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FROM DIGITAL ADVOCACY TO AGE REDUCTION LEGISLATION, THE STORY OF NIGERIA'S #NOTTOOYOUNGTORUN

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Abstract

The #NotTooYoungToRun, a global campaign to expand youth inclusivity in politics. The Nigerian campaign, championed by the Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA), employed both digital and offline advocacy to demand a reduction in the constitutional age limit for contesting elections in the country. With the aim of making politics, especially the right to be voted for, more accessible for young people. This paper employed qualitative content analysis of 904 manually purposively selected tweets from the #NotTooYoungToRun Twitter hashtag. Six dominant themes: victory/inspirational youth movement, activism, youth participation, solidary/endorsement, partisan bickering, and ageism. The context of the representative tweets were provided by exemplar tweets provided under each theme. The finding revealed that Nigerian youths demanded and achieved the signing of the 2018 Age Reduction Act. This victory was based on a systematic social media campaign in which the youths advanced their message. In so doing, they set public agenda by getting influential young Nigerians to either endorse their message or/and highly placed publicly show their solidarity. In addition, Nigerian youths engaged politicians who pushed the legislation through parliament, until it was signed into law by the Nigerian president. The #NotTooYoungToRun campaign is an exemplar of how youth driven movements have harnessed digital media for social and political change.

Keywords: #NotTooYoungToRun, Nigerian youths, social media

Introduction

In 2016, the United Nations launched a global #NotTooYoungToRun campaign for the inclusion of young people in the national politics across the world (Fahd, 2016). This campaign was not just focused on amplifying the awareness of the obstacles that youths face in getting integrated into their national politics. Above all, the aim was to eliminate or at most minimize these obstacles, so as to ensure more youth engagement in politics, especially the right to contest for elective positions. The little or no representation of youths in government was attributed to the rather high legal age of voting in many countries, including Nigeria (OHCHR, 2016).

In Nigeria, the #NotTooYoungToRun campaign was championed by a youth driven movement called Youth Initiative for Advocacy, Growth and Advancement (YIAGA). The movement deployed a massive civic engagement which included a deliberate social media campaign, especially on Twitter. YIAGA also engaged Nigerian legislators who had the exclusive privilege of effecting a constitutional reduction in the age limit for contesting elections in the country (World Movement for Democracy, 2016).

YIAGA's two-pronged approach – digital and the engagement of Nigerian politicians – to the age reduction advocacy is understandable. The first reason for a social media campaign is obvious, Nigerian youths are active on digital platforms. As at 2015, Nigerian youths comprised of 60% of Nigeria's then 160 million population (Oduwole, 2015). Young people are the predominate users of social media in Nigeria, spending at an average of three hours daily (Global Web Index, 2020). As at January 2021, out of a population of 208 million people, Nigeria had 104 million internet users and 33 million active social media users (Kemp, 2021). With over 3 million young Nigerian Twitter users, the country boasts of the second largest volume of tweets around political topics in the African continent (Portland, 2016; Okpi, 2021). In addition, the architecture of Twitter makes it possible to follow topics more easily due to the aggregation of tweets round a hashtag.

The second reason for YIAGA's engagement of politicians in legislative and executive arms of government is because any reduction of the age limit has to be achieved through a constitutional amendment. Nigeria's 1999 Constitution in Sections 65(1), 106(b), 131 (b), 177(b) clearly states that only those who are 30 years or above can run stand for elections as into the House of Representatives. Similarly, only Nigerians who are 35 years old or above can run for membership of the Senate. Equally, only those who are within or above 35 years of age can become a governor. While the president candidate has to be 40 years or above

(Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

The movement had no choice but to co-opt politicians in the House of Representatives, Senate, The State House of Assemblies to push for the constitutional amendment needed to reduce the age of standing for elections in Nigeria. After the bill had been adopted by the National Assembly, it was signed into law – formally called the Age Reduction Act, 2018 – by President Muhammadu Buhari on May 31, 2018 in the presidential villa, in the presence of youths from the 36 states of the federation (Adebayo, 2018; Tukur, 2018).

