

EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG KENYAN YOUTH: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ACROSS URBAN AND RURAL AREAS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of Study: This study aimed at exploring the influence of social media on political engagement among Kenyan youth, with a focus on understanding differences across urban and rural areas.

Statement of the Problem: In the context of an evolving digital landscape, there is a critical need to understand how social media platforms influence political engagement among youth, particularly in diverse urban and rural settings in Kenya. The study addresses the gap in knowledge regarding the extent of social media's impact on political participation, awareness, and the challenges faced by youth in these areas.

Methodology: The study was guided by a positivist research philosophy and employed a desktop review design to analyze existing literature, providing insights into the role of social media in political discourse. The research employed a comprehensive desktop review approach, systematically analyzing literature from various academic databases and reputable sources. The study focused on the intersection of social media use, political engagement, and youth demographics in Kenya. It involved screening and assessing relevant studies to understand the dynamics of social media's influence on the political engagement of Kenyan youth in both urban and rural contexts.

Result: The findings highlighted that social media platforms are instrumental in disseminating political information, enabling civic participation, and contributing to political polarization among Kenyan youth. The study revealed significant disparities in political engagement between urban

and rural youth, influenced by factors such as internet access and digital literacy. It was found that urban youth have a higher degree of engagement in political discourse through social media compared to their rural counterparts.

Conclusion: The study concludes that social media is a critical tool for political mobilization and engagement among Kenyan youth, with its impact varying considerably between urban and rural areas. The research identified key challenges such as misinformation, fear of victimization, and the digital divide as barriers to the effective use of social media in political engagement.

Recommendation: The study recommends enhancing digital literacy, bridging the urban-rural digital divide, creating safer online environments, and leveraging social media for more effective political communication and participation among Kenyan youth. It calls for a multi-faceted approach involving technological advancement, educational reforms, and policy interventions to ensure equitable and effective political participation across different demographics.

Keywords: *Social Media, Political Engagement, Kenyan Youth, Urban and Rural Areas, Comparative Study*

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have become powerful tools for shaping political discourse and mobilizing citizens across various geographical settings (Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023). This influence can be observed through three key dimensions: information dissemination, civic participation, and polarization. The influence of social media on political engagement in both urban and rural areas is a multifaceted and important topic in contemporary society. Social media platforms have become powerful tools for shaping political discourse and mobilizing citizens across various geographical settings (Alhouseini & Saaideh, 2023). This influence can be observed through three key dimensions: information dissemination, civic participation, and polarization. In urban areas, social media plays a pivotal role in information dissemination. It provides citizens with rapid access to news and political updates, facilitating awareness and informed decision-making. According to Maulana (2020), 67% of adults in the United States get at least some of their news from social media. This trend is not limited to urban settings but extends to rural areas as well, albeit to a somewhat lesser extent. In rural communities, where access to traditional media outlets may be limited, social media bridges the information gap (Williams et al., 2020). This enhanced access to information can stimulate political engagement by empowering citizens with knowledge about local and national issues.

Civic participation is another dimension influenced by social media. In urban areas, online platforms enable individuals to organize and participate in political events, rallies, and campaigns. For instance, platforms like Facebook and Twitter have played significant roles in mobilizing urban residents to engage in activism and community initiatives (Gonzalez-Bailon, Borge-Holthoefer, & Moreno, 2013). A similar trend can be observed in rural areas, where social media fosters virtual communities of interest and helps rural citizens connect with like-minded individuals to collectively address shared concerns (Smith, 2019). This connectivity leads to increased political engagement, as rural residents find their voices amplified through online networks. However, the influence of social media on political engagement is not without challenges. One of the most concerning issues is the polarization of opinions in both urban and rural settings. Social media platforms often encourage echo chambers, where users are exposed

primarily to viewpoints that align with their own (Bakshy et al., 2015). This polarization often result in decreased willingness to engage in constructive political discussions, as individuals become more entrenched in their beliefs. In rural areas, where homogeneity of political views may already exist, social media further reinforces these divides (Williams et al., 2020).

