

## Perception of Social Media Credibility and Online Political Participation by Young Adults in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria

Ngozi Joy Onyechi, PhD & Mustapha Adeniyi Adeitan

Department of Communication and Language Arts

University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria

ngoonyechi@yahoo.co.uk;+234 803 323 3639

adeitan199@gmail.com;+234 909 394 9505

### Abstract

This study was carried out to determine the perception of social media credibility and online political participation among young adults in Ibadan Metropolis. This study was guided by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Mixed research method was used as the research design (survey and focus group discussion). The study employed multi-stage sampling technique to select (n=289 for the survey; n=40 for FGDs) respondents and discussants respectively for the study. Questionnaire and focus group discussion guide were used as research instruments. Results revealed that interactivity, accessibility from medium dimension and accuracy, objectivity from message dimension are the main determinants of social media credibility. Furthermore, results also showed that there is a significant relationship between perceived credibility of social media and online political participation among young adults. Thus, it was recommended, among others, that political actors should utilise this platform for online mobilisation of this cohort.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Credibility, Political Participation, Young Adults, Ibadan

### Introduction

The emergence of the internet and social media on the global information arena has forever altered the dynamics of information dissemination that was once skewed against receivers. Hitherto, information receivers were not much thought about in the information dissemination process. Social media have not only shown that mass media audience is not passive, but also, is significant in considerably expanding the extent to which once-passive audiences are able to engage with media producers and fellow consumers (Chen & Vromen, cited in Onyechi, 2018). The social media more than any other channel of communication, have offered unprecedented opportunities to users to be masters of their own affairs. This tendency may have prompted Bruns, cited in Antopolus, Veglis, Gardikiotis & Dimoulas (2016) to conclude that there is increase of active "produsage"(a contraction of production and usage) that blurs the boundaries between passive consumption (users) and active production (producers) and increase in the numbers of Netizens.

Admittedly, social media platforms are believed to be opening up new frontiers, especially for the youths to participate in politics. For instance, youths who are hitherto presumed to be politically inactive are now very active in online political activities (Vitak *et al* 2011) and spend more time in political discussions on the internet, especially on Facebook,

where they have access to their friends and other online politically active people in their online network (Kenski & Stroud). Notwithstanding these potentials, since the advent of the internet and social media, issues revolving around credibility have dominated the centre stage. There are animated discussions focusing on the credibility of social media. According to Hilligoss & Rieh, cited in Mehrabi, Hassan & Ali (2009), since the late 1990s when the internet began to provide new interactive environment of information that allowed users to seek information and communicate with others like never before, the concept of credibility has received considerable attention. Concerns and scepticism have been raised on the credibility of social media and other online news content as a result of issues that bother on professionalism, anonymity of sender, fabrication or false quotation and other type of information counterfeit (Mehrabi *et al* 2009, citing Kioussis, Fogg, Hilingoss & Rieh; Li and Suh, 2015; Marco & Pasi, 2017).

Social media credibility is imperative, especially for any platform that transcends geographical boundaries. This fact may have prompted Kim & Johnson, cited by Nababa (2016) to admit that since online credibility has become an international issue, it has become necessary to examine the degree to which online information is perceived as credible by people around the world. While some researchers have addressed issues related to social media credibility (Mehrabi *et al* 2009; Edogor, Jonah & Ojo, 2015; Li & Suh, 2015; Adeyanju, 2016; Nababa, 2016), but the question of how perception of social media credibility influences political participation among young adults remains unclear and unanswered. This study, therefore, investigated the correlation between perception of social media credibility and participation in online political activities among young adults in Ibadan Metropolis.

### **Research Questions**

The following questions were asked:

1. What is the perception of social media credibility among young adults in Ibadan metropolis?
2. What criteria do young adults in Ibadan metropolis use to measure dimensions of medium and message credibility of social media?
3. What is the level of online political participation among young adults in Ibadan metropolis?
4. What is the relationship between the credibility of social media and online political participation among young adults in Ibadan metropolis?

