

Interrogating the Relationship between WhatsApp Political Use and Active Political Participation among Nigerians: Implication for Online Democracy

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Abstract

Massive use of social media by the citizens has led to a shift from conventional political rally for political mobilization and marketing of candidates to online political advertising. While the masses engage in political discussion online, some politicians take social media discussions of politics for granted claiming that there are no polling units online. The general objective of this study is to examine the relationship between WhatsApp use for political discussion and active participation in real time among residents of Awka metropolis. Specifically, the study examined how often WhatsApp is used for political information; the degree of political education gained by the respondents; the extent to which the use of WhatsApp encouraged physical political participation, and whether the rate of use of WhatsApp for political purposes corresponds to the rate of participation in real life by the respondents. The study used the survey research method in studying 379 WhatsApp users in Awka Metropolis sampled using purposive sampling technique. The study found expression from the theoretical provision of the reasoned action theory of the media. Findings revealed that WhatsApp use for political discussion does not only increase political awareness and knowledge but also heavily encourages real-time political participation among the respondents. It was concluded that WhatsApp use has been a viable means of political mobilization and participation in Nigeria. The study among others recommended that politicians and political parties that want to survive politically should take social media criticisms very seriously or get ready to be voted out in elections.

Keywords: WhatsApp political use, interrogation, relationship, active political participation, implication, online democracy.

Introduction

The rate at which the masses gain access to the internet in recent time has given a wide range of opportunity for them to get exposed to the new media and its advantages as an alternative to the mainstream media means of

gathering information. The normal human activities that have characterized the pre-internet era had drastically been influenced by the advent of the internet. Generally, the internet had changed the life that men live and the mode of doing everything in the world, including politics (Abheeshai, 2022). Among the internet-enabled networking sites that have touched as well as changed the lives of the people in the world is WhatsApp. WhatsApp is one of the most vibrant social media networking sites in the world that have taken over the political space of different countries of the world.

Since its birth in 2009, WhatsApp has gained customers and subscribers around the world following its ease of use. Having penetrated the people and effecting the observed transformation in their lifestyles, social media became a veritable tool of information dissemination and persuasion. The kind of presence it creates is such that it gives one an opportunity to feel free to disseminate any kind of persuasive content to target audience. Its existence encouraged all time communication and dismissed all kinds of barriers of either distance or language. This is because social media allow all users to use their dialects either through written message or voice notes. This was captured more clearly in Abheeshai (2022) who argued that the popularity and the rise of WhatsApp is because of its ability to grant users the freedom to express themselves freely to an audience.

Naturally, people love to express themselves and share their opinions on matters of national and communal concerns. Significantly, the evolution of WhatsApp had served a retinue of purposes such as promotion of businesses by enhancing social listening, connecting buyers and sellers of different products, encouraging education, entertainment and even banking. Nigeria has reasonable active internet users of WhatsApp (Statista, 2023). This means that reasonable communication is taking place in the WhatsApp media space about political activities in the country which is capable of enhancing political awareness and consciousness among the people. While citing Castells (2012), Uwalaka (2021) argued that earlier studies have demonstrated the significant impact of social media in fostering political participation in emerging democracies. The impact of social media use also has been documented to have the strength to encourage demand for social change in autocratic regimes as can be seen in the #EndSars (Abosade, 2020; Adekoya, 2021) and the Black Lives Matter protests in US (Amnesty International, 2020).

Generally, these political participations most times emanate from social unrest in the society. Research evidence has shown that there has been an increase in collective and connective actions across the globe. Importantly, these collective actions as can be seen in the 2011 Arab Spring, the 15 Million men march in Spain, and the 2012 Occupy Nigeria social unrests were made possible as a result of accessibility of digital media platforms (Ashiekpe & Mojaye, 2017).

These platforms encourage these collective actions through its ability to disseminate mobilizing information, propagating enthusiasm and enabling emotional contamination which makes the people eager to participate in the physical action (Ufuophu-Biri & Ojoboh, 2017; Uwalaka, 2017; Uwalaka, 2019; Uwalaka, 2020).