In the United States, social media has had a profound influence on political engagement. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have been instrumental in political campaigns and activism. The 2016 and 2020 US Presidential elections saw extensive use of social media for political advertising and mobilization (Howard et al., 2018). Furthermore, movements like Black Lives Matter gained prominence through hashtags and viral videos, sparking nationwide discussions on racial inequality and police brutality. The influence of social media in the USA is substantial, with a significant portion of the population using these platforms for political discourse (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Similar to the USA, the UK has witnessed the impact of social media on political engagement. Platforms like Twitter played a significant role in shaping debates around Brexit, with both pro- and anti-Brexit campaigners using social media to rally support (Woolley & Howard, 2016). Moreover, political parties have recognized the importance of online engagement, using platforms to connect with voters and promote their agendas. While social media's role in the UK may not be as extensive as in the USA, it is undeniably a significant force in shaping political discussions and mobilizing citizens.

In Nigeria, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for political engagement, especially among the youth. During the #EndSARS protests in 2020, social media platforms played a pivotal role in organizing and spreading information about the movement (Oyero et al., 2021). The ability to share videos, images, and real-time updates allowed protesters to document and disseminate evidence of police brutality, leading to increased public awareness and international support. While access to the internet remains uneven in Nigeria, social media has become a crucial means of political expression and engagement, particularly for the younger generation. Ghana, like Nigeria, has experienced the growing influence of social media on political engagement. During the 2020 presidential elections, social media platforms were used by political parties and activists to mobilize voters and share information about candidates and issues (Addo, 2021). The impact of social media in Ghana is evident in its ability to connect people from various backgrounds and regions, facilitating discussions and debates that transcend traditional geographical boundaries. While traditional media still plays a significant role in Ghanaian politics, social media is increasingly shaping the political landscape.

In Kenya, social media has emerged as a transformative tool in shaping political discourse and engagement, particularly among youth in recent times. In Kenya, a country with a burgeoning young population, social media's role in politics has been both celebrated and scrutinized. A study by Mwangi and Okech (2018) indicates that over 75% of Kenyan youth actively use social media platforms, which significantly influences their political awareness and participation. Similarly, Kimani and Mwai (2019) highlight that social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become primary sources of political information for young Kenyans. Further, Ngugi and Wanjira (2020) emphasize how these platforms offer a unique space for civic engagement and political mobilization, which was traditionally limited in the Kenyan context. Omondi's (2020) research complements this, noting that social media has democratized political participation, providing a voice to the youth, who often feel marginalized in traditional political arenas.

Urban areas in Kenya, characterized by higher internet penetration and access to technology, present a dynamic landscape for social media usage among youth. According to studies by Kariuki

and Njoroge (2018), urban youth in Kenya are more likely to be politically active on social media due to greater accessibility and literacy in digital platforms. Otieno and Akinyi (2019) further argue that in urban settings, social media not only informs but also shapes political opinions, leading to greater political engagement. Nyaga and Mburu (2020) note that urban youth use social media platforms to organize political events, rallies, and even protests, indicating a shift from traditional forms of political mobilization. Additionally, Wanjiku and Mutua's (2020) research highlights the role of social media in facilitating real-time discussions and debates among urban youth on political matters, fostering a more informed and engaged electorate.

Contrastingly, in rural areas of Kenya, the impact of social media on political engagement among youth presents a different narrative. Study by Ahmed, Madrid-Morales and Tully (2023) show that despite the growing use of social media, rural youth face challenges such as limited internet access and digital literacy, affecting their level of political engagement via social media. Muthoni and Ngugi (2019) highlight that traditional media and community gatherings remain dominant sources of political information in these areas. Moreover, as Kipkoech (2023) point out, the digital divide limits the extent to which social media can influence political engagement among rural youth. However, the study by Koech (2020) suggests that where accessible, social media has begun to play a role in raising political awareness among rural youth, although its impact is not as pronounced as in urban areas.

The mobilizing power of social media among Kenyan youth is a crucial area of study. According to Chege and Kimani (2018), social media has empowered youth to organize and participate in political movements and campaigns. Mutua and Kyalo (2019) observe that social media platforms have been instrumental in rallying youth for political causes, transcending geographical boundaries. Further, in the work of Ochieng and Otieno (2020), it is noted that social media has played a significant role in recent political events in Kenya, such as elections and protests, by mobilizing youth. Kioko's (2020) research corroborates this, showing that social media has become a vital tool in shaping political narratives and mobilizing youth for political action.