### **Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Studies**

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) originally formulated by Richard Petty and John Cacioppo is adopted for this study. The model proposes that people are neither universally thoughtful in evaluating persuasive messages nor universally mindless (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). They argued that rather, a variety of individual and situational factors will determine how much cognitive effort a person devotes to processing a message. On a message continuum, people tend towards either high end called central route or low end termed peripheral route. The central route of information processing involves scrutinising the content of information to determine its inherent merit before the formation of attitude from the information (Pee & Lee, 2016). High-quality message is likely to be perceived as more trustworthy because it can better support sense making and improve decision accuracy (O'Reilly in Pee & Lee, 2016). When people adopt the central processing route, they elaborate on the content of political messages by thinking critically and evaluating the relevance and strength of issues and arguments (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

The peripheral route involves the use of cues or heuristics (source credibility, opinion of the majority on the message and medium) by individuals to form an attitude. The opinion of others represents the social influence and is especially relevant in the context of social media whose key feature is enabling socialisation through the social media platforms (Pee & Lee, 2016). In the view of Kerr, Beede, Proud & Schultz (2010), the peripheral path uses simple associations, inferences and heuristics to trigger attitude change. In fact, it is posited by Pee & Lee (2016) that when a piece of information is supported by many people, it may be perceived as having been endorsed and validated and, therefore, considered more trustworthy. Earlier observation by Li & Suh (2015) that people do not care about the source of information credibility when they "give a like" to a Facebook page goes to support this tendency. By applying this model to this study, we were able to determine the dimensions that were critical in determining medium and message credibility.

The ways in which political information is broadcast, shared and talked about on social media by engaged young people demonstrate the importance of communicative forms of action for the future of political engagement and connective action (Vromen, Xemos & Loader, 2015). The pervasiveness of social media in the lives of young people is no longer in doubt. Accordingly, researchers have continued to interrogate the correlation between social media and political participation by youths and young adults. In a study of University of Ibadan undergraduates, Onyechi (2018) found that there is a significant relationship between social media exposure patterns and students' participation during the 2015 political campaigns. In a study by Pap, Ham & Bilandzic (2018), which was entitled, "does social media usage influence youth's interest in politics?" revealed that using Facebook, not Twitter for political discussions, has a significant positive influence on young people's interest in politics. Keating & Melis (2017) carried out a study entitled "social media and youth political engagement: Preaching to the converted or providing a new voice for youth?" Among others things, they found that some young people are far more engaged in using social media for political purposes than others. Kahne & Bowyer (2018) in their own study found that the size of young people's social networks interacts with both friendship-driven and interest-driven online activity to promote political activity.

### **Method**

Mixed method research (survey and focused group discussion-FGD) was employed for the study, while questionnaire and FGD guide were the research instruments used to obtain data from the sample. The study was carried out in Ibadan Metropolis which has 11 local government areas (LGAs). The 2006 population census estimated a population of 257,994 young adults within the ages of 18-25years old for the study area ([www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de)). Multi-stage sampling procedure (stratified, simple random, systematic and purposive sampling techniques) was used to select a purposive sample size of 352. Out of 312 copies of questionnaire administered, 289 retrieved were found usable; 40 discussants participated in the FGD sessions. The rationale for purposively selecting the sample was to ensure that only those who met the eligibility criteria (use Twitter and Facebook for political purpose and are within the age range of 18-25years) were selected. Descriptive statistics, One-way ANOVA and Scheffe's Post Hoc Comparison Test were used to analyse the quantitative data. In addition, direct quotations that represented the discussants' opinions were derived from the qualitative data.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

**Table 1: Respondents' exposure pattern to Political News and Information on Social Media**

<b>Options</b>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>%</b>
Twitter	137	47.4
Facebook	274	94.8
<b>Hours of use</b>		
1-2hours	248	85.8
3-4hours	34	11.4
5-6hours	5	1.7
7hours and above	2	0.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>100</b>

Finding of FGD showed that many discussants prefer to access political information on Facebook. For instance, one of them (FGD discussant, male, 24years) said that "I use Facebook and Twitter to access political information...but I use Facebook more for political information than Twitter."

