

Original Research Article

Social Media and Political Participation of the Youth in Contemporary Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Social media platforms have changed the behaviour of youth political participation in contemporary Zimbabwe. Given the popularity of technology, social media platforms have facilitated easier and faster ways of sharing and seeking information and political campaigns. This study sought to analyse social media integration and political participation with specific reference to youths in contemporary Zimbabwe. Circulating information on social media can influence one's political views and participation. Hence, critical analysis was needed to determine how social media affects youths' political participation in Zimbabwe. The study draws analytical praxes from the political activity theory and technology acceptance model to determine how social media influences youths' political participation. The researcher used primary and secondary data sources such as journal articles and book chapters to collect data to analyse social media and youth political participation in Zimbabwe. The researcher also used content and thematic analysis to analyse data. Findings presented that perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness promote the use of social media and political engagement. An interesting finding was that social media is used for political campaigns even though the voting process is done through secret ballot. However, a major concern is the challenge of hoax messages, ghost accounts and ghostwriters on social media platforms as the majority of people have become citizen reporters and journalists. Nevertheless, these findings conclude that social media platforms promote online political participation and less offline political participation. The Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) has a pressing need to consider online voting to cover the gap between online and offline political participation towards the 2028 elections and beyond.

Keywords: Media, youth, political participation, political activity theory, technology model.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has gained popularity in the contemporary international system. Social media has also paved the way for a new level of political engagement and political support. Active youth political participation is fundamental to the electoral process. The use of social media platforms has had a lot of tension in promoting political participation. The use of social media platforms seems to have been adopted for political engagement rather than for keeping in contact with friends and family. The usage of social media and the varied available access to political activities and information have a significant impact on political efficacy and youth engagement (Bimber & Copeland, 2011). According to Valenzuela (2013), digital technology has made youths to be politically active on

social media. In Zimbabwe, however, the percentage of registered youth in elections remains low despite awareness campaigns by political parties and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) urging the youths to be well-versed in the country's electoral processes for them to participate meaningfully in elections. This is despite claims by researchers such as Musvanhiri (2023) that over six million (6m) youths had registered to vote for the 2023 elections. According to the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC), (2022) national voter population, (inclusive of all voting age groups), as of 30 May 2022 stood at five million eight hundred and four thousand and three hundred and seventy-six (5 804 376). ZEC statistics calls for the need for research to analyse the relationship between social media and the political participation of the youth in contemporary Zimbabwe. The researcher

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sought to analyze whether youth in Zimbabwe value online participation more than offline political participation.

Zimbabwe's politics has drawn much attention in the African region and the world at large. Robertson (2013) contends that Zimbabwe still faces tough monetary challenges, which include collapsed infrastructure, regulatory deficiencies, indigenization stress, policy uncertainties, a huge external debt burden of ten comma seven billion dollars (\$10.7b), liquidity disaster and insufficient casual employment. The country has ranked the highest on inflation statistics as of 2023. Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency (ZIMSTAT) (2023:1) states that the Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased by an average of 0.1 per cent from February 2023 to March 2023. ZIMSTAT (2023:1) further states that the CPI was 274.01 in March 2023, 273.65 in February 2023 and 146.06 in March 2022. Factors, such as politics, and globalisation of the industry, and questions about the industry's marketing practices are increasing public and political hostility to Zimbabwe's economic environment. The mantra, "Zimbabwe is open for business" has led to optimism and expectation that the country could be on its way to economic recovery. Musvanhiri (2023) states that Zimbabwe is struggling with entrenched poverty, chronic power cuts and runaway inflation. As such, the economic environment affects the political environment and participation. Although Zimbabwe's economic situation is struggling, democracy, political processes and developments are important.