Consequently, this study investigated the #NotTooYoungToRun movement which employed social media to advocate for a constitutional change of the age limit so as to allow young Nigerians to contest for electoral positions. Aided by reviewed literature and a qualitative content analysis, this study answered the following research questions:

1. What were the themes from #NotTooYoungToRun tweets?
2. What was the context of the representative tweets from the #NotTooYoungToRun themes?

Methodology

Qualitative *content analysis* of 904 manually filtered tweets collated from #NotTooYoungToRun hashtag on Twitter was used in this study. The unit of analysis for this study is only texts generated from the search feed of #NotTooYoungToRun on Twitter. The inter-coder reliability score of 0.8 shows consensus and a high degree of agreement between the two coders (Neuendorf, 2002). Intercoder reliability score shows the extent of similarity and agreement between two or more researchers who are coding the same content. This is imperative in content analysis where the goal is to ensure consistency and validity. The inter-coder reliability score of 0.8 shows a high degree of consistency, validity and agreement between the two coders of this study. Using a coding sheet, an inductive thematic analysis was employed in this study. This means that the content categories (themes) emerged from the corpus of the analysed tweets. Research question one was answered by the themes that emerged from the qualitative content analysis. The second research question was addressed with the examples of tweets from the themes and a corresponding explanation which was provided after the examples.

Findings

The six themes that emerged from the #NotTooYoungToRun tweets, which answers research question one was victory/inspirational youth movement, activism, youth participation, solidary/endorsement, partisan bickering, and ageism. Research question two which provides the context to which these tweets were made by giving examples from the analyzed tweets, presented under the respective themes. An explanation was also provided after the examples.

Victory/inspirational youth movement

This is the #NotTooYoungToRun journey. All barriers are artificial. It takes consistency, resilience, unity of purpose, strategy and tact to make great things happen. When young people unite, change happens. The journey just began #ReadyToRun (#NotTooYoungToRun, @YIAGA, May 31 2018).

At 2.30pm today May 31, 2018, I signed into law the #NotTooYoungToRun Bill, a landmark piece of legislation that was conceived, championed and accomplished by young Nigerians. The Bill has now become an Act of Parliament. It is a historic day for Nigeria (Muhammadu Buhari, @MBuhari, May 31 2018).

The real achievement of the #NotTooYoungToRun Act is not the lowering of age limits or even the chances of increased participation. Those may not make much difference in the short term. It is that change is possible in Nigeria when the youth come together & demand it. That's BIG! (Dr. Joe Abah, @DrJoeAbah, May 31 2018).

These tweets were made on the day the #NotTooYoungToRun bill was given presidential accent. This was a successful culmination of the advocacy by young people which ended in the legislation formally called the Age Reduction Act, 2018. Hence, both the youth driven YIAGA movement and President Muhammadu Buhari, took to Twitter to announce their joy, in praise of the doggedness of Nigerian youths who inspired, championed and executed a constitutional amendment.

Activism

Hi guys! Have you signed the petition to reduce the required age for elective office? ...Sign the Petition National and State Assemblies: Support the #NotTooYoungToRun bill reduces the age limit for running for elective office Change.org (Doctor's bae, @MimieLaushi, 1 Jun 2016)

Currently at the @nassnigeria to advocate for the #NotTooYoungToRun bill to reduce the age qualification for contesting elective offices (Eta Uso, @royaltyuso, 27 May 16).

The rain came to march with us and our demand is simple we are #NotTooYoungToRun moving from Unity Fountain to the National Assembly (Cynthia Mbamalu, @DCynthiaM, 25 Jul 17).

These tweets are apt examples of the online and offline component of the #NotTooYoungToRun advocacy. The first tweet shows how young people ramped up their digital advocacy to get the age limit reduced by making signing online petitions. The second and third tweets shows that the youth did not stop at social media promotion, they constructively engaged Nigerian lawmakers (lobbying and marching) in the National Assembly to buy into their message. This kick started the constitutional amendment in both chambers of the National Assembly.

