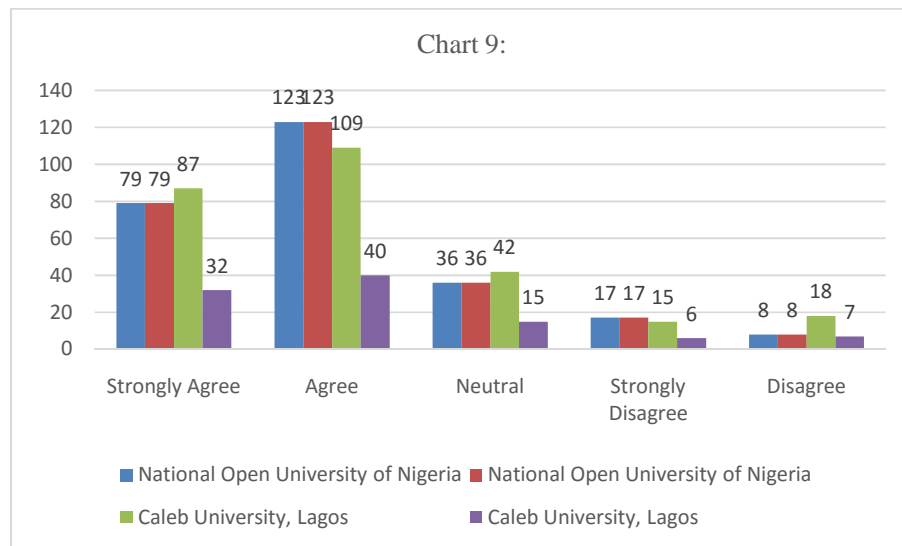
As to whether the new media aimed at improving democracy and the youth's participation in Nigeria's politics, 47% said they agreed with this opinion and 30% said they strongly agreed, meaning that approximately 77% held this view. Nine percent (9%) disagreed and 14% were neutral. Thirty-two percent (32%) of Caleb University students said they strongly agreed with this opinion, and 40% said they agreed, showing that approximately 72% held this view. Eleven percent (13%) disagreed and 15 equally were neutral.

Social Media and Youths' participation in politics among students of selected universities in Nigeria.

Chart 10:
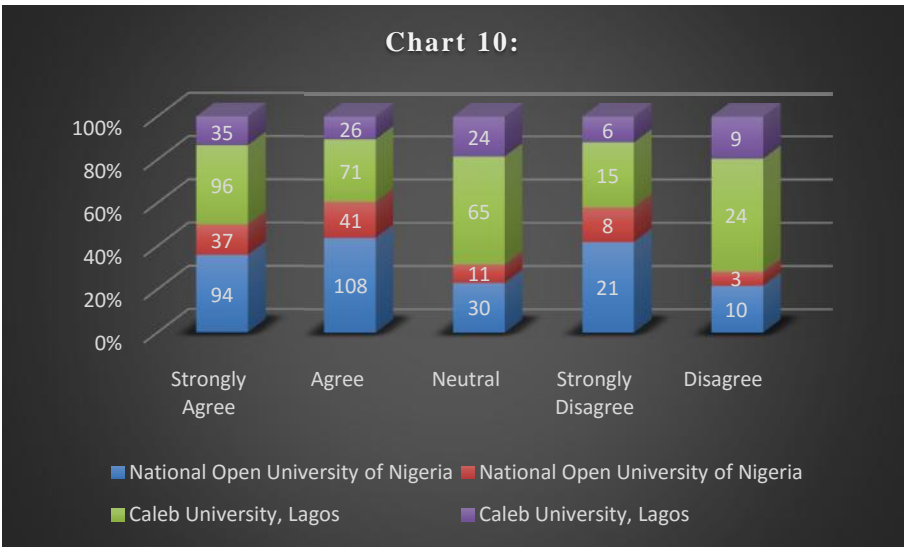
Lastly, 41% of the participants agreed that social media interaction among the youth was a way of improving democracy in Nigeria. Thirty – seven per cent (37%) strongly agreed with this idea, indicating that 78% actually agreed. Eleven percent (11%) disagreed and another 11% was neutral. Thirty-five per cent (36%) students of Caleb University, Lagos, strongly agreed with this opinion, while 26% agreed, indicating that 71% actually agreed. 15% disagreed, while 24% were neutral. Just less than 2% differential between the two institutions views on the issue.