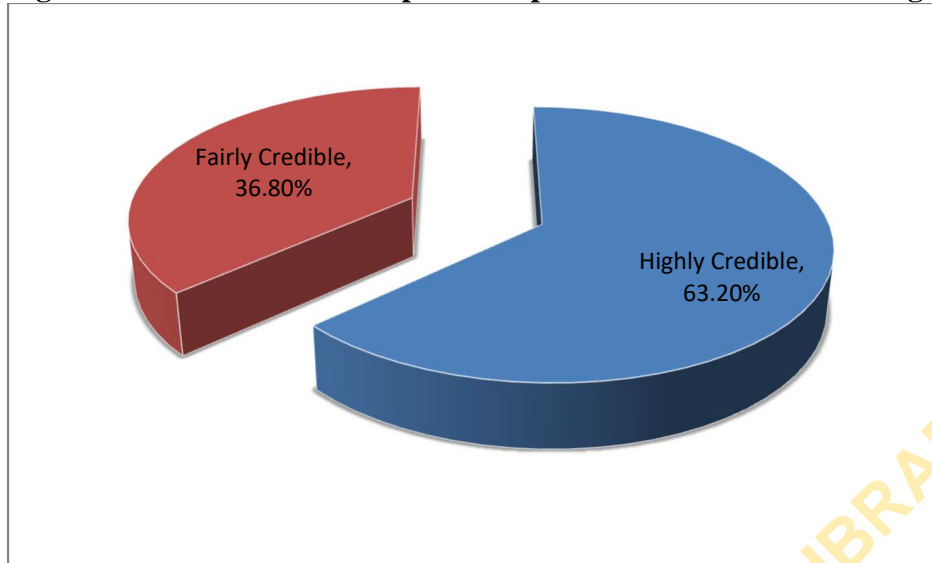
**Table 2: Perception of Social Media Credibility among Respondents**

<b>Options</b>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>%</b>
Credible	269	93.1
Not credible	20	6.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>100</b>

Finding in table 2 reveals that majority of the respondents perceive social media platforms to be credible. This means that they trust and believe the information on the platform. Finding from FGD showed that many perceived social media platforms as credible sources of news and information. A discussant (FGD discussant, male) answered rhetorically:

Why will I not take the social media credible when the same news or information you find on the media is what you find on the television or hear on the radio some hours later? How are we sure the mainstream do not also source for their news on social media?

**Figure 1 shows that more Respondents perceived Social Media as highly Credible**

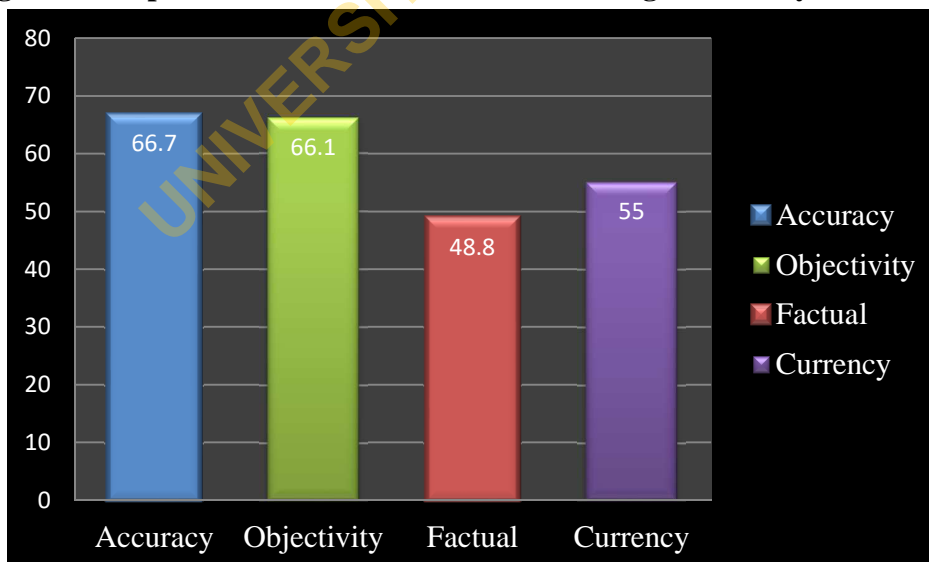


**Figure 1: Perceived Degree of Social Media Credibility among Respondents**

Discussants were asked "how credible are the social media platforms? Majority perceived social media to be highly credible. One discussant (FGD discussant, female) summed her thoughts this way:

I will rate social media as highly credible because of its ease of use and availability.... If the platforms could give me what the mainstream media would give and I can use the platforms easily, then it is highly credible.