Youth participation

#NotTooYoungToRun is a construct that speaks to me and every young person. Let's come out in 2019 to take our country back (Cinderella Man, @Osi_Suave, 29 Jun 2016).

If we are not too young to vote, not too you to go to war to defend our country, not too young to pay taxes, then #NotTooYoungToRun (Bamikole Banks Omisore, @MrBanksOmishore, 28 Jun 16).

Needless to say, I staunchly support #NotTooYoungToRun as I said before, our greatest resource as Nigerians is our youthful population (AuduMaikori, @Audu, 11 Jun 16).

These tweets show ownership of the message of the advocacy. These three young Nigerian social media influencers not only identified with the message but in doing so, sold it as a positive and timely one. In so doing, they ramped up the identification of the #NotTooYoungToRun message with other digitally savvy Nigerian youth.

Solidary/endorsement

I support #NotTooYoungToRun (Goodluck E. Jonathan, @GEJonathan, 11 Jun 16).

High Commissioner @PaulTArkwright speaks on his support for #NotTooYoungToRun on #Internationaldayofdemocracy (UK in Nigeria, @UKinNigeria, 15 Sep 2016)

These two tweets shows that the organizers of the #NotTooYoungToRun built and obtained a broad-based solidarity among highly placed individuals. Hence, the endorsement of their message by former President Goodluck Jonathan and the United Kingdom High Commissioner in Nigeria, helped their cause to gain traction across board.

Partisan Bickering

RT if you don't care whether it was PDP or APC that sponsored or signed the #NotTooYoungToRun Act, that you are just happy that it has come into being, and that you don't want political insulters to steal the glory for doing zilch (Dr. Joe Abah, @DrJoeAbah, May 31 2018).

...And I read @Bint_Moshood's tweet yesterday calling on political parties not to exploit this for political gain - here is APC shamelessly touting #NotTooYoungToRun as an APC promise fulfilled - a bill pushed by @tonynwulu - PDP House of Reps member from Lagos (Demola Olarewaju, @DemolaRewaju, 1 Jun 2018). On the same day that the allegedly 75-year-old Buhari signed the #NotTooYoungToRun Bill, it was announced that his party, APC, picked a 74-year-old to be its deputy Governor candidate for the July 14 Ekiti guber election. Youths of Nigeria, can't you see they are just using you? (Reno Omokri, @renoomokri, May 31 2018).

These tweets are exemplars of the sparing between twitter supporters of the ruling party All Progressive Congress (APC) and the opposition party Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP). The youth supporters wanted the credit for the success recorded by the #NotTooYoungToRun advocacy to go their respective parties.

Ageism

Age does not equal wisdom. Applied knowledge plus understanding is what translates to wisdom. #NotTooYoungToRun (Feb Idahosa, @BIUpresident, 13 Jun 16).

Thank you, our fathers, you people have tried to the best of your abilities in developing our great country and leading us so far, but it is time for power to change hand from old to the young #NotTooYoungToRun (Nwaturuba Kelechi, @knwaturuba, Mar 15).

Chief Bisi Egbeyemi, the Dep Gov candidate of APC in Ekiti was the youth leader of UPN in 1979. I was 9 years old then. I am now nearly 48. We need to start disgracing these old men who are eating into their great grandchildren's future. #NotTooYoungToRun (Babasola Kutu, @SKSolaKutu, Jun 1 2018).

These three tweets show how Nigerian youths crafted their message demanding a reduction in the age limit. By emphasizing ageism, they were able to galvanize support of other young people but also older Nigerians who were sympathetic to their cause.