Social media platforms such as Twitter have been actively utilised to share ideas effectively to discuss issues to do with socio-economic and political environment. Marima (2019) argues that social media platforms have been utilised as a platform to air out frustrations on the state. Print media has been facilitating the exchange of ideas but not the way social media has been rapidly expanding the exchange of information. Zimbabwe's 2018 and 2023 elections reflect political participation instilled by social media. With the advent of digital technology and social media, getting credible information remains exposed and fragile. There appears to be a fake information problem on social media platforms concerning the contesting parties. Contemporary fake news limits the quality and credibility of information (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019). Indeed, the surge in the use of social media in African media domains has heightened anxieties and concerns about fake news in modern times (Wahutu 2019). Through social media, ghostwriters can make use of anonymity and spread unverified or incredible information. Propaganda, like "fake news," has existed since time immemorial; but, with the development of digital media technology, it has been digitised (Howard & Bradshaw, 2018). Social media has evolved into a primary source of personal orientation and anonymous interactivity which might have a bearing or impact on

youth political participation. This paper therefore sought to make use of the technology acceptance model and political activity theory to get an understanding of how social media has an impact on political participation of the youth in Zimbabwe.

Political Activity Theory

The theory of political activity determines the level to which citizens are politically engaged. Political activity theory indicates internet interactivity and citizen participation. As a result, youthful 'friendship' and connection with major political personalities are likely to be important sources of political information and viewpoints. As a result, politicians may have a proclivity for mobilizing and encouraging youth to join in online political activities. Political participation is the involvement of the citizens in the political system (Falade, 2014). However, despite voter information and social media access citizens might decide not to actively participate or get involved in political activities.

Citizens are expected to participate in a political system. According to Falade (2014), there are six types of political participants. The inactive are the people who take no part in any political activity. Whilst, the voting specialists get eagerly engaged only in voting. These participants do not participate in any other political activities except voting. The author also identified the parochial participants who participate in politics occasionally when it only affects their interests. The communalist participants are engaged in voting regularly, they also get involved in community affairs but they are not involved in political campaign activities. Then there are the campaigners who are actively involved in political campaigns but inactive in other community affairs. The sixth type of political participants are the complete activists who are highly involved in all political activities, they actively participate in voting, political campaigns, and community activities and make contact with public officials.

Indeed, effective communication on social media and other online platforms is important towards political participation. Social media platforms have necessitated online political participation such as commenting and engaging in online groups even from people in diverse regions and views. Youth participation in politics has continued to be a major area of study around the world (Kitanova, 2019). The researcher has noted that the easy accessibility and usefulness of digital technology have paved the way for political engagement and sharing of information in the contemporary world. As such, the paper also incorporated the Technology Acceptance Model to understand the impact of social media on youth political participation.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model has its roots in acceptability and usability. The Technology

Acceptance Model theory by Davis (1989) states that there are two main features behind user acceptance of technology that is perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. These two aspects lead to behavioural intention to use a system and to the actual system use. Hence, technology allows citizens to participate on social media platforms, however, offline political engagement depends on one's personal choice and interest.

Social media promotes interactions and engagement among members of the community. It may be predicted that if the youth learn that using social media is simple, it will have a significant impact on youth political involvement through social media (Elkaseh, *et al.*, 2016). It is believed that the easier a method is to utilize, the more users are interested in using the media. Hence, due to ease of use and perceived usefulness, social media has made youth actively engage in online discussions.

However, the TAM does not take into consideration the traditional mode of discussions and that human beings are capable of engagement without a motivating factor. However, social media reveals the importance of information communication technology as it provides faster access and sharing of information. By generating online discussions, social media can determine youth political participation. The researcher also considers youths as active users of social media who can critically analyse information before they make decisions. Despite social media allowing active online participation, the major question for this study is why statistics continue to reveal low youth political participation. In an attempt to answer this, the researcher sought to merge the Political Activity Theory and TAM to analyse social media and political participation of the youth in contemporary Zimbabwe.