As an instrument of massive mobilization for social action, at the wake of the 2023 general elections, the WhatsApp social media was heavily engaged by both politicians, political parties and the citizens to mobilize for different activities involving the electoral process ranging from the continuous voter registration to the voting at the polling stations as people and political parties disseminated different political slogans and messages aimed at mobilizing and encouraging the people to participate in the process. Even the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) subscribed to the use of the digital platforms to persuade the citizens to participate in the process. The continuous voter registration was also digitalized to accommodate many voters and reduce the crowd at the registration centers. With all these and the degree of commitment and assurances by INEC that the elections were going to be the best in terms of credibility and fairness, the internet and all social media platforms were awash with discussions on political developments, especially concerning the Bimodal Verification and Accreditation System (BVAS) and the IRev which were seen as the game changers of the 2023 elections.

The use of social media in communicating issues on the election got the youths so involved in the election that awareness was high among them. It reawakened the political consciousness of the youths leading to observed desires among them to participate and change the narrative, considering the fact that they are the ones bearing the brunt of bad leadership in the country. Importantly, it was the youth that face all socio-economic challenges ranging from unemployment, poor infrastructure, lack of health facilities, insecurity, to poverty. The National Bureau of Statistics reports that Nigeria's unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2023 moved from 33.5 per cent to 41 per cent in 2023 (Onuba, 2019; Proshare.com, 2020). Relying on the degree of social media use and involvement of the youth in the online discourse of the election and its process, one may not be wrong to conclude that there would be massive turn out at the polling stations for the voting proper. The burning desire among the youth to express their dissatisfaction with the leadership of the country is not new. According to Obisesan (2019), Nigerian youth have often shown interest in turning around the peculiar challenges which are holding back the country and mortgaging their economic fortune.

Since the origin of WhatsApp social media and its use in political activities, researchers have paid attention to the influence of WhatsApp in electoral processes. However, despite an abundance of research investigating social

media effects on political participation, little or insufficient attention has been paid specifically to WhatsApp use in political mobilization and physical participation in electoral processes in Nigeria. Limited enquiry has evaluated the relationship between WhatsApp political use and active political participation among Nigerians. Against this background, whether these burning desires and involvement expressed in the social media translate to physical participation is a great question that this study is set to answer.

Statement of the Problem

Public use of social media platforms of different kinds has forced many political parties and their candidates into the creation of different social media accounts to reach out to the electorates. The reason for this is that social media control the main sources of information dissemination among the voting population in Nigeria. The advent of the social media gave the masses the needed opportunity to participate in the discussion of issues influencing their lives as a people in a society. Through these media, the citizens see and get exposed to what is happening in the political space and decide to take a stand on how best to save themselves from different kinds of political misfortunes. If WhatsApp social media platform has exposed the people to dangers of political apathy and the likely political behaviour to change the narrative, it becomes important to investigate how the masses utilized the opportunity provided by this medium to effect the needed correction in the political leadership space. Considering the fact that keeping silent in the midst of oppression is a demand for more oppression, this study answers the question: what has changed after being aware through WhatsApp that the polity needs reformation through active participation of the masses? It was in line with the above question that this study investigated whether heavy WhatsApp use for political discussion of political activities encourages physical participation in politics with special reference to the 2023 general elections.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

- To ascertain how often WhatsApp is used for political information seeking among the respondents.
- To find out the degree of political education gained by the respondents through WhatsApp use.
- To ascertain the extent to which the use of WhatsApp for political discussion encourage physical political participation in real time politics by the respondents.

- To examine whether there is a significant relationship between respondents' rate of use of WhatsApp for political purposes and the political participation in real life by the respondents.