Chart Title
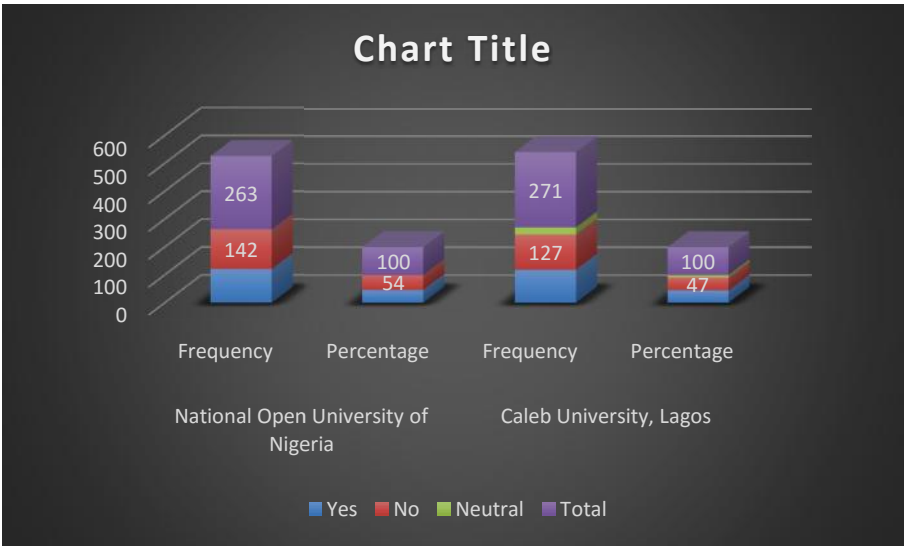
Forty – six per cent (46%) of NOUN students said they sent political messages on social media platforms but 54% said they did not send such messages. While 44 percent of Caleb University, Lagos students said they also sent political messages on social media platforms, 47% responded in the negative, while 9% were silent on the issue.
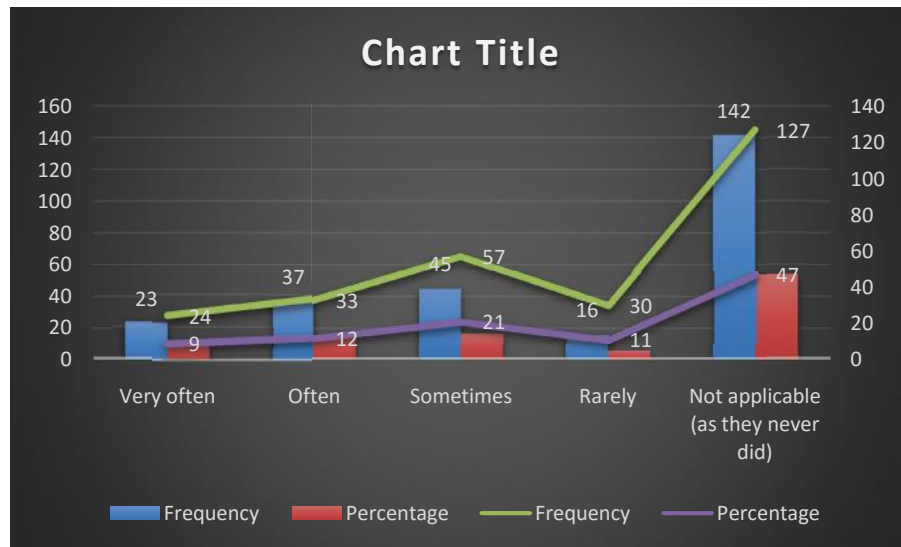
Of NOUN students who sent political messages on social media platforms, 9% indicated they did that very often; 14% said it was often; and 6% said they rarely did. This question however, did not apply to the 54% who did not send political messages on social media. While of the 43% of Caleb University, Lagos, students who responded, 21% said they sent political messages sometimes, 12% said often, 9% said very often, and 11% rarely send.

RQ1: **What is the rate of social media use by the youths in the 2019 general   elections in Nigeria?**

Judging from the result of the survey conducted, it is clear that youths are believed to have very much deployed the use of social media in Nigeria's 2019 general elections. The indication that 68% and 63% of NOUN students, Abuja and Caleb University, Lagos agreed that the youth successfully participated in the election campaign on social media shows this. To further strengthen this position is the fact that 66% and 56% of the two institutions agreed that the youth proved their awareness of the elections on social media platforms; and 65% agreed that there was a positive relationship between social media use among the youth and the election process, which produced positive results; 68% said the massive involvement of the youth on social media helped politicians tremendously.

RQ2: What was the impact of the use of social media in Nigeria's 2019 elections?

Social media obviously very much influenced the elections. Even though 60% of NOUN and 55% of Caleb University, Lagos,   students were of the opinion that conventional media channels such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television got more attention than social media platforms during the elections, 60% and 48% of the two institutions still indicated they were of the opinion that participation of the youth in the political process via social media was commendable; furthermore, 75% and 62% were confident that the 2019 presidential election on social media encouraged online campaign process; again, 77% and 72% of the students in each institution said that the social media is aimed at improving democracy and youth's participation in politics and 78% and 61% said interaction on social media by the youth would improve Nigeria's democracy.

RQ3: What is the extent of social media use in politics between students of National Open University of Nigeria and Caleb University, Lagos?

At the National Open University of Nigeria, almost half of the sample (46%)sent political messages on social media and this was so in the case of 43% of students of Caleb University, Lagos, ; 9% sent political messages very often by students in both institutions, 14% and 12% did so often, 17% and 21% did so sometimes and 6% and 11% rarely did respectively. However, results show 46% and 43% of students in both institutions sent political messages at some point in time. In answer to the extent of social media use by students of NOUN Abuja and Caleb University, Lagos, data shows no remarkable differences (less than 5% where it is observed) by students of both institutions.

Discussion of Findings

Social media played a key role in the 2019 elections. Given the high level of Internet penetration and smartphone use in the country, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp became important sites for political debate, voter information flow and campaigns (The Commonwealth, 2019). In response to the research questions above, research questions one and two is positively received, while research question three shows no differences in social media use between NOUN and Caleb University, Lagos.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that even though traditional media still hold sway in Nigeria's political communication, the youth to a large extent, used social media platforms in the 2019 general elections by sending and receiving political messages. Moreover, social media greatly influenced the 2019 general elections. Students of both the National Open University of Nigeria, Abuja and Caleb University very much used social during the last general elections. The study therefore recommends that politicians and the citizenry should channel efforts towards strengthening politics and democracy through social media. Politicians should use social media to strengthen their campaign efforts.

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