

A Critical Review of the Role of Social Media in Citizen Engagement and Policymaking: The Nigeria Discourse

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Abstract

This study explores how social media facilitates citizen engagement and policymaking in Nigeria and Senegal. It examines features that encourage participation, strategies for including underrepresented groups, and the translation of online engagement into real-world policy influence. An online survey method was employed in gathering data on the experiences and perspectives of citizens from both countries regarding their social media usage for civic participation. Results from the online survey revealed that discussion forums and live Q&A sessions with policymakers were the most effective features for citizen participation. Social media can empower traditionally marginalized voices, but overcoming language barriers and the digital divide is crucial for equitable participation. The study found a belief in social media's power for social change, but cautions against attributing policy changes solely to online campaigns. Social media's impact includes agenda-setting, fostering public pressure, and building social movements for long-term influence. The study recommends among other things that social media platforms should prioritize features that encourage substantive discussions and analysis of policy documents within forums.

Keywords: Social media, citizen engagement, policymaking, Nigeria, Senegal

Introduction

Social media has rapidly become an integral part of people's lives, affecting various aspects such as civic and political activities, health information sharing, job-related activities, and even news consumption (Adjei, 2016). It has revolutionized the way people participate in civic and political activities, providing them with a platform to voice their opinions, engage in discussions, and organize protests. Additionally, social media has become a major source of

news for many individuals, rivaling traditional news organizations. This has significant implications for citizen engagement and policymaking.

The use of social media allows citizens to have a direct and immediate impact on policy decisions (Bosch, 2018). By connecting individuals with policymakers and facilitating open dialogue, social media enables citizens to express their concerns, share information, and mobilize support for important causes. Furthermore, social media plays a crucial role in shaping the national discourse and mobilizing citizens (Adjei, 2016). It provides a space for citizens to engage in political conversations, stay informed about current events, and contribute to public debates. For example, in countries like the USA, UK, and France, social media platforms have been instrumental in organizing political movements and protests, such as the Arab Spring and the Black Lives Matter movement. Similarly, in Nigeria, Senegal, Niger etc., social media has helped to mobilize citizens and create a platform for political engagement. For example, social media fueled outrage against police brutality in Nigeria. Youths used Twitter and Instagram to organize protests, document human rights abuses, and garner international attention for the #EndSARS movement. In Senegal, the Senegalese social movement leveraged Facebook and SMS to mobilize citizens against former president Abdoulaye Wade's bid for a third term, ultimately influencing the election outcome.

Social media empowers citizens to influence decisions that shape their lives and fosters a sense of ownership over the governance process. Unlike the traditionally, citizen engagement methods that relied on public hearings, town hall meetings, and contacting elected officials through written letters or phone calls, often known to its limitations (Chadwick & Livingston, 2012). Public hearings can be geographically inaccessible and time-consuming, potentially excluding those with busy schedules or transportation limitations (Stewart, 2008). Vocal minorities (Delli Carpini & Keating, 1996) can dominate town hall meetings, and traditional communication channels may not effectively reach certain demographics (Norris, 2001).

While social media offers exciting possibilities for citizen participation in policymaking, several key challenges hinder its effectiveness. The true influence of online engagement on policy decisions remains unclear. While online petitions, discussions, and polls raise awareness, their ability to translate into concrete policy shifts remains uncertain. Measuring this impact and ensuring it progresses beyond mere visibility is crucial. Addressing these challenges is essential to unlocking social media's full potential as a tool for inclusive and impactful citizen participation in shaping policy. It was on this note that the researcher carried out this study to examine the role of social media in facilitating citizen participation in policymaking within the contexts of Nigeria and Senegal.

Purpose of the study

The general purpose of the study is to examine the role of social media in citizen engagement and policymaking in Nigeria and Senegal. Specifically the study examine:

1. specific features of social media platforms that are most effective in facilitating citizen participation in policymaking;
2. how can social media can be used to encourage participation from traditionally underrepresented groups in policy discussions; and
3. extent to which social media campaigns can effectively translate online engagement into real-world policy influence?

