Short-Field Communication

Social Media, Gender and Politics: Public Perception of Female Politicians through the Facebook

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Abstract

Social Media is a dynamic form of communication platform that gives rapid feedback to messages posted/sent to targeted receivers. However, as much as there seems to be a fairly remarkable acceptance of females in politics, there is still an assumption that responses gotten on their social media platforms particularly are biased and unbalanced compared with that of their male counterpart. This work (a short field communication) evaluates the perception of messages received by or posted on the social media platforms of female politicians by the Nigerian citizens, based on responses and reactions to the social media updates and posts of these female politicians, using Facebook, as a case study. With the use of content analysis, the accounts of four selected female presidential candidates were purposively selected and analysed using Pew Institute data). The results revealed the suspected imbalance but noted an increase the citizens' awareness of the effects of gender prejudice. It however avers that this could change with time because of the noticeable people's sensitivity to effects of the imbalance. The study concludes that the dynamic nature of the social media goes a long way in influencing the sensitivity to the female gender.

Keywords: Female, Politics, Social Media, Facebook, candidates

Introduction

In Nigeria, it is a known norm that men are expected to take charge and women are expected to be submissive. Over the years however, women have made various distinctive and unique marks for themselves in all areas of life including politics. Since independence in 1960, Nigerian women have been challenging their roles in the society. The formation of women movement in the country has lent an impetus to the struggle of women and help put women issues in the front burner. (Oyinade & Daramola, 2013).

The issue of gender discrimination in politics in the modern society that we find ourselves is manifested in a variety of ways and this often seems to be disadvantageous

to the women folks as they are often relegated to the backbench in almost all social activities, not only in Nigeria but in a lot of developing countries around the world. The African culture and tradition have been observed to aid the occurrence of discrimination against female gender, and this has also been passed to the political realm.

Suukyi (2014) opines that human beings all over the world need security and freedom in order for them to realize their inherent potentials. It is on this note that raising the status of people through the concept of gender equality becomes a vital tool in the quest for improvements in the standards of living and wellbeing of the general populace as this is one of the major means of transforming economies and making them more stable.

Social media is the newest tool for communicating locally and globally. Its unique features make it easy to perform various functions like education, entertainment, business and so on. Politics is not left out from the list of various functions that the social media performs. However, social media have transformed the communications landscape for every sector, including politics. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have changed the way politicians interact with citizens and vice versa. Ezeah and Gever, (2015) corroborate that there exists a paradigm shift in political communication as a result of the emergence of social media.

Nulty, Theocharis, Popa, Parnet and Benoit (2015) sum the centrality of social media in political communication thus: social media play an increasingly important part in the communication strategies of political campaigns by reflecting information about the policy preferences and opinions of political actors and their public followers. In addition, the content of the messages provides rich information about the political issues and the framing of those issues during election.

Political communication means "citizens' involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives" (Okoro and Nwafor, 2013: 33). It is the various mechanisms through which citizens express their political views and/or exercise their rights and influences on the political processes (Chatora 2012). Thus, it is a civic activity and a critical part of any democracy; an action taken by a citizen to influence the outcome of a political issue. Political participation could also be explained as a set of activities that citizens perform to influence government's structured policies or officials. Through political participation, citizens can decide on who to elect for political positions, who make policies in favour of the citizens who are the ultimate beneficiaries of social programmes put in place by the representatives. Political participation also entails citizens' engagement in the discourse of socio-political and economic issues which serve as yardsticks for choosing would-be leaders. It may also include assessing the capabilities of the incumbencies and advocating ways of ameliorating societal ills for a more prosperous country.

Political participation, therefore, includes such activities as political discourse, political campaigns, voter registration, voting, writing and signing of petitions, civil protests, public consultations, donating money towards elections, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, political advocacy, monitoring and reporting of cases of violation of the electoral process such as frauds, rigging, intimidation, violence, monetary inducements, underage voting, etc. (Abubakar, 2011; Gibson et al., 2005; Unwuchola et al., 2017).

Gender, as it relates to social media and politics is crucial to national development. Gender differences accord various benefits to each gender, starting from biological to social. On the social level, it is seen as a set of principles that are ingrained in the association between men and women (Parpart et al 2000).