Significance of the Study

This study is very important to the society, the electoral system and the political parties. To the society, the study will expose what the people do with the political information they gain from their WhatsApp use for political purposes. This will help political parties and the policy makers engage the audience in future outing for positive political participation. With the understanding of what the audience do with political education disseminated on WhatsApp, the political parties will design communication strategy that can encourage social listening with their audience in order to know what they need and proffer solution on how to provide them. This will certainly help in initiating good governance to the people. Apathy will as well dwindle if good governance gets initiated into the Nigerian political space. Moreover, this study will form a source of literature for future studies on the use of social media for political campaigns and participation in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Theory of Reasoned Action

Propounded by Martin Fishbein and Icek Ajzen in 1975, the Theory of Reasoned Action which is usually classified as the Theory of Planned Behavior, is a theory that is designed to help make sense of human behavior in specific contexts, such as whether or not people will take up healthy habits (LaCaille, 2020). As a cognitive theory and mathematical model, the theory allows scientists to predict behavioural intentions as a function of attitudes and subjective norms (Nickerson, 2022).

The theory is based on a tripod of audience beliefs, attitudes and intentions. In this context, the individual's belief explains the chances that the individual thinks that a certain action will generate a favourable outcome. For instance, *'if participating in real time politics is a means of being a governor tomorrow, one may end up participating in order to get the chance to rule one day'*; a WhatsApp user thinking this way can join political activities because he is certain that a reward awaits such an action. On the other hand, the attitudes towards an action are where the individual examines what action to be taken while paying attention to whether or not the individual thinks that the expected outcome (to desire to get a better political office) is favourable or unfavourable (being a victim of political violence). The attitude is what helps the individual to positively and/or negatively evaluate an action which he or she intended to take. Any user that thinks that joining will lead to desirable outcomes will have

a positive attitude towards putting all his efforts in it.

Meanwhile, someone who thinks that following *politicians* will lead to being victimized on the day of election will shun real life political participation after weighing the cost and benefit. This will amount to negative attitude towards offline participation. At the component of intention, the individual examines the best way to take the action in response to beliefs and attitudes. Significantly, the theory equally relates to the possible expectations of other people around the actor. Drawing from the above explications, the proponents of this theory are of the view that any action taken by an adult is well thought of and well calculated. It is the views of the proponents of this theory that actions are taken after the actor had concluded the examination of what he wanted to do and what he stands to gain. Being a matter of interest, political participation is mainly motivated by the expected interest subject to outcome. The theory posits that any action is voluntary and not forced. Applying the theory to this study, to participate or not participate in political activities offline is seen as a reasoned action which is considered by the WhatsApp users and concluded to be of positive interest and at the same time acceptable to those who matter to them.

The Review

WhatsApp Use for Political Discussions and Political Participation

Despite the serendipity surrounding these inventions, instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp have become a popular medium for political mobilization and activism in Africa (Omanga, 2019; Colom, 2022) and elsewhere (Treré, 2018; Pang & Woo, 2020; Velasquez *et al.*, 2021; Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.*, 2021), especially when they act as tools that enable common people to create online communities. The instant messaging app, WhatsApp, given its “more intimate and controlled environment” (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2021, p. 201), is particularly popular in Africa which is characterized by several inhibitions related to political participation including media censorship, citizen surveillance, and intrusion of privacy, among others. As such, it provides the much-needed safe environment for political participation often characterized by minority and unpopular views against the establishment, even though some studies report the contrary. While citing Brady (1999, p. 737), Knoll & Matthes (2018) defined political participation as any behavior by the citizens aimed at influencing some political outcomes. Among Nigerian population, WhatsApp is a highly utilized social media networking site where political activities are discussed and its effects are largely dependent on how people make use of it. Findings on motivation and user behavior demonstrate that demographics and predispositions largely determine how people use social media and that people may either avoid or actively seek political information

(Tang & Lee, 2013; Baek, 2015). In this same manner, people are most likely to decide to abscond from real time participation after taking active online participation for a period of time.

Importantly, the basis of the current study is that exposure to online political content may not actually encourage citizens into engaging in political participation in real life. Earlier study by Nekmat, Gower & Zhou (2015); Kim & Khang (2014) have revealed that there is significant relationship between WhatsApp use and political participation. Overall, studies measuring political use of social media constantly found positive political participation effects (Ekström, Gil de Zúñiga Olsson & Shehata, 2014). However, studies investigating the effects of general social media use produced inconsistent results (XenosVromen & Loader, 2014). Furthermore, in contrast to intentional exposure, even relatively uninterested users may get incidentally exposed to political information.