Research Questions

In line with the specific objectives, the following research questions are raised to guide the study:

1. What specific features of social media platforms are most effective in facilitating citizen participation in policymaking?
2. How can social media be used to encourage participation from traditionally underrepresented groups in policy discussions?
3. To what extent do social media campaigns effectively translate online engagement into real-world policy influence?

Hypothesis

1. Social media campaigns do not effectively translate online engagement into real-world policy influence

Methodology

This research investigates the role of social media in fostering citizen engagement and policymaking within the contexts of Nigeria and Senegal. An online survey method was employed in gathering data on the experiences and perspectives of citizens from both countries regarding their social media usage for civic participation.

Results

Research Question 1: What specific features of social media platforms are most effective in facilitating citizen participation in policymaking?

Results of Research Question 1 are presented in Table 1

Table 1: Features of social media platforms are most effective in facilitating citizen participation in policymaking n = 12,140

Items	f	%
Social media features that is most effective in facilitating in-depth discussions on complex policy issues		
a) Online polls and surveys	2307	19
b) Discussion forums	5099	42
c) Live Q&A sessions with policymakers	3035	25
d) Content sharing capabilities	1699	14

Live Q&A sessions with policymakers on social media can be beneficial because they

a) Allow for more in-depth analysis of policy issues	2792	23
b) Provide a platform for direct citizen-policymaker interaction	4249	35
c) Lead to a more informed and responsive policymaking process	5099	42

f = Frequency, % = Percentage

Results in Table 1 show that discussion forums (42 %) and live questions and answers sessions with policy makers (25 %) were the most effective features of social media platforms that facilitated citizen participation in policymaking. Other features of social media that facilitated citizens' participations in policymaking were online surveys and content sharing, respectively. It was also observed in Table 1 that live questions and answer sessions with policymakers on social media was beneficial because it allowed for more in-depth analysis of policy issues, provided a platform for direct citizen-policymaker interaction as well as lead to a more informed and responsive policymaking process.

Research Question 2: How can social media be used to encourage participation from traditionally underrepresented groups in policy discussions?

Results of Research Question 2 are presented in Table 2

Table 2: Mean responses of the respondents on how social media can be used to encourage participation from traditionally underrepresented groups in policy discussions

S/N	Item statements:	$\bar{X}$	SD	Decision
1.	To what extent do you think social media can be used to overcome traditional barriers to participation for underrepresented groups?	3.07	0.87	GE

$\bar{X}$ = Mean, SD = Standard deviation, GE = Great extent

The results showed that social media can be used to overcome traditional barriers to participation for underrepresented groups in policy discussions ($\bar{X} > 2.50$).

Research Question 3: To what extent do social media campaigns effectively translate online engagement into real-world policy influence?

Results of Research Question 3 are presented in Table 3

Table 3: A cross tabulation on the extent social media campaigns effectively translate online engagement into real-world policy influence (n = 12140)

Variables	Effectiveness of social media in translating online engagement on policy issues into real-world			p-value
Social media platforms have the potential to be a powerful tool for citizen engagement in the policymaking process				
	Effective	Not effective	Freq.	
Agree	6469 (53.3)	3012 (24.8)	9481	0.00
Disagree	927 (7.6)	1732 (21.9)	2659	

Data on Table 3 shows a cross tabulation depicting the extent social media campaigns effectively translate online engagement into real-world policy influence. From the Table, it can be seen that majority (78.1 %) of the respondents agreed that social media platforms have the potential to be a powerful tool for citizen engagement in the policymaking process and effective in translating online engagement on policy issues into real-world (60.9 %). This result is in agreement with the Chi-square probability value of 0.00. Indicating that social media campaigns can effectively translate online engagement into real-world policy influence ($p < 0.05$).