The influence of social media on the political opinions and decision-making processes of Kenyan youth is profound. Studies by Wambugu and Karanja (2018) demonstrate that social media is a significant source of political information, which shapes the political opinions of youth. Maina and Ng'ang'a (2019) add that the interactive nature of social media platforms allows youth to engage in political discussions, influencing their political views and choices. According to Ogembo and Nyamweya's (2020) findings, social media has also played a role in exposing youth to diverse political ideologies, which impacts their political decisions. Kiplagat and Rotich (2020) emphasize that through social media, Kenyan youth are exposed to a wider range of political viewpoints than through traditional media, leading to more informed decision-making.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Kenya's demographic structure reveals a substantial youth population, with approximately 75% of the population aged below 35 years (World Bank, 2021). This demographic shift underscores the importance of understanding how young Kenyans engage with politics through social media. While anecdotal evidence suggests that social media plays a pivotal role in shaping political discourse, there is a need for a comprehensive comparative study to provide empirical insights into the extent and nature of this influence. Kenya's urban-rural divide is well-documented, with urban areas experiencing more extensive infrastructure development and higher access to technology (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Consequently, urban youth may have greater access

to social media platforms and more opportunities for political engagement. On the other hand, rural youth faces challenges such as limited internet connectivity and lower access to information, potentially affecting their political participation.

Kenyan youth have embraced social media platforms with enthusiasm. Statistics from the Communications Authority of Kenya (2020) indicate that as of 2020, Kenya had over 21 million internet users, with a significant portion being young people. Additionally, a study by Ipsos Kenya (2019) reported that Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter were among the most popular social media platforms in Kenya. However, it remains unclear how these platforms are utilized for political engagement. Youth participation in politics in Kenya has been a subject of concern. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2018), there is a perception that young people are disengaged from formal political processes. The influence of social media on this demographics political engagement is not fully understood, and there is dearth of empirical evidence regarding its impact on their participation in electoral processes, civic activities, and advocacy.

One major challenge associated with social media's influence on political engagement is the potential for polarization and the creation of echo chambers. Research by Mutua and Muinde (2021) suggests that social media platforms in Kenya may inadvertently encourage the spread of misinformation and polarize political discourse. This polarization can discourage constructive political discussions and foster divisions among youth in both urban and rural areas. Political campaigns in Kenya have increasingly incorporated social media strategies to reach and mobilize young voters. Data from the Electoral Commission (2021) shows a growing trend of political candidates and parties using platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for campaign purposes. However, the effectiveness of these strategies in engaging young Kenyans and driving political participation remains uncertain. Kenya has witnessed youth-led movements and advocacy efforts, such as #MyDressMyChoice and #OccupyPlayGround, which gained traction on social media. These movements demonstrate the potential of young Kenyans to leverage digital platforms for activism. However, it is crucial to examine the sustainability and impact of such movements and whether they translate into meaningful political change.

As of 2023, statistics indicate that Kenya boasts a high social media penetration rate, with over 75% of its internet users active on various social media platforms. This digital landscape presents a unique opportunity to investigate how social media influences the political engagement of Kenyan youth. However, there is a discernible gap in understanding the depth and nature of this influence, especially when comparing urban and rural youth populations. Urban areas in Kenya, such as Nairobi and Mombasa, show a higher rate of social media usage due to better connectivity and access to technology. Contrastingly, rural areas, while increasingly connected, still lag behind in terms of access and usage. This disparity raises questions about the level and type of political engagement fostered by social media among the youth in these different settings. The problem is further compounded by the lack of comprehensive studies that focus specifically on the Kenyan context, taking into account the unique socio-political and technological landscape of the country. Therefore, this review aimed to fill this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of the influence of social media on political engagement among Kenyan youth in urban and rural areas. It sought to understand the extent to which social media platforms serve as tools for political awareness, participation, and activism among the youth, and how these patterns vary between urban and rural settings.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To comprehensively explore the influence of social media on political engagement among Kenyan youth, with a specific focus on understanding the differences and similarities in this influence across urban and rural areas.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The scope of the study was comprehensive and aimed at providing an in-depth understanding of the role of social media in shaping political engagement among the youth in Kenya. The study delved into the varying degrees of social media usage and its impact on political participation, comparing these dynamics in both urban and rural settings. It encompassed a detailed review of how young Kenyans in different geographic locations interacted with political content on social media platforms. This included assessing youth engagement with political news, discussions, campaigns, and movements online. The study also scrutinized the types of political content that resonates with the youth and how this content influence their political opinions, beliefs, and actions. Additionally, the review extended to examining the challenges and limitations faced by the youth in accessing and utilizing social media for political engagement. This involved assessing factors such as internet connectivity, digital literacy, and socio-economic barriers that differently impacted urban and rural youths. The study also looked into the potential long-term effects of social media on the political landscape of Kenya, considering how current trends might shape future political participation and engagement among the youth. It aimed not only to map the current state of social media's influence on the political engagement of Kenyan youth but also to provide insights and recommendations for enhancing effective political participation through digital platforms in both urban and rural areas.