Specifically, the ‘rise of social media has arguably further contributed to the phenomenon of accidental or unintentional exposure to public affairs content because such contents are often “pushed” to people by their acquaintances’ (Tang & Lee, 2013, p. 2). Accordingly, research frequently looked at contextual factors increasing the chance of such incidental exposure. Tang and Lee (2013) suggested that direct connections to political actors increase exposure to shared political information and at the same time increase political participation. They identified network heterogeneity as a predictor of political participation. This is due to the fact that people embedded in a more diversified social network are usually exposed to a wider range of viewpoints and, thus, more likely to feel addressed. Similarly, sheer network size was assumed to increase the probability of being exposed to opportunities for political participation (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga *et al.*, 2012; Theocharis & Quintelier, 2016).

The lion’s share of research distinguished between online and off-line political participation (Bakker & de Vreese, 2011; Bode, 2012; Kim & Khang, 2014; Towner, 2013). Online political participation usually refers to activities such as signing an online petition or sending a message to a public office holder. Off-line political participation refers to more traditional forms of Political Participation, such as voting or working in a party organization. Some scholars argued that there is a qualitative difference between these participative activities which are not accounted for by the simple online versus offline distinction. Specifically, certain online activities encourage the so-called ‘slacktivism’, characterized by inefficacious ‘feel-good’ forms of political participation that should be distinguished from more effective and effortful kinds of political participation (Vitak *et al.*, 2011). Against this background, it is believed that it makes sense to describe participatory activities in terms of the effort needed to accomplish them (for a similar approach, see Bakker & de

Vreese, 2011). As a result, various kinds of PP can be predicted from user motivation since motivation is seen as an antecedent of effort (Naylor *et al.*, 1980, cited in Knoll, Matthes & Heiss, 2018). This distinction is crucial because political participation, as a behavior, is clearly driven by goals (Kruglanski Jasko & Chernikova, 2015). The implementation of goals depends on the amount of necessary effort. This effort is crucial for the question of whether someone acts or not, rather than the distinction between online and off-line.

It is important to note that most studies investigating the relationship of social media use and political participation employed cross-sectional research designs. Clearly, such designs provide only a snapshot in time and do not account for long-term effects. The few existing panel studies indicated that general social media use does not or weakly trigger political participation in the long run (Theocharis & Quintelier, 2016). This finding is being tested in the current study for either confirmation or dismissal. These studies challenge the view that social media have capability in facilitating social ties, providing space for personal expression, and encouraging social interaction which is sufficient to exert long lasting influence on political participation. Whether this is true is a function of the outcome of this study.

Empirical Review

Through the application of focus group discussion method, Ooko (2023) examined the contribution of WhatsApp social media to political participation considering the fact that there has been heavy media censorship and citizen surveillance in Kenya. The mainstay of this study was the freedom that WhatsApp has given to the citizens to express themselves in their political environment. Relying on the provision of the Actor–Network Theory of social media, the study concludes that although both human and non-human actors strive to construct a safe community for political participation on WhatsApp, modes of exclusion and inclusion arise from the socio-technological interaction which could pose a threat to the newly founded “safe space”. It was recommended that more efforts should be made to free other social media from threats and surveillance of the government to encourage safer media space that can encourage political participation among the population. This study is related to the current one in the sense that they are particular about WhatsApp and political participation. On the other hand, they are different. While the previous study is relying on the freedom of expression granted by WhatsApp away from the threat and surveillance that other social media platforms like twitter and Facebook users face, this current one is interested in how the use of WhatsApp has encouraged real time participation of the people in the political activities in Nigeria’s 2023 election.