Discussion of Results

This analysis explores the effectiveness of various social media features in facilitating citizen participation in policymaking processes within Nigeria and Senegal. The findings highlight two key features: discussion forums and live Q&A sessions with policymakers. The prominence of discussion forums as a tool for citizen participation aligns with current research on social media's potential for civic engagement. Omotayo et al. (2021) investigated the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, where social media discussion forums played a critical role in fostering communication and mobilizing citizens. These forums serve as virtual spaces for in-depth analysis of policy issues. Participants can share information, debate diverse

perspectives, and collaboratively formulate solutions. This collaborative approach fosters a more informed and engaged citizenry, a cornerstone of effective policymaking. Discussion forums also address limitations inherent in traditional civic engagement methods like public hearings. Such limitations include geographical inaccessibility and the potential for vocal minorities to dominate the discourse (Chadwick & Livingston, 2012).

The finding that live Q&A sessions with policymakers are a valuable tool underscores the growing demand for citizen-policymaker interactivity. While research on live Q&A sessions specifically within the contexts of Nigeria and Senegal is limited, Gaye et al. (2018) explored how Senegalese youth utilize social media for political participation. Their study revealed a desire for more interactive experiences with politicians, suggesting a wider trend. Live Q&A sessions provide a direct dialogue space where citizens can pose inquiries, receive immediate responses, and gain a deeper understanding of policymakers' positions. This fosters a sense of accountability and transparency, potentially influencing policy decisions by pressuring policymakers to directly address citizen concerns (Bosch, 2018). Furthermore, live Q&A sessions can enrich the policymaking process by providing policymakers with real-time feedback on proposed policies and allowing them to gather citizen input that might not be captured through traditional methods.

The research findings elucidate the transformative role of social media in policymaking, particularly in empowering underrepresented voices traditionally marginalized from policy discussions, offering a promising avenue for inclusivity and equity. Understanding the demographics and platform preferences of these groups is essential, as exemplified by Adefemi's study on the #BringBackOurGirls campaign (Adefemi, 2021) and Diagne's research on youth-led movements in Senegal (Diagne, 2019), highlighting the significance of strategic messaging via WhatsApp platform in creating awareness. Overcoming language barriers, as emphasized by Bello et al., through content creation in local languages and leveraging informal languages like "Pidgin English," can enhance accessibility to policy discussions (Bello et al., 2019; Okonedo, 2020). Trust-building initiatives, such as partnering with local figures like Senegalese "griots," can bridge complex policy issues with community understanding, fostering meaningful participation, particularly among rural populations (Mbow, 2018). Addressing the digital divide, as highlighted by Olorunsola (2019) and Faye et al. (2020), through initiatives focused on affordability, digital literacy training, and device access, is crucial for ensuring equitable participation. Ultimately, leveraging social media effectively can lead to a more inclusive and democratic policymaking process, where all citizens' voices contribute to shaping decisions that impact their lives, necessitating continued efforts from policymakers and advocates to harness its potential for creating a more representative policy landscape.

Further findings from the study reveals a strong belief in the power of social media platforms as a tool for driving social change. However, the studies by Akinwale (2019) and Mbengue

(2018) introduce crucial layers of complexity. While acknowledging the #EndSARS movement's success in raising awareness about police brutality in Nigeria, Akinwale cautions against attributing policy changes solely to online campaigns. Similarly, Mbengue's study on Senegalese civil society organizations highlights the challenges of translating online mobilization into concrete policy shifts due to entrenched power structures and bureaucratic inertia. These insights remind us that social media campaigns operate within a broader political context. The existing political landscape and power dynamics significantly influence the path from online engagement to real-world change.

Frimpong & Sun (2020) offer a valuable counterpoint, urging us to consider the broader impact of social media activism beyond immediate policy changes. Their study on social media activism in Africa argues that social media campaigns can contribute to agenda setting, fostering public pressure on policymakers, and building social movements with long-term goals of influencing policy. These indirect effects pave the way for future change. For instance, a social media campaign might not directly result in a new law this year, but it could raise public awareness and put pressure on policymakers, potentially leading to legislative changes down the line.