Social media in Zimbabwe and youth political participation

Gone are the days when television, radio and newspapers were the major sources of access to information. Hysenlika (2012) defined social media as the various electronic tools, technologies, and applications that facilitate interactive communication and content exchange, allowing the user to move back and forth easily between the roles of the audience and content producers. Social media is the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve active interactive participation.

With a population of more than 15 178,979 million, media consumption is relatively high in Zimbabwe. According to the statistical data released by ZIMSTAT Census (2022), The population of Zimbabwe as of 20th April 2022 was 15,178,979, of which 7,289,558 (48%) were male and 7,889,421 (52%) were female, giving a sex ratio of 92 males for every 100 females. Kemp (2022) states that 27.7% of citizens are aged between 18-35 years. Zimbabwe is also known for

its high Internet penetration. Kemp (2022) further states that the advent of Covid 19 led to an increase of 6.0% in broadband Internet usage due to restrictions on people's movement. The author acknowledged that social media users at the start of 2022 were equivalent to 10.2 per cent of the total population. Facebook's outreach in Zimbabwe was equivalent to 27.9 per cent of the local internet user base (regardless of age) in January 2022, whilst, Twitter's ad reach in Zimbabwe was equivalent to 5.0 per cent of the local internet user base (regardless of age) in the start of the year (Kemp, 2022). According to The Independent (2022), even though citizens use social media for engagement and communication, many activists in the country use social media to drive real social changes by exposing corruption and violations of human rights. Marima (2019) states that in Zimbabwe, social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp swiftly disseminate news in real-time in both urban and rural areas. The author further indicates that over 6 million people in Zimbabwe have access to the internet and social media platforms from which Facebook and WhatsApp dominate the market followed by Twitter. Hence, the advent of the internet created an enabling environment for youths' engagement through the use of social media. Such a social development has attracted interest in research on the impact of social media and youth political participation in Zimbabwe.

Digital technology has threatened the survival of print media not only in Zimbabwe but across the globe. Ndoma *et al.*, (2021) state that besides the negative effects of social media, citizens are demanding unrestricted use of social media. The major form of political campaigning or political communication used to be centred on mass rallies at public stadiums/spaces, printing of pamphlets, posters and clothing material such as t-shirts. Logo printing and distributing of T-shirts has and still dominate at political party conferences for visibility and campaign purposes. Therefore, the main question is, is it still relevant to use traditional media when communication has been transformed easier and faster through social media? By the time news bulletins or newspapers publish stories, most of the detailed news and evidence would have already been disseminated in real-time via social media. Does the youth have the patience to wait for the main news to get reliable information to determine their political participation? The problem with social media is that it can be an obstacle to youths' physical political participation. Nevertheless, social media provides equal and free discussions, comments and participation, hence, this study sought to critically analyse the role of social media in youth political participation.

The Constitution of Zimbabwe provides for equal political participation of citizens. Section 61 provides for equal rights to freedom of expression and media. As such, youth are not restricted to political participation. Political participation does not only imply voting in elections or participating in campaigns, it also

incorporates decision-making, and joining a political party. The Zimbabwe Constitution under section 20 defines youth as an age group from 15-35 years. Apart from the age range, in Zimbabwe, the legal age to vote starts at the age of 18 years. Vambe (2021) states that 18 years is the legal age from which citizens may participate in elections. However, there have been campaigns for the age of 16 to be the starting age where one may participate in the elections. Besides that, political participation is voluntary and one can participate directly or indirectly and the Zimbabwe Constitution provides for freedom of expression (Section 61 of Zimbabwe Constitution). However, youth political participation has been low in Zimbabwe. Arowolo & Aluko (2010) acknowledge that politics is a dirty game and as such some people might be afraid or reluctant to be involved in political engagement. The principle of democracy is fully recognized in Zimbabwe with no restriction to the involvement and participation of youths. As such, this study sought to focus on youth political participation in social media.