In another study, Obisesan (2022) examined the roles of social media on youth's political participation in the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria. In this study, attention was on the roles played by social media in the emancipation of the youth as well as the double-edged implications that the use of social media may have on the democratic processes. The study relied on both in-depth interview of social media influencers and textual analysis of social media accounts of prominent politicians. Premised on the uses and gratifications theory of media effect, the study found that social media played a vital role in the 2019 General Election in Nigeria. The study concluded that social media contributed to citizens' power through debates and narratives which were instrumental in agenda-setting for the ruling class and citizens' democratic expectations. Again, this study is connected to the current one in the area of its base. However, the previous study is looking at social media generally while the current study is interested in the WhatsApp networking site. It also pays attention to the influence of its use for political activities on the respondents' political participation in Nigeria, especially in 2023 general elections.

Similarly, Fleur (2022) investigated the influence of using the internet on whether citizens participate in politics. The main objective is to investigate the role that the internet plays in predicting different and separate forms of political participation, like voting behaviour or signing petitions. The study adopted the logistic regression and ordinary linear regression analysis in studying the extent to which citizens participate in politics as a result of their internet use among 41,041 respondents from 24 European countries. The study found that Internet use among the individuals positively influence political participation. It was concluded that the internet has significant influence on the respondents' political participation in the areas of the study. This study is related to the current one being a study premised on the political participation as a dependent variable. However, they differ in area of target and objective. While the previous one is on the internet use generally, this current one is on WhatsApp use particularly. Again, as the previous study was conducted in Europe, the current one is looking at the influence of WhatsApp political use on political participation among Nigerian audience.

In another closely related study, Abheeshai (2022) investigated the relationship of social media use and political participation among Indian natives. The study which was conducted using the survey research method explored different social media used by the respondents in different spheres of life, including politics. Relying on the technological determinism theory of the media, the study found that heavy social media use has significant relationship and positively affects both political efficacy and real-life political participation. This study is related to the current study because it also examined the dependent variable in the study which is political participation. However, it

could be pointed out that while the previous study is looking at all the social media platforms and their use among Indian natives, this current study is interested in understanding the influence of use of only WhatsApp social media platform on the real time participation of the people in the political activities of Nigeria.

Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu & Casero-Ripollés (2021) examined the mediating role of WhatsApp political discussion in the relationships between different types of news use and various forms of political participation. The study which used the survey research method found that WhatsApp discussion has a positive influence on political activism, and a more significant effect on conventional participation. While this study is on the role of WhatsApp, the current one is interested in whether its use for political activities in Nigeria encourages real time participation in politics among the respondents.

Methodology

This study adopted the Survey research method. The population according to 2006 census figure is 363,764. The implication of this is that the sample was drawn from the above population. To get the up-to-date population of this area, the researcher used the projected population index thus: Therefore, to work out the new projected population figure the following formula was used thus: $PP = GP \times Pi \times T + GP$

Where: PP = Projected Population

GP = Given Population (363,764)

PI = Population Increase Index 2.28%

T = Period between the given population and year of study (2023-2006=17).

Therefore $PP = 363,764 \times 0.023 \times 17 + 363,764 = 502,996$

The sample size of this study was determined using Rakesh (2013) sample size determination formula

$$SS = \frac{PS}{[1+(PS \times PE^2)]}$$

Where SS = sample size

PS = population size = 502,996

PE = precision error = 0.05

$$SS = \frac{502,996}{[1+(502,996 \times 0.05^2)]}$$

$$SS = \frac{502,996}{[1+502,996 \times 0.0025]}$$

$$SS = \frac{502996}{[1+(1257.49)]}$$

$$SS = \frac{502996}{1258.49}$$

$$SS = 400$$

The purposive sampling technique was used to select residents who use WhatsApp social media and participated in political discourse in the platforms during the election. The instrument used in collecting data for this study is the questionnaire.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Out of the 400 copies of the questionnaire distributed among the respondents, 379 were returned and found valid for the study.