As Kayany and Yelsma (2000) noted, thatra sample of 185 social media users from 80 families in the United States revealed that men spend as much as twice the amount women spend online in their various homes. As a consequence of these inequalities, technology advancement has always been seen as masculine tools (Bailey and Telford 2007). And despite the fact that steps were being taken to reduce the level of the inequalities, the incidence of men dominating some specialized fields of technology such as software design (Andeson and Buzzanel 2007), with many online points being seen as masculine territory, thereby makes the internet appear more like a male-occupied space. As argued by some set of feminists, as a result of male exclusion, technology has continued to reflect a patriarchal hierarchy that produces tools that are detrimental to the women folk.

But recently, technological growth seems to embrace more women as they are now increasing in percentage with regards to the internet population. As observed by the U.S. Department of Commerce (2004), male versus female parity on the internet is now almost at par. The availability of data that relates to the online technologies between men and women with reference to the use of the internet is getting more bogus by the day. The American Life Project of 2000 reported that women make use of the internet as a relationship maintaining tool more than the men. A survey of 713 college students revealed that women are five times more likely to make use of the social networking sites more than men (Tufecksi 2008). As observed by Acar (2008), women report more Facebook Friends than men regardless of the size of their network. And it has also been asserted by Wiliams et al (2009), that men and women spend a closely equal amount of time playing online games. These measures are seen by contemporary feminists as an indication that the internet can provide as pace for women for empowerment (Hansetal2011). This is because the measures provide a sort of fun paralleled mechanism for worldwide dissemination and communication. (Bailey and Telford 2007).

There is a long history of a so-called gender gap in political interest, knowledge, and participation (with the notable exception of voting, where women participate at higher rates than men do). I was interested in whether this gap would persist in a specific realm of growing importance: social media.

In general, women and men create online content differently—for example, women are less likely to post online or use the internet to seek information but more likely to use the internet for social interaction and relationship maintenance. These differences, combined with political gender gaps, led to the expectation that women would be less politically engaged on social media than men.

To determine if there are gaps in how men and women social media use for political purposes, Analysis of survey data collected by the Pew Research Center in 2012 where three different ways of thinking about political social media use were considered:

1. General use of social media for political purposes, such as using social media for political reasons, posting about politics on social media, commenting on political social media posts, and liking political social media posts;
2. Reacting to disagreeable political content on social media, including agreeing and disagreeing with political content on social media, ignoring or responding to disagreeable content, and unfriending for political reasons; and
3. Offline reactions to political social media content, such as changing an opinion, becoming more active, or becoming less active after seeing a political post on social media

Across these three different ways of thinking about political engagement on social media, only two showed gender differences. Women were less likely to post about politics on social media, and more likely to block, unfriend, or hide someone because they posted too frequently, disagreed argued, or offended about politics.

New Media, New Political Engagement?

A research and the Pew survey suggest that gender differences are much less pervasive in political engagement on social media than might have been expected. As in other recent research showing that using social media can increase exposure to political information and potential knowledge effects as a result, it is possible that social media represent a fundamentally different type of media experience, changing our understanding of how people gain, use, and propagate political information in the modern media environment.

This is a new understanding of an old idea – that the Internet can sometimes improve representation of voices heard by lowering the costs of participating because women are more likely to use social media, and use it more intensely for relationship

maintenance, they seem to be able to overcome the structural and social factors that lead to deficits in political information exposure, political knowledge, and political engagement in other areas. (Bode, 2020)

The coming of internet 2.0, coupled with its emphasis on user-produced content in the form of social media has also facilitated an online interaction amongst various users, irrespective of gender to spread their ideas far and wide. The mainstream social media in Nigeria is being dominated by men right from the inception and up till the present moment, it has not changed. As Anyanwu (2001) posited, the issues concerning women are often tagged as having a lightweight status on various social media plat forms. This often comes in the form of tagging media publications that are attached to a larger percentage of women as being women's publication which is not always so. The media, most especially the social media has continually shown a selective gender bias through the nature of the information that is interchanged in a manner that obscures women issues. Most social media platforms use women's pictures just to catch the attention of people but when you really get into such platforms, you will see that they are short of women substance in the area of attending to their voices. Soetan (2014) lamented that the seemingly silent nature of women on national issues on various social media platforms is always seen from the perspective that they do not really care about what is happening within their environment. She went further by stating that even when it comes to granting interviews, the women folk seems to be short changed. In the end, it is either these women are misquoted or grossly misrepresented. This gender discrimination on the part of the media seriously begs the question of whether or not the Nigeria media practitioners really understand the functions of the media within the society.