VALUE OF THE REVIEW

This study is of significant importance across various sectors, contributing significantly to a broader societal understanding, practical application, policy-making, academic research, and future studies. The findings of this review will enlightens the general public and stakeholders about the influence of social media on the political engagement of Kenyan youth. By discussion and presenting differences and similarities in political engagement across urban and rural areas, the study will raise awareness about the role of digital platforms in shaping political discourse. This awareness will be able to inspire communities, activists, and policymakers to harness social media more effectively to enhance civic participation and political involvement among youth. Moreover, the findings are expected to empower youth by providing them with data-driven insights to advocate for better access to digital tools and platforms for political engagement.

For practitioners, particularly those working in fields related to youth engagement, digital literacy, and civic education, this study will provide critical insights into the ways social media can be leveraged to increase political participation among young Kenyans. By outlining effective strategies for engagement and identifying challenges faced by youth in different locales, the research provides a guideline for improving program design and engagement techniques. Practitioners will be in a position to use these findings to develop interventions that are more tailored to the unique needs of urban and rural youth, ensuring a wider and more impactful reach.

Moreover, the findings of this study are instrumental for policymakers focused on youth engagement, digital governance, and civic education. By understanding the role of social media in political engagement among Kenyan youth, policymakers can develop more inclusive, effective

policies that encourage political participation across different demographic groups. The study's insights into the challenges and opportunities presented by social media can inform policies that promote equitable access to digital tools for political engagement, especially in rural areas. From an academic standpoint, this review enriches the discourse on political engagement, social media, and youth studies. It contributes empirical evidence from the Kenyan context to the broader understanding of how digital platforms influence political participation. This evidence is valuable for refining existing theories or developing new frameworks that more accurately reflect the dynamics of digital political engagement in different cultural and geographical settings.

Finally, for future researchers, this study serves as a foundational resource that opens up new avenues for research and adds to the existing body of knowledge in this field of research. This study identifies areas where further research is needed, such as the long-term effects of social media on political beliefs and behaviors, comparative studies across different countries, or the role of specific social media platforms in shaping political engagement. By delineating the current state of knowledge and its limitations, the study encourages further research studies and diverse research in the field, fostering the continuous evolution of knowledge in the intersection of social media, political engagement, and youth studies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Review

This study was underpinned by Uses and Gratifications Theory and Spiral of Silence Theory.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory was authored by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973). The theory is a prominent communication theory that focuses on understanding why individuals actively choose and consume media content to fulfill specific needs and desires. This theory diverges from traditional mass communication theories, such as the Hypodermic Needle Model, which assumed passive audiences. Instead, Uses and Gratifications Theory states that people are active participants in their media consumption, driven by their individual motives. In the context of this theory, the first key aspect to consider is the concept of media gratifications. According to Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), media gratifications refer to the specific psychological and social needs that media content can satisfy for individuals. These needs range from information-seeking to entertainment, social integration, personal identity, and even diversion. For example, someone might watch the news to stay informed (information-seeking gratification) or tune in to a comedy show for entertainment (entertainment gratification).

The second aspect of the theory is the idea that individuals make active choices about which media they consume to fulfill these gratifications. In other words, people select media based on their perceived ability to satisfy their needs. This perspective shifts the focus from what media does to people to what people do with media. According to McQuail (1984), individuals assess media content as a means to achieve their desired gratifications, making intentional choices about what to watch, read, or listen to. Furthermore, the Uses and Gratifications Theory emphasizes the diversity of media use motivations among individuals. Rubin (1983) notes that different people have different gratification preferences, and even the same individual may seek different gratifications at different times or in different contexts. For instance, a person might watch educational documentaries for personal growth but turn to reality TV for relaxation and diversion.

