

X (FORMERLY TWITTER) AS A PLATFORM FOR POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AMONG SOCIAL SCIENCES UNDERGRADUATES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ABUJA DURING THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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Abstract

This study explored the extent to which X (formerly Twitter) was instrumental in representing the 2023 Nigerian presidential election among Social Sciences undergraduates at the University of Abuja. The study Anchored in Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch's (1974) Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that audiences actively select media to satisfy cognitive, affective, personal and social needs and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, which argues that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships that shape communication and behaviour, the study examined how students accessed political information, participated in discursive socio-political debates, and negotiated political identities. A qualitative design was employed, using semi structured interviews triangulated with students' digital traces. Twelve purposively selected participants were drawn from four departments. The findings revealed that X facilitated gratifications for political information and participation by providing near immediacy, awareness and opportunities for civic dialogue, and reinforcement of social identity. Categories of voters were associated with particular candidates to signal claims to power and, in some accounts, voting behaviour. However, challenges such as misinformation, tribalism, and polarisation denied students these gratifications and alienated them from participation on X. The findings emphasise both the benefits and pitfalls of X for youths' political engagement. To strengthen youth political participation and mitigate the risks associated with social media use, this study recommends that universities integrate digital literacy programmes into curricula to equip students with critical evaluation skills, and that inclusive online communities be fostered to reduce hostile exchanges and encourage respectful civic dialogue.

Keywords: X (Formerly Twitter), Platform, Political Engagement, Social Sciences, Undergraduates, Presidential Election.

Introduction

In Nigeria, social media provides an important platform for political discussion, particularly amongst young people, who are reported to be the most active demographic on these platforms. Data Reportal (2023), reported that Nigeria had over 36.7 million social media users as of January 2024, most of whom were youth. Scholars have noted the importance of social media in political discourse. Njoku, Ihechu, and Njoku (2025), concluded that platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) democratise access to political debates, making politics more accessible.

Oparaugo (2021), similarly observes that while social media platforms have expanded opportunities for political engagement, mobilisation, and citizen participation, they simultaneously possess the capacity to intensify political polarisation. By facilitating the rapid circulation of partisan content, emotionally charged narratives, and ideologically homogeneous interactions, social media environments often reinforce existing beliefs and deepen divisions within the political sphere.

X has become a defining space for immediacy, interaction, and direct connection -between citizens and political actors during elections. Unlike traditional media, it offers real-time updates, open debates, and grassroots mobilisation, making it central to how young people experience and participate in democratic processes. Bosch (2017), observed similar dynamics in South Africa, where students used Twitter during #FeesMustFall to amplify activism, highlighting the platform's power in youth mobilisation. In Nigeria, Opeibi (2019) and Obisesan (2022) likewise found that undergraduates increasingly turned to X for mobilisation, candidate evaluation, and voters' education.

The 2023 presidential election brought these patterns into sharp focus, as Nigerian undergraduates relied on X to follow political developments, weigh candidates, and join conversations that shaped their views. Yet, while earlier studies have explored social media's role in youth activism more broadly (Okorie & Salawu, 2021; Ndlela & Mano, 2020), less attention has been paid to specific academic communities. Social Sciences undergraduates, with their disciplinary grounding in governance and civic life, represent a particularly insightful group for understanding how political information needs and social identities are negotiated online.

Literature Review

Political Communication and Social Media

Social media has reshaped the way politics is communicated, offering immediacy, interactivity, and mass mobilisation in ways traditional media cannot. In Nigeria, scholars highlight its role in democratising access to political discourse and encouraging youth

participation (Njoku et al., 2025; Oparaugo, 2021; Odalonu & Aghahowa, 2023). Earlier studies of youth participation show how political engagement is understood across disciplines (Vite et al., 2020), while policy analyses point to both enabling structures and persistent barriers (Eboigbe & Ajisebiyawo, 2024). Globally, Bosch (2017) and Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2015), observed similar patterns of student activism, highlighting social media's central role in contemporary political communication. Okonkwo et al. (2024). opine that:

Twitter's accessibility and immediacy have democratized the process of political participation, providing a voice to those who have traditionally been marginalized in political discourse. Young Nigerians, in particular, have utilized Twitter not just as a means of communication but as a powerful instrument of political activism. (p.101).

According to Okonkwo et al. (2024). above, their views on Twitter's accessibility and real-time communication features have broadened opportunities for political participation, enabling individuals who were previously marginalised in mainstream political discourse to express their views. In Nigeria, young people have particularly leveraged the platform not merely for interaction, but as a strategic tool for political mobilisation and activism.

Misinformation

The spread of misinformation complicates digital political engagement, eroding trust and deepening polarisation. Wyorkson, (2025); Jimada, (2023) and Morah & Nwafor, (2024) studies document the prevalence of fake news, hate speech, and identity-driven misinformation during elections. These findings mirror international research showing how disinformation circulates within echo chambers and identity-based controversies.

The Nigerian experience mirrors patterns identified through X which demonstrates how disinformation thrives within algorithm-driven echo chambers and polarised online communities (Diaz-Ruiz & Nilsson, 2023). Within these spaces, audiences are repeatedly exposed to ideologically congruent content, reinforcing existing beliefs while insulating users from counter-narratives. Such environments facilitate the rapid circulation of misleading or fabricated information, intensify identity-based controversies, and undermine rational democratic deliberation. These studies reveal that electoral misinformation in Nigeria often exploits ethnic, religious, and regional identities, thereby deepening societal divisions and heightening political tensions. False narratives are frequently deployed to delegitimise political opponents, discredit electoral institutions, and manipulate public opinion. Oshionebo & Okoronkwo (2023) postulate that:

Some Twitter users have used the platform to pursue their personal interests. They sometimes engage in spreading falsehood and negative information to achieve their objectives. This negative use of the Twitter has amplified tension and security threats among citizens of Nigeria. On the flipside, other Twitter users have engaged the platform towards achieving their modest and legitimate interests (P.88).