Leung & Yildirim (2020) argued that social media has the potential to change and shape the game plan of politics. Although Keating & Melis (2017) provide that social media can be a solution to low political participation among youths, Matthes (2022) states that access to vast amounts of information also contributes to low political engagement among youths. Indeed, the diverse knowledge and awareness gained from social media do not guarantee the political participation of youth in the electoral process. Moreover, Borhaug (2005) indicates that voter education contributes towards the political participation of youths. The author further indicates that young people should be aware of democratic principles and ideas. Social media has become the new driver for political communication. The electoral process is being advertised and made popular on social media for example at election results announcements, concentration and focus would be on social media for real-time update information.

The Zimbabwe political system can be used as an example of how social media played its role in political knowledge and sharing experiences. Zimbabwe's electoral processes are more dominant on social media platforms. Political parties, politicians and civil societies have used social media to encourage citizens particularly youths to register to vote. Political parties have also used these spaces to campaign for candidates ahead of elections. Moyo, *et al.*, (2020) provide social media debate and Twitter war between supporters of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU- PF) and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change Alliance (MDC-Alliance) in the run-up to the 2018 harmonized elections in Zimbabwe. In addition, Marima (2019:3) states that; on 14 December 2018 at its ZANU -PF Annual Conference, President Mnangagwa called on the party youth to be vigilant and engage dissenters on social

media for a comeback to the ruling party. As such, by having youth political participation, the socio-political undertakings may shape the policy processes to be more open and transparent towards the younger generation. Social media is one of the contemporary innovative forms of effective and efficient communication, however, political participation depends on one's access to and process of information. Given the rise and influence of social media, this study sought to analyse how social media impacts youth political participation in Zimbabwe.

METHODOLOGY

This paper sought to analyse social media and youth political participation in Zimbabwe. The paper made use of documentary data accumulated from secondary sources and interviews with participants who have either participated in the electoral process or not participated. The researcher also made a manual search of keywords such as social media, youths and political participation in Zimbabwe to get diverse views concerning the area of focus. As has already been indicated earlier in the literature, social media plays a crucial role in promoting youth political participation and, for this paper, in particular, social media has been a key source of credible data. The researcher also managed to interview nine key respondents to get relevant information to analyse social media and youth political participation in Zimbabwe.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The research findings presented that social media has greatly changed the way citizens engage in the political process. The researcher noted that traditional media such as open gatherings at rallies promoted a monopoly of information and media power. Findings presented show that social media platforms provide a divergent of information and views at the same time unlike relying on television news, radio or print media, which at times might be biased towards a particular political party. Chiweshe (2017) acknowledges that social media platforms stand as a source of political engagement. Research findings indicated that the use of social media by youths contributes towards online political participation. With the advent of digital technology, the use of social media in political participation is now inevitable.

The study presented further revealed that social media platforms provided spaces from which youth air out their voices and mindsets, even conducting debates and eye-opening discussions. Social media platforms enabled the youths to be citizen news agents or journalists despite not having attended school of journalism or media studies which Chiadzwa (2014) termed as "guerrilla journalism". There is little or no control over messages shared on social media platforms. As such, almost everyone is a journalist as there is a lot of news reporting and sharing of unverified information

on social media. Karombo (2018) states that fake news seems to be a problem not only for the opposition party but to general citizens. Although social media provides updated information on events or activities, Zimbabwe's political space has not been spared from the threat of fake news. It is difficult to determine true or false information as anyone is capable of posting information on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp or Twitter. Zimbabwe elections have not been spared from fake news, which is fast disseminated through social media. As such, information attained or circulating on social media can be a powerful tool in determining political participation. The participants expressed that politicians engage in social media platforms to spread their intended messages to secure votes ahead of elections. The researcher noted that social media platforms also provide a way for politicians to engage with youths canvassing for their support.