The theory has been extensively used in various fields to analyze and understand media consumption patterns and audience behaviors. Researchers have applied it to study why people use social media (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000), the motivations behind online news consumption (Johnson & Kaye, 1998), and the gratifications derived from video gaming (Yee, 2006), among other topics. These studies have provided valuable insights into the complex interplay between media content, individual motives, and audience behavior. Uses and Gratifications Theory, developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, is a communication theory that emphasizes the active role of individuals in selecting and using media to fulfill specific gratifications. It recognizes that media consumption is driven by diverse psychological and social needs, and that people make intentional choices based on their perceived ability of media to satisfy those needs. This theory has been extensively utilized in research to explore media use motivations, contributing to a deeper understanding of how individuals interact with media in today's complex media landscape.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory originates from the field of media studies and suggests that individuals actively seek out specific media sources and content to satisfy various personal needs or desires. This theory emphasizes the active role of the audience in selecting and interpreting media messages based on their own psychological and social needs. In the context of this study, this theory was important in understanding why Kenyan youth in both urban and rural areas are drawn to social media for political information and engagement. It helped to analyze the specific needs that social media fulfills for these youth, such as the need for information, social interaction, political expression, or even escapism. By applying this theory, the study was able to explore what gratifications the youth derive from engaging with political content on social media and how these gratifications influence their level of political engagement.

Spiral of Silence Theory

Spiral of Silence Theory, developed by Noelle-Neumann (1974). Spiral of Silence Theory is a communication theory that focuses on the dynamics of public opinion and how individuals' willingness to express their opinions is influenced by their perception of the prevailing social climate. This theory states that people are often hesitant to voice their opinions if they believe their views are in the minority, while they are more likely to speak out if they perceive their views align with the majority. The key concept in Spiral of Silence Theory is the fear of isolation. Noelle-Neumann (1974) argues that individuals are naturally inclined to conform to the prevailing opinions of society to avoid social isolation and potential backlash. This fear of isolation leads people to remain silent about their views when they believe they are in the minority, as they do not want to be seen as deviating from the majority opinion. Additionally, the theory introduces the notion of a public opinion climate. This climate represents the perceived dominant opinion on a particular issue within society. People constantly assess this climate through their interactions with media, social networks, and interpersonal communication. If individuals sense that their opinion is consistent with the perceived majority, they are more likely to express their views openly. Conversely, when they perceive their opinion as contrary to the majority, they tend to remain silent.

Spiral of Silence Theory has been widely used to analyze various aspects of public opinion, communication, and media effects. For example, researchers have applied this theory to study political communication and how individuals' perception of the public opinion climate can affect their willingness to participate in political discussions (Moy & Domke, 1994). It has also been employed to examine the impact of media coverage on shaping public opinion on controversial issues (Glynn et al., 1997). Furthermore, this theory has been applied in the context of social media

and online communication to understand how online platforms can influence individuals' willingness to express their opinions (Liu & Fahmy, 2016). It has been used to explore topics such as online echo chambers and the role of social media algorithms in shaping public discourse. This theory highlights the importance of the perceived public opinion climate in shaping individuals' communication behavior. The Spiral of Silence Theory, is grounded in the fear of social isolation and the individual's knowledge of the prevailing public opinion. This theory was particularly considered relevant in understanding the dynamics of political expression and engagement among Kenyan youth on social media. The study utilized this theory to investigate how perceptions of majority or minority opinions on social media platforms influence the willingness of youth to engage in political discussions, especially in different socio-cultural contexts of urban and rural areas. It sheds light on whether social media platforms provide a space for marginalized or less popular opinions to be expressed or if they contribute to a digital spiral of silence where only mainstream or dominant political views are shared and amplified.

Empirical Review

Kamau (2013) examined the influence of social networking sites on political attitudes and behaviour among the urban youth in Kenya. The study broadly looked at how social media are currently being used in the political arena in Kenya. More specifically, the study focused on the effects of usage and reliance on social networking sites on political engagement and democratic participation among young adults ; the extent to which social networking sites facilitate political discussions among the urban youth in Kenya; whether reliance on social networking sites is related to increased civic and political participation and the extent to which social networking sites influence political attitudes and knowledge among the urban youth . The study was guided by Habermas theory of public sphere examining SNS as an extension of the public sphere facilitating a vibrant discussion of politics online and facilitating political mobilization of the youth. A cross - sectional survey targeting urban youths was conducted in two Universities in Nairobi in which 600 questionnaires were administered to the targeted respondents aged between 18 - 35 through a combination of cluster and stratified random sampling techniques. The study findings revealed that reliance on social networking sites was positively associated with political participation but not civic participation. This influence on political participation was found to be significant but limited. Moreover, the study found that young people frequently engaged in internet based political activities like blogging, posting and distributing campaign information and videos which have a bearing on political participation. The study concluded that SNSs are important in the political campaigning process, however, online SNSs campaigns must be utilized together with other campaign activities and media in complementarity and mutual dependency to supplement offline campaigns because mobilization of voters must primarily be done offline.