Gender Discrimination and Politics

The Nigerian political landscape has been characterized by a patriarchal thinking which tends to see governance as the exclusive right of men (Heywood2007).While it cannot be disputed that women are also politically active in many societies around the world, the coming of colonial rule brought about some form of anti-women policies which served to spur a society that was already gender-biased to become more enmeshed in the thought of a male-dominated political scenery. For example, before the advent of colonialism in Nigeria, there were recorded cases of women holding influential political position, even occupying the highest position of King within the Yoruba ethnic group. It is also on record that some of the women of the old performed excellently as military warlords in their respective enclaves. But sadly enough, the office of the president as well as the Defence Minister has never been held by any woman which goes on to show the level of discrimination that is ascribed to the female gender in Nigeria As Udegbe

(1998) noted, female representation in governance from the time of independence in all tiers of government is less than 5%.And this was made even harder as a result of the various military regimes that have been ruling the country from the time of independence to the end of last millennium. The pre-colonial era was awash with various policies that indirectly served to promote gender discrimination against women in Nigerian politics. One of the most profound is the consideration granted to only men to be active within the political sphere and subsequently be allowed to earn a living from being in government (Assie-Lum uba 1996).

As a consequence of this, the few educational assistance programs available were reserved exclusively for the men who later enjoyed the benefits of being recruited into the colonial civil service structure. The discriminatory practice gave the male gender an undeserved advantage over the womenfolk, culminating in the under representation of women in governmental agencies and by extension the political and scape after colonisation. Another major colonial policy that further entrenched the incidence of female gender discrimination in the political structure of Nigeria during the colonial era was there structuring of the traditional economies in Africa and their links with the capitalist economies of the world. The Nigerian economy as a result of this was transformed into an economy of primary crop producer, with these cash crops exported to Europe as raw materials. The men within the corridors of the colonial powers were quick to fill the vacuum of major cash crop exporters while most of the women folk were limited to food crop production and home management. This control of export crops and other related merchandising endeavours by the male gender partially accounted for their domination of the political scene because they were seemingly rich enough to fund the cost of an election while the women folk were left impoverished. And while the men have experienced the importance of political power, they continued to consolidate their position by shielding the women from the mainstream politics where in the main political power resides.

Conclusion

The performance of gender is endemic on social media as it relates to all aspects of it from social networking sites to online gaming. As it has been noted, some social media users make use of these avenues to challenge the existing stereotypes related to gender and how to defy the pre-existing norms that tend to support gender discrimination on the social media and in most cases, it is evident that the discrimination is more often than not directed at the women. However, it is important to embark on further research from time to time to really evaluate the incidence of gender discrimination in order to ascertain the status of the discrimination at any point in time. The participation of women in Nigerian politics is very crucial if the country is really determined to move forward.

This is as a result of the fact that the women constitute a significant percentage of the total population and any attempt to neglect them will only lead to losing their invaluable contributions. It is important for an ideal democratic system to allow for voluntary individual participation in politics irrespective of gender sentiments. However, despite all the barriers that act to impede the incidence of gender in equalities and discriminations in the political spectrum, there are suggestions that may be useful to the realization that gender equality is a drive that should be seen as important for the benefit of the society at large. Firstly, it is important that the government strengthen its political will power and embark one forts to promote gender equality in politics while also establishing various women empowerment programs that will further hinder the incidence of gender discrimination against women. The legislative should also as a matter of expediency removal barriers against the women folk most especially in the political arena. They should also make laws that would promote equal rights of all genders in the labour market and try as much as possible to abrogate cultural practices that encourage gender discrimination against women.

Also, equal educational opportunities should be made available to all land sun dry without giving prominence to a particular gender. It is also important that are form should be done with regards to the various labour laws and regulations that would realign the labour industry towards a new gender agenda.

With regards to the social media, people should continue to oppose and expose all acts of gender discrimination, violence and crime against the womenfolk who, as we have noted are the main victims of gender discrimination and bias.

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