The research findings indicated the role of social media as a communication platform during a crisis is important and unavoidable. The research findings presented that social media platforms act as political campaign platforms with wide coverage across the country. The study found that the print media (newspapers) has been replaced by digitalized news, from which youth participation has been promoted. Despite that, physical rallies and print media campaigns are still prevalent, though the impact of social media on youth political participation is more vibrant.

The research findings further revealed that the use of social media in contemporary Zimbabwe politics has significantly intensified, especially among the youth. The Twitter platform has seen several hash (#) tags promoting youth political participation for example #Register to vote during voter registration especially ahead of the 2018 and 2023 elections. Milton & Mano (2017) state that social media shapes who we know, how we communicate and how others communicate with us. Findings indicated that social media not only promotes awareness but also promotes political participation. The researcher concurs with McQuail (2010) who states that social media information creates active participation from passive participation for most people.

Social media platforms have been vital play forms of citizens' engagement in discussions. The Twitter platform has offered political discussions and encouraged youths to participate in elections. Another participant expressed concerns over women and youth political participants. Action Aid Zimbabwe (2022) presented a headline "Government Urged to Ensure Meaningful Youth Participation across Spheres." The organisation urged the Government to work towards the 2020-2025 National Youth Policy and promote youth participation in governance issues. Action Aid (2022) further highlighted limited meaningful youth participation and representation in decision-making, electoral, budgeting, and resource allocation processes.

The findings also presented that social media plays an important role in sharing information in a fast way. Perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness were identified factors of using social media platforms in political discussions. The probability is very high that future election campaigns and political news will continue to be aired and shared on social media due to perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Hence, social media platforms promote political activity due to perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. The research findings imply that social media has an impact on political participation and usefulness as it provides information to interested individuals. The youths remain alive to current information, trends and policies. The researcher noted that the use of social media is easy as the majority of citizens own more than one mobile telephone. As such, this promotes youth towards political participation. Given the popularity of social media platforms such as Twitter and effects of Covid 19 and the embrace of digital technology, social media promotes youth political engagement.

Zimbabwe's Cyber Security and Data Protection Act seeks to protect the lawful use of technology and curb cybercrime. The Act came against a background of fighting cybercrime, a threat to State Security. The study presented that participants acknowledge that it is illegal for a person to send unverified messages. However, despite Chiyadzwa (2014), arguing that in Zimbabwe politicians are using social media as an opinion polling platform, as a voter mobilisation platform, there has been a paradox where the increased access to the internet and other technologies on social media increases the rate of exposure to cyber threats.

The fact that African countries adopted various forms of legislation such as the African Union Convention on Cyber Security and Personal Data Protection in June 2014, indicates that cyber terrorism (as a cybercrime) is a serious threat to African countries' national security. Gambanga (2016) postulates that the legal framework in Zimbabwe has not progressed as fast enough as the evolution of technology concerning the regulation of cyberspace that balances the right to freedom of expression, access to information, protection of citizens' rights and state security interests. The research findings established that youths access social media for information and rely on social media for news bulletins. As such, traditional modes of communication such as public speeches, radio, and newspapers remain equally relevant in contemporary Zimbabwe as a way of allowing sending and receiving information and promoting youth political participation. The study also found that social media news has a huge impact on the community as people repost on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp mass sending messages. Social media is being extensively used to better understand and promote youth political participation. The research findings presented that although young people are always on social media

platforms, television and radio remain some of the main sources of information.