These findings suggest a dynamic interplay between online engagement and policy influence. Social media undoubtedly plays a crucial role in raising awareness, mobilizing public pressure, and setting agendas for future policy debates. Social media campaigns can spark national conversations, empower citizens, and hold leaders accountable. However, directly attributing specific policy changes solely to online campaigns can be challenging. Other factors, such as pre-existing political pressures, established power structures, and effective offline mobilization strategies, also play a significant role.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has shed light on the efficacy of various social media features in promoting citizen participation in policymaking processes, particularly within the contexts of Nigeria and Senegal. Two key features, namely discussion forums and live Q&A sessions with policymakers, have emerged as pivotal tools in fostering citizen engagement and influencing policy decisions. Discussion forums serve as virtual spaces for in-depth analysis of policy issues, allowing participants to share information, debate diverse perspectives, and collaboratively formulate solutions. They address limitations inherent in traditional civic engagement methods, such as geographical inaccessibility and the potential dominance of vocal minorities. Meanwhile, live Q&A sessions provide direct dialogue opportunities between citizens and policymakers, fostering transparency, accountability, and real-time feedback on proposed policies.

These findings underscore the transformative role of social media in policymaking, offering avenues for inclusivity and equity by empowering underrepresented voices traditionally marginalized from policy discussions. Understanding the demographics and platform preferences of these groups is crucial for effective outreach and engagement. Overcoming barriers such as language differences and the digital divide is essential to ensuring equitable participation.

However, while social media campaigns hold immense potential for driving social change and influencing policy, attributing specific policy changes solely to online engagement can be challenging. It is imperative to consider the broader political context, including pre-existing power structures, bureaucratic inertia, and effective offline mobilization strategies. Social media activism contributes to agenda setting, public pressure on policymakers, and long-term social movements, paving the way for future policy influence.

Recommendations

This analysis has illuminated the potential of social media features in fostering citizen engagement and influencing policy decisions within Nigeria and Senegal. Here are specific recommendations to leverage these findings and create a more inclusive and impactful online policymaking landscape:

1. Platforms should prioritize features that encourage substantive discussions beyond basic comments. This could involve the enablement of structured conversation flows that prevent comment sections from devolving into chaotic exchanges. This allows citizens to build upon each other's ideas and engage in constructive debate. Also, there is a need to facilitate the analysis of relevant materials by allowing citizens to share policy documents, reports, and research directly within the forum. This fosters a knowledge-based environment where arguments are backed by evidence.
2. There is the need to move beyond static information dissemination by incorporating dynamic features that encourage active participation. Interactive features that utilize features like polls and audience questions should be incorporated in the information dissemination platforms to encourage real-time participation and gauge public sentiment on specific policy issues. This will allow policymakers to gather immediate feedback and tailor their approaches accordingly.
3. Policy simulations should be crafted to engage citizens with hypothetical scenarios and policy consequences. Interactive simulations can gamify the policymaking process, making it more accessible and fostering a deeper understanding of the potential impacts of different policy choices.
4. Policymakers and advocacy groups should conduct targeted research to understand the communication styles and preferred social media platforms of underrepresented groups. This research, through focus groups, surveys, and collaboration with local

organizations, will inform the development of targeted messaging, content formats, and outreach strategies. For instance, research might indicate that a specific demographic is more active on Facebook, while another primarily uses WhatsApp. Messaging and content can then be tailored accordingly to ensure it reaches the intended audience effectively.

5. To ensure equitable participation, several strategies should be implemented such as (a) multilingual content development. Develop key policy content in local languages for broader accessibility. This demonstrates respect for diverse communities and ensures that citizens are not excluded due to language barriers; (b) Informal language formats: Consider utilizing informal language formats where relevant (e.g., "Pidgin English" in some West African contexts). This can make policy discussions more relatable and encourage participation from those who might find formal language intimidating; and (c) Digital literacy training partnerships: Collaborate with existing digital literacy training programs to equip citizens with the skills for online participation and critical information evaluation. This can empower citizens to engage meaningfully in online policy discussions and avoid the spread of misinformation.
6. Policymakers should develop and communicate guidelines for online engagement, including the establishment of a clear timelines for responding to citizen inquiries on social media platforms. This will demonstrate transparency and respect for citizen input; outlining clear procedures for addressing online concerns raised by citizens. This will fosters trust and ensures that policymakers are held accountable for their actions; and developing and communicating consequences for violating community guidelines, such as hate speech or misinformation. This will help maintain a civil and productive online environment for all participants.

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