Thematic data

Table 1: How often WhatsApp is used for political information seeking among the respondents

Response category	Frequency	Percentage
Very often	178	46.9
Often	102	26.9
Not often	67	17.6
Sparingly	32	8.6
Very sparingly	0	0
Total	379	100

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2023

Data in the table above demonstrated that WhatsApp is an instrument of political mobilization and education. The number of responses to each response category shows that the channel has been veritably used in the discussion of political activities in the country by the citizens. The implication of the data is that the respondents mainly use WhatsApp to discuss political issues and that widens their political exposure and knowledge of the political state of things in the country.

Table: 2: The degree of political education gained by the respondents through WhatsApp use

Response degree of political education on WhatsApp	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	172	45.5
High	126	33.2
Moderate	68	17.9
Low	13	3.4
Very low	0	0
Total	379	100

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2023

The above data demonstrate the gravity of the use of WhatsApp social media among Nigerian citizens. This is also a demonstration of the fact that the social media are instruments of political education and awareness creation among the users. The implication of this is that constant use of WhatsApp in discussing political issues increases the rate of political education among the respondents.

Table 3: The extent to which the use of WhatsApp for political discussion encourage physical political participation in real time politics by the respondents

Response category	Frequency	Percentage
To a very great extent	130	34.3
To a great extent	158	41.7
To no extent at all	0	0
To a minimal extent	12	3.2
To a very minimal extent	79	20.8
Total	379	100

Source: Researcher’s field survey, 2023

Generally, this table suggests that WhatsApp use for political activities and engagement stimulates physical participation of the users in real time politics. The response category of “*To no extent at all*” receiving no response from any of the respondents is an indication that WhatsApp has an impact on real time participation following the education and political enlightenment it presents to the users.

Table 4: Whether the rate of use of WhatsApp for political purposes correspond to the rate of participation in real life by the respondents.

Variables	SA	A	UN	DA	SD	Total	X
WhatsApp use for political discussion encourage participation in real life politics	106	109	110	38	16	530	3.7
Many WhatsApp users have no voters card	102	55	46	38	138	510	2.8
Many online users are afraid of real politics	72	64	80	75	88	360	2.8
Being online is different from voting	78	89	77	68	67	390	3.1
Those who stay online also go to the poll	103	76	70	52	78	515	3.1

Source: Researcher’s field survey, 2023

The information in the above table is very significant on the likely relationship between WhatsApp use and political participation in real life. It shows that the use of WhatsApp for political discussion positively influence people’s sense of reasoning and motivates political participation among the respondents.

Discussion of Findings

While investigating how often the respondents discuss political issues through

WhatsApp platforms, the researchers found that an overwhelming majority of the respondents discuss political issues on WhatsApp very often. The massive exposure of the people to WhatsApp in the dissemination of political information as found in this study supports the position of the democratic participant theory which sets the ground that decentralization and democratization of the press is to allow for easy access and popular participation among the citizens (Nwabueze, 2014, p. 52). Apart from the universality of the new media and its enabling technologies, this finding is a confirmation that WhatsApp is one of the social networking sites where political issues are being discussed everyday by users. The finding, further, shows how rampant and popular the 2023 election was among the audience. Moreover, the high degree of discussion of political issues through WhatsApp cannot be divorced from heavy WhatsApp users occasioned by influx of cheap android phones in Nigeria. This finding shows how significant the WhatsApp social networking site has been to the political development of Nigeria.

Research question two was set to investigate the degree of political education gained by the people through the use of WhatsApp for discussion of political issues ahead of the 2023 general election. On this research objective, it was found that majority of the respondents gained high political education from their discussion on WhatsApp. From the table, 172 respondents accounting for 45.5 percent of the sample admitted that political education they gained is high. This figure was followed by 126 others representing 33.2 percent of the sample who admitted that their political education was high. On this same question, 68 respondents have moderate political education while 13 gained low political education from their WhatsApp use in the discussion of political issues ahead of the 2023 election. Significantly, none of the respondents said that he or she gained very low political education from the discussions they have had in the social media during the election. Importantly this current finding is a confirmation of the finding made in Erubami (2020) where it was found that social media use for political activities is perceived to have positive influence by enhancing free dissemination of vital political information capable of re-awakening public political consciousness to participate in real time voting.