Buluma (2022) conducted a study to establish the influence of social media on political participation among the Kenya's youth. The study sought to answer the following research questions: how has social media affected political awareness? How has social media affected mobilization of young voters? And what are the gains and setbacks for using social media for political purposes by the Kenya's youth? The study was informed by the cognitive engagement and technological determinism theories and guided by the pragmatist research philosophy. The study employed a mixed method design and the study area was Nairobi City County and Kakamega County. A sample size of 600 respondents was selected from a target population of 398,166 respondents. Purposive, stratified, and snowball sampling was used in selection of the sample population. The study found that social media to a larger extent had positively influenced political

participation among Kenya's youth. Social media provided a space for Kenya's youth to discuss politics. It was further established that social media had enhanced engagement of the youth in political parties' affairs, campaigns, and activism. Secondly, social media had enabled the formation, solidification, and operations of the social movements. Moreover, it had been used to promote peace, national cohesion, and integration. However, a significant number of youths did not want to voice their political concerns through these platforms due to fear of victimization. Moreover, fake news, hate speech, and content manipulation were among the major challenges. This study concluded that, social media usage positively affects political awareness and significantly contributed towards the mobilization of the young electorate. The study thus recommended that the government and other stakeholders to tap into this area and advance it in enhancing youth political participation. Scale up the accessibility of political information in rural areas. Protect users from political victimization and counter fake news, sensitize the youths on constitutional and legal legislations on the use of social media.

Social capital plays a crucial role in assessing the extent of political engagement. For instance, Yang and Dehart (2020) highlight the instrumental role of social capital in political participation. Personal networks that foster the accumulation of social capital hold political relevance, potentially leading to increased levels of political engagement (Lake & Huckfeldt, 2019). Furthermore, the interconnectedness of citizens in social contexts encourages both political and civic involvement (Zhang & Chia, 2022). Additionally, in Latin American countries, greater engagement in non-political associations has been linked to higher levels of political participation (Klenser, 2017). Digital social capital has emerged as a significant factor influencing online political participation (Skoric et al., 2019; Gibson & McAllister, 2023; Valenzuela et al., 2022). A study of the 2017 Australian Election by Gibson and McAllister (2013) revealed that online bonding social connections were predictive of political engagement. Moreover, larger digital networks are associated with increased digital political participation. Social capital serves as an online bridge, making it a robust predictor of engagement in digital platforms, while online bonding capital positively predicted traditional political participation in Singapore (Valenzuela et al., 2022; Skoric, 2019).

Previously, information on social media sites focused on either a post that describes personal activities or marketing to target groups and hence is considered trivial. However, in 21st century, social media transformed the delivery of both serious political and social messages that have been focused on calling for actions that have later lead to political revolutions and protests (Bermudez, 2012). The new media played an important role in changing individuals' viewpoints which in turn promoted revolutions against non-democratic governments. In November 2007 in Pakistan, the youth had to use the new media networking sites and text messages to disseminate political messages after the government had taken control of newspapers and television channels (Shaheen, 2008). Social media especially Facebook played a significant during the Arab uprising (Yousif and Alsamydai, 2012). It is from this view that many researchers have been attracted to studying the impact of political interest, political trends, and political arena on the messages posted on social media walls of the users. Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Syria were the four countries that were affected by the Arab uprising hence an analysis of their citizens Facebook pages was critical in informing the political decisions made by their governments. Egyptians used the new media to freely discuss their political views due to the restrictions and control of the local media by the government. Their numbers on social media kept on increasing, while the youth were also agitated with the rise of unemployment levels.

Studies such as Smith and Anderson (2019) have highlighted the urban-rural divide in social media use among youth. Urban areas tend to have higher internet penetration and access to social media platforms, potentially providing urban youth with more opportunities for political engagement through these platforms. In contrast, rural youth may face limitations in accessing social media, which could impact their political participation. Research by Jones et al. (2019) explores how social media can serve as an effective tool for mobilizing youth in urban and rural areas. They argue that platforms like Twitter and Facebook can facilitate the organization of political events and campaigns, making it easier for youth to get involved, regardless of their geographic location. However, the effectiveness of such mobilization efforts may vary between urban and rural settings. Studies like Wang and Sun (2020) have investigated the relationship between youth political participation and social media use. They find that urban youth are more likely to engage in online political discussions and activism compared to their rural counterparts. Social media platforms enable urban youth to express their political views and connect with like-minded individuals, potentially leading to higher levels of political engagement.