Despite an increase in the use of social media in political participation by youths in Zimbabwe (Kemp, 2022), the gender divide is also prevalent. Mhaka (2022) in his article titled, “Apply gender lens to technology to bridge digital divide”, acknowledges that females have less access to the internet than males. It is disturbing that social media appears not to be equally promoting equal political participation despite efforts of international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) to promote equal participation and eliminate discrimination against women. The Research findings presented that there is a gender digital gap which needs to be closed considering that we are in the 21st century epoch. What is not clear, however, is why social media is not actively promoting youth offline participation. The study found that social media platforms provide political information and awareness. However, according to ZESN (2019), youth constitute 67.7% of the total population, however, lack of youth political participation is a major concern in Zimbabwe. It is the right of youths to be active and participate in socio-economic and political spaces. ZESN (2019:3) further states that “Post-election has seen a shrinking of civic space, which might act as a deterrent to some youth political participation in 2023 elections” The research findings also presented that social media does not circulate news but helps to increase political knowledge and this ensures more participation in political activities. The study found that youth are more actively engaged on online platforms than offline or physical participation. As such, the increase in mobile phones promotes an opportunity and access to engage in online political discussions. In that regard, social media platforms play major roles in promoting online political participation. Hence, as youths continue to be actively online, political participation by the youths on social media can be further entrenched, which can be termed as politics of social media engagement. With low offline participation, it is biased to conclude that social media promotes youth political participation without distinguishing between online and offline political participation.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper was interested in analyzing the role of media in youth political participation in Zimbabwe. This study has contributed towards new knowledge and understanding of the impact of social media on youth political participation. The study made use of political activity theory and the technology acceptance model to determine the phenomenon of social media and youth political participation. The theories have revealed the nexus between social media and youth political participation in contemporary politics.

The study concludes that social media not only brings social connectivity but also promotes youth

political participation. The study found that social media platforms have not only made an impact on the academic field or economic platforms but also on the political field. Enlightening discussions and debates have been facilitated over social media platforms. It is imperative to indicate that political participation amongst youth is largely dependent on social media platforms. The study concludes that the majority of youths are often engaged on social media from which they participate in online discussions or get easy access to political information.

The study concludes that despite social media platforms acting as a threat to the survival of traditional media in providing information to citizens, traditional media such as radio and television remain relevant in promoting political participation. Traditional news media has been identified as a slow mode of engagement, despite being still useful and relevant in allowing sending and receiving information. In addition, digitalization has shifted modes of communication and has paved the way for the popularity of social media as a factor in promoting youth political participation. Political news and awareness have been raised by social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Hence, in the study, social media is presented as a powerful factor which generates active online youth engagement. Most of the youths spend a lot of time online, which is the same reason that acts as a barrier to offline participation. Hence, despite the popularity of social media and digital technology, a major concern is how social media can promote offline youth political participation since the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission (ZEC) has yet to adopt e-voting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media has brought hope and expectations to youths’ political participation hence, this study recommends that ZEC adopt and implement e-voting since social media is playing the role of e-speaking and online sharing of information. This strengthens the power of Information Communication Technology (ICT) in promoting political participation, transparency and credibility in the 2028 elections and beyond. E-voting will also contribute towards credible free and fair elections, however, the main question will depend on who will be handling the main server to deter manipulation of the election results.

The study recommends the Government of Zimbabwe strengthen the security of the use of digital technology across socio-economic and political engagement. In addition, citizens should be censored to provide credible information and avoid negative criticisms, hate speech or cyber-attacks. It is difficult to confirm fake news or to separate hoax messages and true information. Whilst there is an increase in the use of social media in political participation, issues to do with trust, accountability and transparency should be promoted. Lessons on how to detect fake news should be administered to citizens by The Ministry of Information Communication and Technology and the Postal and

Telecommunications regulatory authority, citizens should be informed that it is important to verify and fact-check any information on social media. There should be strict rules and regulations to promote digital rights without any fear of intimidation. Zimbabwe youths should actively participate both online and offline in contributing towards achieving Zimbabwe's Middle Income Economy by 2030.

As social media platforms continue to be popular in the political space, women and girls should be encouraged to embrace digital rights. Gender representation should be equally present in political participation. Political parties, politicians, and Civil Society Organisations should encourage active women's political participation as social media creates a new dimension of space for political engagement and participation. Such sectors should educate youths on the importance of both offline and online political participation. This will help promote offline political participation.

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