

## Chapter 15

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# Social Media Adoption and Female User Agency as Determinants of Women's Visibility in Nigerian Public Affairs

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### Abstract

The pervasiveness of social media has propelled them to a significant position in the running of public affairs globally. In Africa, social media has gained greater prominence and ascendancy in public affairs in recent times. While a lot of scholarly efforts have gone into investigating the use of social media in governance and public affairs generally, the place of women in this new wave of influence seems to have been neglected. The intention of this chapter is to interrogate the reduced participation of women on social media platforms which may in the long run provide agency and visibility for them in public affairs. Using a combination of digital humanities, a compatible approach of netnography and field observation as methods, the study seeks to identify the factors that demotivate female members of the national parliament from being as visible as their male counterparts on social media sites which may make them subjects of greater interest in public affairs. It argues that such a minimal adoption rate has the tendency to continually push women to the margins of governance and public life and deprive them of the confidence of self-assertion. The chapter concludes with a few recommendations for reversing the trend.

**Keywords:** Agency, Nigeria, Public Affairs, Social Media, Twitter/X, Visibility, Women

### Introduction

Social media have become tools in various fields of human endeavour. The uses also vary depending on the objective or focus of the use. As Christian Fuchs argues, social media are “often understood as having to do with user-



generated content, comprising a network of contacts and followers, the sharing of texts, images, and videos, possibilities for online re-sharing and the spreading of content” (Fuchs, 2021:4). While they have become ubiquitous in networking for maintaining friendship, professional connections and other forms of acquaintances, social media continue to assume relevance in other spheres including public relations, business, governance, politics and public affairs. With such growing relevance, social media have also attracted scholarly attention with different scholars examining their diverse aspects in order to analyse or provide a better understanding of the activities involved in this communicative phenomenon. Researchers across the African continent have therefore explored issues ranging from modes of representation to identity formation, social impact, civic agency, categories of discourses and implications of the platforms for technological advancement (Anani-Bossman, 2023; Bidwell, 2016; Porter et al, 2016). It is pertinent to note, however, that much of the body of work on social media use in Africa, and in Nigeria especially, seems to have paid little or no attention to the ways in which women participate on different platforms as a form of agency with the potential to enhance visibility in public life. In other words, a considerable gap still exists in the scholarship on female social media adoption rate and, by extension, user agency as a major driving force of visibility in public life and governance in Nigeria.

The level of participation in governance by women in Nigeria has often been said to be low when compared to their male counterparts (Afolabi, 2019; Chitongo & Ojogiwa, 2021; Nwabunkeonye, 2014; Orisadare, 2019). This low level of participation by women is also generally agreed to be antithetical to the development and the evolution of an egalitarian society. In stretching further, the argument there is often the tendency to lay the blame at the feet of masculine chauvinism, patriarchy or some form of misogyny deriving from age-old cultural practices and beliefs to which society itself subscribes in spite of the claim to modernity and transformation. While feminist activists continue to raise their voices in demand for increased participation of women in politics and public affairs, a new crop of agitators professing a kind of digital feminism has emerged to canvass for greater opportunities for women to have an online presence like their male counterparts or at least better than what is currently the case. In many of these agitations, we find a reference to culture, history and conformist gender roles as factors which demotivate women from having a fair share of opportunities which may translate to greater visibility in the public space.

## Public affairs, communication and social media

Public affairs has continued to evolve in different ways either as a concept, academic discipline or a form of professional practice with its attendant nuances which require careful analysis. This evolution is most evident in the various mutations of the definition of the term. Phil Harris and Craig Fleisher (2005), in providing three 'broad historic definitions' of public affairs, touch on policy formulation, political and social development, as well as the totality of government affairs or relations. For Conor McGrath et al. (2010), public affairs is the "fundamental bridge between organisations, society and government" (p. 335). They argue that public affairs "may refer to the nexus of politics, management and communication whereby an organisation seeks to deal with external public policy challenges" (McGrath et al., 2010:338). In aggregating the meanings that have evolved over the years, it is largely evident that the major significance of public affairs resides in the fact that it provides a meeting point for the political and administrative structures of government and the larger society. The focus in this study is on politics and the top-echelon of bureaucracy as two core components of public affairs in Nigeria.