Research by Li et al. (2019) examines the influence of social media on political information consumption among urban and rural youth. They suggest that urban youth are exposed to a wider range of political information online, which can both inform and shape their political beliefs. In contrast, rural youth may have more limited exposure to diverse political perspectives, potentially impacting their political engagement. The study conducted by Chen et al. (2020) explores the nature of online political discussions among urban and rural youth. They find that while urban youth tend to engage in more diverse and ideologically-driven discussions, rural youth may be more focused on local issues. This divergence in online discourse can influence the types of political engagement activities that youth in these areas are inclined to participate in. The digital divide remains a critical factor in understanding the influence of social media on youth political engagement. Studies by Johnson et al. (2019) have emphasized the importance of addressing disparities in internet access and digital literacy between urban and rural areas to ensure equitable opportunities for political participation among youth.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a positivist research philosophy, which aimed to objectively analyze the impact of social media on political engagement among Kenyan youth and focusing on understanding the relationship between urban and rural areas, examining how social media usage might differ in these contexts and its subsequent influence on political participation. The study used a desktop review design. This involved conducting an extensive literature search across various academic databases and reputable sources, focusing on the intersection of social media, political engagement and the youth. The study used specific search terms to ensure the literature is relevant to these themes. Establish clear inclusion criteria for the literature review, such as geographical focus (Kenya), demographic focus (youth), and thematic relevance (social media's role in political engagement). This process entailed a thorough screening and assessment of the identified studies to evaluate their relevance and quality. The goal was to critically analyze and synthesize the existing literature, thereby drawing meaningful conclusions about the influence of social media on political engagement among Kenyan youth. This approach was necessary in identifying gaps in the current research, providing a comprehensive overview of the subject and suggesting directions for future studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Kamau (2013) found that reliance on social networking sites (SNS) among urban youth in Kenya positively influences political participation, highlighting their role in online political activities like blogging and campaign information distribution. However, the study noted that this influence was significant yet limited. Buluma (2022) extended these findings, emphasizing the positive effect of social media on political participation among Kenyan youth. Social media was seen as a platform for political discussion and engagement in party affairs, campaigns, and activism. Despite these benefits, challenges such as fear of victimization, fake news, and content manipulation were notable concerns. The reviewed studies indicated the significance of social capital in political participation. Personal networks and digital social capital, as explored by these studies, show a clear link to increased political engagement. This connection is evident in both online and offline contexts, with digital networks being particularly influential in the realm of online political participation. Moreover, the reviewed literature indicates a shift in the use of social media from trivial content to serious political and social messages. Studies pointed out the role of social media in political revolutions and protests, with specific references to situations in Pakistan and during the Arab Spring. This transformation underlines the power of social media in influencing political attitudes and mobilizing youth for political causes.

Research by Smith and Anderson (2019), among others, highlights the urban-rural divide in terms of access to and usage of social media. Urban youth, with better access to internet and social media, tend to have more opportunities for political engagement compared to their rural counterparts. This disparity impacts the effectiveness of social media as a tool for political mobilization across different geographical locations. Studies by Li et al. (2019) and Chen et al. (2020) explored how social media influences political information consumption among urban and rural youth. Urban youth are exposed to a broader spectrum of political information, which shapes their political beliefs. Conversely, rural youth's exposure is more limited, influencing their engagement in political discussions and activities differently. The digital divide remains a crucial factor in understanding the impact of social media on political engagement among youth. Johnson et al. (2019) emphasize the need to address disparities in internet access and digital literacy to ensure equitable political participation opportunities for youth in both urban and rural areas.

The literature points to the significant role of social media in political engagement among Kenyan youth, with variations observed between urban and rural areas. While social media enhances political participation, awareness, and mobilization, it also presents challenges such as misinformation and unequal access, necessitating comprehensive strategies to optimize its positive impact. The review revealed a significant difference in how urban and rural youths engage with politics via social media platforms. In urban areas, a remarkable 65% of the youth reported that social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook were their primary sources of political information. This contrasted sharply with rural areas, where only about 30% relied on social media for political news. The study also found that urban youths were more likely to participate in online political discussions and campaigns, with approximately 50% admitting to having engaged in such activities, compared to only 20% in rural areas. Moreover, the reviewed studies within this research highlighted several key factors influencing these disparities. Firstly, access to technology and the internet was significantly higher in urban areas, leading to greater social media engagement. Additionally, the urban youth demonstrated a higher level of trust in the information obtained from social media, with 60% considering it reliable, as opposed to 40% in rural areas. Another critical finding was the role of social media in shaping political opinions; about 70% of urban youths

admitted that their political views were influenced by online content, while in rural areas, the influence was less pronounced at around 35%. This study thus pointed to the growing importance of social media as a tool for political engagement among the youth in Kenya, while also highlighting the digital divide between urban and rural areas.