**Figure 2: Responses on the Criteria for determining Credibility**

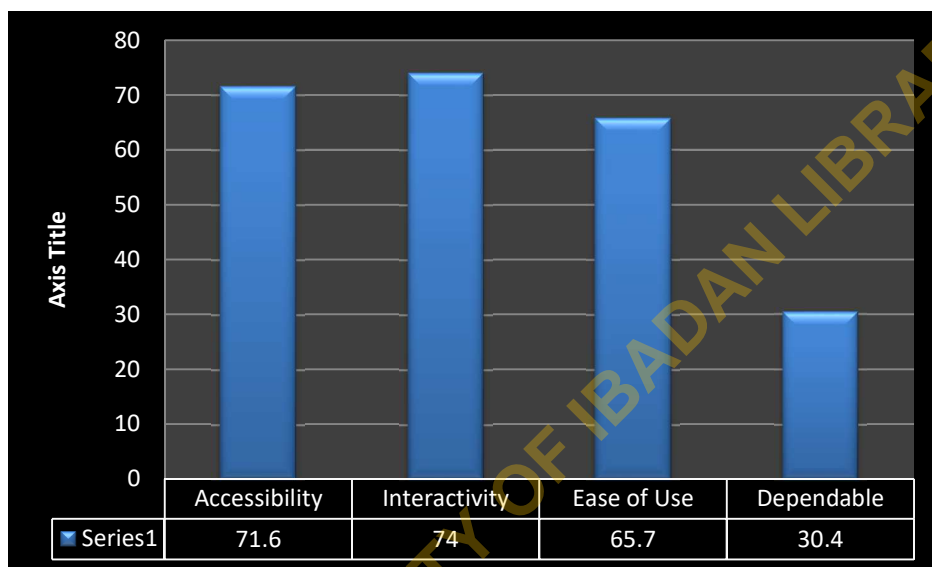


**Figure 2: Criteria for measuring Message Dimension of Social Media Credibility**

Responses from discussants showed that accuracy, objectivity, factuality, currency and believability are key criteria they use to measure message dimension of social media as well as mainstream media credibility. For instance, a discussant (FGD discussant, male 23years) believed that the criteria apply also to mainstream media:

Information on social media platforms is as accurate and objective as information on the mainstream media...

To measure medium dimension of social media credibility, we used interactivity, ease of use, dependability and accessibility. Findings show that interactivity, accessibility, ease of use and dependability were rated in that order. This means that interactivity is the main criterion respondents use to measure medium dimension of social media credibility.



**Fig 3: Criteria for measuring Dimension of Medium Credibility**

Discussants identified interactivity, accessibility, timeliness, affordability and ease of use as criteria for measuring medium dimension of social media credibility.

A discussant (FGD discussant, female, 25 years) summed it up this way:

What else will I use to ascertain the credibility of social media when I am able to interact with other people at various ends and we can get one another's messages within seconds. Also, social media is more accessible than the mainstream media.... So interactivity, timeliness and accessibility are the criteria I use to judge the social media's credibility.

**Table 4: Levels of Online Political Participation among Respondents**

Options	Respondents	%
Passive	124	42.9
Active	103	35.6
Partisan	62	21.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>100</b>

Three (3) levels of participation were adopted in categorising the respondents- passive, active and partisan. Table 4 shows that majority were passive. This means that many young adults are passive when it comes to online political activities.

Finding from the FGD revealed that less number of discussants are partisan, while majority of the females are passive online political participants. However, those that are partisan appeared "unrepentant" in their online political activities. For instance, a discussant (FGD discussant, male) stated:

...that is where I believe politicians can get the youth to vote in elections if truly they need them. So, I use the medium to canvass vote for my party candidates at any level. The online activities have not only been productive, but have also been taking party politics to the doorstep of those who will not come to party meetings or will not join political parties.

Admittedly, female disposition to politics may explain the trend observed among FGD participants. It is not unlikely that females are more attracted to other activities such as entertainment, fashion and style on the internet, rather than to political activities. A female (FGD discussant) stated that:

It is obvious that the majority of us use the social media platforms, but it is not purely for political activities. I know of many friends who will never read anything about politics. They spend most of their times on fashion, style and entertainment. Thus, they give little attention to politics on those platforms.

**Table 5: One Way ANOVA comparing Perception of Social Media Credibility, grouped by Online Political Participation of Respondents**

<b>Political Participation</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>
Passive	111	11.5946	2.03773	.19341
Active	98	12.5204	1.99602	.20163
Partisan	60	14.0333	1.76565	.22794
Total	269	12.4758	2.16751	.13216
<b>ANOVA</b>	<b>Df</b>	<b>Mean Square</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>Sig.</b>
	2	115.972	30.033	.000

Increasing mean scores as reflected in table 5 shows that as perception level increases, the more active they become in their online political activities. One -way ANOVA test shows that this relation is statistically significant at 0.05 level.