The place of communication in public affairs cannot be over-emphasised. Most of the initial efforts to properly position public affairs either as a concept or as an academic discipline took off from the perspective of communication with greater focus on public relations, corporate communication and strategic communication. This further explains the obsession of much of the early definitions of public affairs with communication to the extent that it was almost possible to equate the whole of public affairs with communication to the exclusion of other forms of engagement. Beyond being one of the parent disciplines which provided impetus for its emergence and its flourishing, communications are important in public affairs. There are many social media platforms available for users to choose from depending on their preferences or the purpose for which they need to be connected. Some of these popular platforms include Facebook, Twitter (now known as X), LinkedIn, Instagram and personal blogs. Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter have gained popularity amongst corporate organisations, individuals, technocrats and politicians, who now keep accounts or profiles on those platforms. However, Twitter seems to have an edge as a very active space for political engagement and public affairs (Duncombe, 2018; Evans et al., 2011). As a result, Twitter was chosen as the primary social media platform for data collection for this study. This choice is borne out of the popularity that Twitter has attained in recent times as a social media platform of choice amongst public office holders and politicians who seek to keep in touch with constituents and other stakeholders in their

spheres of operation. For instance, almost every major political office holder in Nigeria has a Twitter account with which they engage their constituents and also gauge public opinion about their activities and current events locally and globally.

### **Theoretical and methodological considerations**

The theoretical framework for this study is anchored on the Social Capital Theory (Hauberer, 2011; Kennan & Hazleton, 2000; Luoma-aho, 2013; Tabancali, 2022). Dating back to Bourdieu (1985), Social Capital Theory construes social relationships as capable of translating to useable resources for the benefit of individuals and organisations. According to Richard Machalek and Michael Martin, “social capital can be defined as any feature of a social relationship that yields reproductive benefits” (2015:894). The relevance of the theory, in this instance, is in its capacity to make sense of social media use amongst female politicians and technocrats based mainly in South West Nigeria. Connecting social capital to questions of communication excellence, Kennan and Hazleton see social capital as “something that can be acquired, stored, and expended and that can be used to facilitate action that can result in a competitive advantage for individuals, groups, and organisations” (2000:282). Approaching the concept from the perspective of civic engagements, Hauberer (2011) focuses on the benefits of social contacts and the ways in which such benefits help in reinforcing the visibility and subject positions of individuals and groups. Contacts made via different kinds of media including social media platforms therefore have the potential of enhancing the visibility of those who constantly feature in activities on such platforms than those who hardly do. In establishing the link between social capital and communication, Luoma-aho (2013) contends that social capital contributes to corporate reputation and individual reputation with the ability to influence personal or corporate brand image, reputation and public opinion in different ways.

This study combines netnography, which is a form of ethnographic research conducted online (Kozinets, 2015; Bartl et al., 2016) and field observations for data collection. While netnography is generally known as a form of digital ethnography, with the Internet providing the research area, field observation is a qualitative research method which allows for a careful and systematic observation of actions, practices and phenomena with the purpose of bringing out certain characteristics as may be necessary for the objective of the research. (McCall, 1984; Smiley, 2015). As Smiley argues, field observation is “an ethnographic practice of collecting data and information about a given social setting and situation” (Smiley 2015:1812). For McCall, systematic field observation involves a “naturalistic observation of human

social interaction” (1984:262). Both McCall and Smiley are unanimous on the suitability of field observation for studying social behaviour, with the latter advocating the suitability of the method for preliminary research towards a better understanding of communities and individual behaviour. Their postulations also make netnography and field observation attractive for studying social media adoption rate by participants based on their different demographic characteristics.

The area covered by this research is limited to the South West geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Relying on the aforementioned netnographic field observation, the Twitter handles of members of the House of Representatives who represented constituencies from the six states of the South West from 2019 to 2023 were closely studied. The Twitter handles of all four females, out of seventy-one representatives, were purposively selected, while another set of Twitter handles of four male representatives chosen from four different states of the South West was also sampled for the purpose of comparison. Posts and activities on the sampled Twitter handles were closely observed for a period of twenty-one days. Inferences were made based on the frequency and tenacity of activities on the handles.

### **Twitter and low activity social media users**

The first major observation on the Twitter handles during the period in question is that the ones belonging to the male representatives were more active than those of the female representatives. Morisson (2023) describes low-activity social media users as ‘casual users’ who engage in limited activities on social media platforms. For such users their level of visibility is also lower than that of high-activity social media users. The reason for this is not far-fetched. Once an account is active, the owner of the account is more likely to be seen and known by more people in cyberspace than one who operates a dormant or less active account. In addition to this, the male representatives showed more interest in issues beyond their immediate environment, like foreign news and other matters of global concern than their female counterparts. For instance, while the war between Russia and Ukraine trended for two consecutive days during the period, two of the four male representatives contributed to the discussion on the war, while none of the females posted anything on the two days. This kind of attitude supports the proposition that the kind of issues that users of social media show interest in has a considerable amount of impact on how much traction and visibility they gain in the process. At times, issues like sports (especially football, in the case of Nigeria), high-wired politics and the like, which attract heavy traffic online hardly interest women users of social media. Also, there were scanty comments and replies from the handles of the four female representatives

included in the study, showing a lower volume of exchanges and engagement with other users of the platform. More often, they were the originators of posts on their handles and there was less tenacity in following through with engagements in the form of comments and replies. This lack of tenacity represents a kind of trouble avoidance strategy that is used to stay out of very contentious issues with the potential for inviting some form of backlash.