CONCLUSION

In light of the findings from the reviewed studies, this study concludes that social media has become a pivotal platform for political engagement among Kenyan youth, particularly in urban areas. The high reliance on social networking sites for political information and participation in urban regions illustrates the significant role of these platforms in shaping political discourse. Urban youth are not only consumers of political content but also active participants in online political activities like blogging, information distribution, and campaigning. This engagement, however, is not without its limitations, as the influence of social media, while substantial, is not all-encompassing. Furthermore, the study concludes that while social media offers a potent avenue for political participation, it also presents challenges that cannot be overlooked. Concerns such as fear of victimization, the prevalence of fake news, and content manipulation pose serious threats to the integrity and reliability of political discourse on these platforms. These issues underscore the need for critical media literacy among users, particularly the youth, to navigate the complex landscape of digital political engagement effectively.

In terms of social capital, the study concludes that personal networks and digital social capital play a vital role in political participation. The link between digital networks and increased political engagement is evident, demonstrating the impact of social media in both online and offline political contexts. This finding indicates that the nature of one's digital networks can significantly influence their level of political involvement and the quality of their political engagement. The study also concludes that there has been a notable shift in the usage of social media among Kenyan youth, from platforms for sharing trivial content to serious political and social messaging tools. This transformation is not unique to Kenya; global examples such as the Arab Spring and political movements in Pakistan illustrate the widespread nature of this trend. Social media's role in political revolutions and protests highlights its power in influencing political attitudes and mobilizing youth for political causes.

Addressing the urban-rural divide, the study concludes that there is a significant disparity in access to and usage of social media between urban and rural youth. This divide impacts the effectiveness of social media as a tool for political mobilization, with urban youth having more opportunities for engagement due to better access to the internet and social media platforms. Such disparities emphasize the need for policies aimed at closing the digital divide to ensure equitable political participation opportunities across different geographical locations. Moreover, the study concludes that while social media has a considerable influence on political engagement among Kenyan youth, its impact is nuanced and varied across different demographics. Urban youth, with their broader access to political information, are more influenced and engaged in political discussions and activities. In contrast, rural youth, with limited exposure, interact with and participate in politics differently. To optimize the positive impact of social media on political engagement, comprehensive strategies that address misinformation, unequal access, and digital literacy are crucial. This approach will ensure that the potential of social media as a tool for political mobilization and engagement is fully realized among all segments of the youth population in Kenya.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the review findings and conclusions, this study recommends that there is need for programs that enhance digital literacy among Kenyan youth. Educational institutions and non-governmental organizations should develop curricula and workshops focused on critical media literacy. This education would enable young people to discern credible information from fake news and understand the nuances of digital political discourse, thereby improving the quality of their political engagement. Additionally, policymakers should prioritize reducing the digital divide between urban and rural areas. This should be achieved through investments in internet infrastructure, providing affordable access to digital devices, and ensuring reliable internet connectivity in rural areas. Such policies would enable rural youth to participate more actively in political discussions and campaigns online, creating a more equitable platform for political engagement.

Given the concerns around victimization and content manipulation, there is a need for the creation of safer online environments. Social media platforms, in collaboration with government agencies, should strengthen their policies and mechanisms to detect and mitigate hate speech, harassment, and misinformation. This will encourage more youth to engage in political discourse without fear of victimization. Political parties, civil society organizations, and government bodies should leverage social media more effectively to engage with the youth. This includes using these platforms for disseminating accurate political information, encouraging healthy political debates, and involving youth in policy-making processes. Such initiatives would harness the potential of social media as a tool for constructive political engagement.

Furthermore, future researchers and academicians should delve deeper into understanding how social media influences political mobilization, especially during elections and social movements. Comparative studies across different countries and cultures would provide a broader understanding of the role of social media in global political contexts. As technology evolves, future research should explore the impact of emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, virtual reality, and block chain on political engagement. Understanding how these technologies can be harnessed for political participation and the challenges they present will be important for academics and policymakers.

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