Discussion

Nigerian youths have been stereotypically portrayed as thugs and enablers of election violence. While this may not be entirely false, it does not entirely tell the true story (Akpan, 2015). Nigeria's political space is controlled by political gladiators with excessive wealth and connections. These godfathers in turn hire young people to work for them, part of which includes disrupting the electoral process by snatching ballot boxes or use of other violent means (Eneji & Ikeorji, 2015). These youths are not only a reflection of the Nigerian political space, but victims of a process that wants to keep them tied to the aprons of the gladiators. This is one of the significant narratives that the findings of these study counteract. That the age limits imposed on young people have been a significant obstacle in their political engagement. By not allowing them to stand for elections, Nigerian youths were hitherto deliberately framed as electoral enablers, a narrative that as the findings of these study suggests does not paint the full picture.

The fact is that since independence in 1960 till date Nigeria has been ruled by 14 presidents or military heads of state. These leaders were between 41 and 73 years old when they took over the reins of leadership (Adejo, 2018). At the same time, Nigerian youths who constitute a great portion of the country's population are also digitally savvy. Hence, building a core aspect of the #NotTooYoungToRun advocacy around digital media was a master stroke. This was because the participatory nature of social media and the absence of gatekeepers amplified their message to a wider Nigerian public. A message that enjoyed popular validity, youths were legally barred from contesting for top political positions in Nigeria.

Ordinarily within the power dynamics structure of leadership within the Nigerian context, the relationship looks like this: the youths wield less power, the government is very powerful and the social movements like YIAGA has limited power. However, within the context of the #NotTooYoungToRun advocacy, there's a shift. The youths have in this context what Lukes (2005) describes as the second face of power – the ability of setting public agenda. Together with their movement, these young Nigerians employed social media, and particularly Twitter to push an agenda from a semi-private one to a full-scale public debate.

This would have been impossible ten years ago, when the media space was heavily manned by mainstream journalists, the gatekeepers. But having been participants of a social media space that ranks second in Africa in political conversations (Portland, 2016), Nigerian young people know they have the power to have their voices heard. But it is not just an issue of being able to set public agenda on conversations in the digital space alone. These youths were responsible in making these discussions move from social media platforms to the streets, as was evident in the 2012 #OccupyNigeria protests and the 2015 #BringBackOurGirls campaign (Egbunike & Olorunnisola, 2015; Akor, 2017). Consequently, due to the digital campaign which was also amplified by mainstream media, there was a favourable public acceptance of the #NotTooYoungToRun campaign message.

However, YIAGA did more than that. Rather than antagonise politicians, they went out of their way to work with them. Hence, the constitutional amendment of the age limit for standing for elections in Nigeria was more of a handshake from the digital savvy youth movement with the old guard politicians. The #NotTooYoungToRun bill was sponsored by Tony Nwulu in the House of Representatives (lower house of parliament) and in the Senate (upper house) by AbdulAziz Nyako. The then Senate President Bukola Saraki was to identified and championed the advocacy. The same was true with President Buhari, who invited young people from all the states of Nigeria on the day he signed the bill into law (Adebayo, 2018; Tukur, 2018).

This naturally explains the findings, one is that the victory was hailed as inspirational by all involved – youths, politicians and movement. A victory that came as a consequence of a deliberate and systematic activism across digital and offline platforms. But the #NotTooYoungToRun would not have been possible without the endorsement by influential youth voices or the solidarity by highly placed individuals. This explains the partisan bickering between supporters of APC and PDP on making and taking credit for the Age Reduction Act, 2018 (informally called #NotTooYoungToRun act). But most importantly, Nigerian youths

showed that they are not only tools in the hands of politicians, as agents of electoral violence. Rather that if given the chance, they are capable of pushing an agenda to a logical conclusion. That age may not be the only standard of wisdom and/or sense of commitment to the Nigerian project.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The 2018 Age Reduction Act was a product of the determination and deliberate activism of young Nigerians. The #NotTooYoungToRun campaign is an exemplar of how youth driven movements harnessed digital media for social and political change. We therefore recommend that political parties and civil society organisations to take advantage of the great potentials of youths' political participation to enhance Nigeria's democratic experience.

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