While examining the extent to which WhatsApp use for political discussion encouraged physical political participation among the respondents, it was found that majority of the respondents are influenced into participation to a “*great extent*” by WhatsApp use. According to the table, 158 respondents admitted that they are influenced to participate in the election “*To a great extent*” whereas 130 others admitted that they are influenced to “*a very great extent*” by WhatsApp political discussion. On the other hand, 79 respondents accounting for 20.8 percent said that they are influenced to a very minimal extent with 12 others accounting for 3.2 percent who said that they are

influenced “to a minimal extent”. Importantly, the fact that none of the respondents choose “to no extent at all” response category revealed that the impact of WhatsApp use for political discussion is high among the respondents. The implication of this is that gone are the days when politicians ignore social media criticisms as the surprises arising from the outcome of the 2023 election shows that people are getting wiser by the day. This finding is in line with that of Uwalaka (2020) who found that political efficacy and online political discussion significantly increased students’ intention to join politics. The study also corroborated that of Erubami (2020) where it was found that social media use for political activities is perceived to have positive influence on Nigeria’s democracy by enhancing the flow of political information and awakening public political consciousness to participate in real time voting. The finding further corroborated Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu & Casero-Ripollés (2021) who found that WhatsApp discussion has a positive influence on political activism, and a more significant effect on conventional participation. The study justifies the view in De Zúñiga *et al.* (2019) where it was argued that an increase in public political debate through the use of the internet significantly encourages citizens’ feelings and arouses the need to participate in politics more than before their exposure to such debates.

On the research question that sought to ascertain whether respondents’ use of WhatsApp for discussion of political issues influence real time participation in politics, it was found that the use of WhatsApp in political discussion drastically influenced positive political participation among the respondents, especially in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. This finding corroborated that of Taufiq, Aima & Muhammad (2019) where it was found that political efficacy is significantly dependent on level of online political participation. This accounts for the surprises that the election sprang up in the election results. Some politicians who abused the people on the ground that there are no polling units in the social media were proven wrong by the action they witnessed. A visit to table 4 will show the details of the influence of WhatsApp use on political participation. This finding agrees with that of Ikegbunam & Obiakor (2021) who found that WhatsApp use encouraged popular participation and monitoring of the electoral process. Further, the above finding is in tandem with that of Omotayo & Folorunso (2020) who found that social media are veritable instruments for political mobilization and participation among the youth.

Summary

This study examined the relationship between WhatsApp use and real-life political participation. The reason that informed this study was the claim by some politicians that polling units are not online. The study was set to find out if discussing political issues online encourage the discussants to engage in

politics in real life, the respondents' frequency of discussing political issues online and whether what they say online are taken to the polling units. The study found that discussing political issues online improves political awareness and knowledge and as well encourages real life participation to a significant extent.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The research findings have shown a great impact on people's political participation as a result of engaging in online political discussion through the WhatsApp platform. Based on this, this study concludes that WhatsApp is a veritable instrument for political mobilization and participation. It also concludes that parties or politicians taking social media criticisms for a joke are doing harm to themselves as the surprise will hit them on the day of election. Generally, the influence of WhatsApp use for political participation has been significantly acknowledged by this study.

Relying on the research findings, this study recommended as follows:

- That the use of social media for political mobilization should be encouraged considering that it has impacted the people's political knowledge and participation. Through the use of WhatsApp, more people have participated in the 2023 election. This reduced apathy and increased monitoring of political actors and activities in Nigeria.
- That politicians and political parties that want to survive politically should take social media criticisms very seriously or get ready to be voted out in elections. WhatsApp use has widened people's political consciousness to the extent that what politicians think that the electorates are ignorant of are now at their fingertips. The era of 'there is no polling unit online' has gone.

People should increase their political discussion online as it has been found to positively correlate with real time political participation.

Nigerian youths should continue to act in line with their pains based on informed political education as that can serve as the only way to recover the country called Nigeria.

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