**Table 6: Scheffe Post Hoc Analysis comparing Perceived Credibility of Social Media and Online Political participation among Respondents**

		Multiple Comparisons				
Credible		Scheffe				
		Mean				95% Confidence Interval
(I)	(J) Participation	Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Passive	Active	-.92581*	.27238	.004	-1.5963	-.2553
	Partisan	-2.43874*	.31487	.000	-3.2138	-1.6636
Active	Passive	.92581*	.27238	.004	.2553	1.5963
	Partisan	-1.51293*	.32212	.000	-2.3059	-.7200
Partisan	Passive	2.43874*	.31487	.000	1.6636	3.2138
	Active	1.51293*	.32212	.000	.7200	2.3059

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Scheffe post hoc test was carried out to determine the source of the relationship. Multiple comparisons of passive, active and partisan respondents revealed a significant relationship at 0.05 level. The implication is that the more respondents perceived social media platforms to be credible, the more they participated in online political activities.

**Discussion of Findings**

Social media, especially Facebook and Twitter are believed to influence the ways politicians engage the public (Rose & Burger, 2014; Vaccari, Valeriani, Barbera, Bonneau, Jost, Nagler & Tucker, 2015). This notwithstanding, our study’s findings show that more respondents accessed political information on Facebook than Twitter. A similar research finding by Halpern & Valenzuela (2017) showed that people on Facebook seem much more likely to share political content than do, people on Twitter. The peculiarity of each platform tends to be a key determinant for the social media behaviour of users and this may be what drives the users of Facebook.

Social media are pervasive in the lives of young people (Vromen *et al* 2015) and they tend to spend meaningful time accessing information, including political information for political participation (Onyechi, 2018). But study finding shows that irrespective of the respondents’ social media preference (whether Facebook or Twitter), majority spent less than 2 hours daily accessing political information on the platforms. It must be noted, however, that this study was conducted during the "off-season" period when political activities were at their lowest ebb and may explain their low political information seeking behaviour.

The findings also showed that an overwhelming majority (93.1%) perceived social media as credible. This is contrary to our expectation because credibility has always been an issue among social media users. Misinformation cannot be neglected due to large amounts of user-generated content on social media platforms (Marco & Pasi, 2017). Many approaches have been proposed to address this issue. These authors proposed data-driven models, model-driven

approaches and graph-based approaches, focusing on credibility propagation, while Abbasi & Lu (2013) favoured the *CredRank* algorithm that analyses social media information sources' online behaviour. Credibility has three dimensions: message, medium and source. Li & Suh (2015) study found that interactivity, medium dependency from the medium dimension and argument strength from the message dimension are main determinants of the information credibility. The findings showed that interactivity, accessibility from medium dimension and accuracy, objectivity from message dimension, are main determinants of social media credibility.

The findings also showed that participants are less partisan in their online political participation. Other studies have shown that decline in offline political participation among young adults has been replaced by active online political participation (Johnson & Kaye, 2014; Kahne & Middaugh, 2012; Odeyemi & Oludare, 2016) with social media accounting for such increase (Abdu, Mohamad & Muda, 2016). But it is worrisome that majority of the female discussants are passive online political participants. Similar study by Kassa (2015) revealed poor women's political participation in Ethiopia. It is not unlikely, perhaps, that the female young adults in this current study are more attracted to other activities such as entertainment, fashion and style, rather than political activities. Admittedly, the disposition of this cohort to political activities now may have grave implication for the future. Already, Arowolo & Aluko (2010) have expressed concern that the low level of political participation of women in Nigeria is becoming alarming and disturbing.

The findings further showed that there is a significant relationship between the perceived credibility of social media and young adults' online political participation. The implication of the finding is that these respondents do not gloss over the contents of the social media; instead, their perception of the social media is based on their involvement with the message content, which ultimately influences their online political participation. This thinking resonates well with the central processing route of ELM proposition. "The central processing route creates audience involvement with the message content and as a result, audiences taking this route are likely to connect messages with their own experience and plans for action" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study investigated the correlation between perceived credibility of social media and online political participation among young adults in Ibadan. The results showed that interactivity and accessibility from medium dimension as well as accuracy and objectivity from message dimension are the main determinants of social media credibility for these young adults. The findings showed a significant relationship between perceived credibility of social and online political participation among this cohort. Based on the findings, the researchers give the following recommendations:

1. Considering the females' low participation in online political activities, Federal and State Ministries of Women Affairs should articulate political programmes that will target particularly, young females. This is based on the fact that women's political participation has been recognised internationally as an important measure of the status of women in any particular country.
2. Youths and young adults are social media savvy; however, the study showed that young adults have preference for Facebook platform. Politician and other political stakeholders should tap into the potentials of Facebook in order to actively engage them in political activities.

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