Gender relations in Africa, as in much of the developing nations, often privilege men and other powerful individuals to the exclusion of women as a result of different historical and contemporary factors which determine the perception of different gender identities by the public, different governments and society at large (Mkhwanazi, 2018; Patel & Hochfeld, 2011). This kind of understanding has also continued to define different kinds of roles which men and women are expected to play in society. These normative expectations often manifest in the ways in which different categories of people respond to events, phenomena and even developments across different spheres. In Nigeria, gender issues have continued to remain extremely contentious for a number of reasons which revolve around cultural beliefs and value systems that tend to promote chauvinistic conduct. In a good number of ways the approach to gender roles also translates to negative manifestations in development and the move towards an egalitarian society (Enfield, 2019; Olonade et al., 2021).

Civic agency can be described as one of the major gains of the ubiquity and pervasiveness of social media (Bakarjieva, 2012; Hungbo, 2021). It is “a conscious action by citizens aimed at effecting a change in the character of their environment by means other than elections” (Hungbo, 2021:248). Adopting the public work and deliberation approach, Harry Boyte argues that “civic agency helps individuals and groups to negotiate a shared democratic way of life” (2014:1). In politics, civic engagement provides an opportunity for more voices to be heard in the public sphere. Such plurality of voices emanates from the deliberate act of catering for voices of people other than elected representatives who speak on the authority of their membership of an arm of government. Social media platforms like Twitter offer great opportunities for personal brand image and reputation management. Performative politics on social media, which involves the use of platforms like Twitter has become one of the major ways through which public office holders gain visibility and ingrain themselves in the minds of the public. While some female users of social media have used the platforms they feature on, for the purpose of challenging patriarchy, others continue to use such platforms for the advancement of public visibility. Yet, gender norms and patriarchy continue to play a role in the dynamics of political participation in Nigeria.

As Veronica Barassi argues, “social media activism has brought about another important transformation in media activism” (2018:2). This transformation implies some measure of agency for individuals who do not previously hold much power in the bigger scheme of things. In political circles, agency is quite significant as it gives voice and visibility to those who are able to exercise it. In addition to creating visibility for subaltern individuals, social media have also demonstrated the capacity to alter identities in both positive and negative ways. It is, however, important to take cognisance of some of the risks associated with constant online presence through the instrumentality of social media. Approaching the risks of online presence from the perspective of journalistic practice, Itai Zviyita and Admire Mare identify some of the risks that women are prone to online as “forms of harassment such as name calling, body shaming, trolling, verbal abuse, sextortion, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, manipulation of photos, cyberstalking, doxing, hacking, receiving unwanted, offensive sexually explicit emails or messages, and inappropriate advances on social media platforms” (2023:1). Digital stress experiences, anti-social media rhetoric and the moralised perception of social media as a harbour zone for ‘iniquities’ combined with different forms of harassment itemised above to threaten female politicians who find pleasure in using social media for the enhancement of their visibility. In spite of these threats, which Emiliano Treré and Veronica Barrasi (2015) categorise as ‘net authoritarianism’, the radical shift in the location of communities from the grassroots to a technologically determined realm of ‘netroots’ makes a more active presence more desirable for female participants on the social media space.

## Conclusion

Self-representation and the construction of a positive identity have become part of the activities through which public office holders gain visibility. Under-representation of women in public affairs has been traced to several factors by previous research while ignoring the impact of visibility on the agency of women in the public sphere. Evidence in this chapter has, however, established low participation and low visibility as major characteristics of female users of social media in public life in South West Nigeria. The low participation by women in public affairs can be attributed to many factors both within and outside the control of the womenfolk. In addition, it is important to note that some of the factors said to be within the control of women have larger import and prompting from within the larger society where the women operate. Digital stress experiences, online harassment and other anti-social media behaviour which reinforce male dominance of the

public space should therefore not inhibit women politicians from claiming agency through social media for the enhancement of their visibility.

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