Together, this literature positions misinformation not only as a technological issue but also as a socio-political challenge that directly shapes democratic participation.

Tribalism, Identity Politics, and Youth Engagement

Ethnic identity continues to be a powerful influence on political behaviour in Nigeria, with digital platforms amplifying tribal and religious affiliations (Okeke & Omosotomhe, 2024; Agbede & Oparinde, 2024; Morah & Nwafor, 2024). Similar dynamics are evident across Africa, where online communities foster solidarity but also risk polarisation (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). Nigerian student activism on X further illustrates how identity politics reinforces collective belonging and mobilisation (Okorie & Salawu, 2021). These studies confirm that identity politics is inseparable from youth engagement online, reflecting Social Identity Theory's emphasis on in-group solidarity and out-group conflict.

Digital Literacy and Democratic Participation

Digital literacy is essential for meaningful political engagement, yet gaps in skills continue to hinder students' ability to critically evaluate online information. Research within Nigeria highlights undergraduates' limited competencies (Adebamgbola & Adeoye, 2017) and calls for curriculum reforms to strengthen digital skills (Adeleye et al., 2025). National frameworks emphasise systemic interventions (NITDA, 2023), while reports underline both the scale of youth engagement and the risks posed by misinformation (Business Day, 2024; Data Reportal, 2023). Globally, digital literacy is widely recognised as a prerequisite for effective participation in online democracy, reinforcing its urgency in the Nigerian context.

Theoretical Review

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory originated in the 1940s and 1950s, when scholars began to investigate why audiences consumed particular forms of media. Herzog (1942) examined radio soap operas and quiz programmes, identifying entertainment and emotional release as key motivations, while Berelson (1949) explored newspaper readership, highlighting informational and social utility. These early studies marked a departure from passive audience models, laying the groundwork for a more active conception of media use. Building on these foundations, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) formally articulated Uses and Gratifications Theory, emphasising that audiences actively select media to satisfy cognitive, affective, personal and social needs. This theoretical consolidation shifted the focus of communication research from media effects to audience motivations. Uses and Gratifications Theory highlights the active role of audiences in choosing media to meet needs such as information, entertainment, and social interaction (Katz et al., 1974). Applied to politics, it explains why Nigerian undergraduates turn to X for immediacy, credibility, and participation. Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2015) confirmed the strong link between social media use and political engagement, while Bosch (2017) demonstrated its role in youth activism. In Nigeria, Opeibi (2019) and Obisesan (2022) found that undergraduates rely on X for mobilisation and activism.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory was developed in the 1970s by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, building upon Tajfel's earlier work on social categorisation and prejudice. Tajfel's minimal group experiments demonstrated that even arbitrary distinctions between groups could produce in-group favouritism and out-group bias (Tajfel, 1970). Turner and Tajfel (1979) subsequently formalised the theory, proposing that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships, which in turn shape communication, attitudes, and behaviour.

Social Identity Theory introduced key concepts such as social categorisation, social comparison, and positive distinctiveness, providing a framework for understanding intergroup relations. Social Identity Theory argues that individuals derive identity from group membership, shaping attitudes and behaviours (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). On social media, this theory explains how online communities reinforce political belonging and activism. Ndlela and Mano (2020) observed that African youths form digital communities that strengthened solidarity but also risked polarisation. Similarly, Okorie and Salawu (2021) found that Nigerian student groups on X aligned around candidates, reinforcing identity while entrenching divisions.

Empirical Review

Empirical studies confirm the relevance of these frameworks. Globally, Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2015) validated the emphasis within Uses and Gratifications Theory on informational and participatory needs, showing a strong correlation between social media use and political engagement. Ndlela and Mano (2020) highlighted Social Identity Theory's role in reinforcing collective identity through digital communities, while also noting risks of polarisation. In Nigeria, Opeibi (2019), Obisesan (2022), and Okorie & Salawu (2021) documented undergraduates' reliance on X for mobilisation, activism, and identity formation. Yet, few studies have examined Social Sciences undergraduates specifically. Given their disciplinary orientation towards governance and civic participation, this group offers a particularly relevant lens for understanding how gratifications and identity dynamics intersect. This study therefore situates Social Sciences undergraduates' engagement with X within these theoretical frameworks.

Gap in Literature

While existing scholarship establishes social media as central to youth mobilisation, highlights the dangers of misinformation, and explores identity politics and digital literacy, most studies focus on broad national patterns or general youth populations. Less attention has been given to specific academic communities, particularly Social Sciences undergraduates. This gap is significant because students in disciplines such as Political Science, Sociology, Economics, and Geography are academically oriented towards governance and civic participation, making their experiences uniquely relevant for understanding youth political behaviour. This study addresses that gap by examining how Social Sciences undergraduates at the University of Abuja used X during the 2023 presidential election, guided by Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Identity Theory.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative design to explore how Social Sciences undergraduates at the University of Abuja used X (formerly Twitter) during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election to access information, participate in discussions, and form political identities. The focus on Social Sciences was deliberate, given the disciplinary orientation toward governance and civic participation. Twelve students (three each from Political Science, Sociology, Economics, and Geography) were purposively selected for their active engagement on X Spaces. While the purposive sample of twelve Social Sciences undergraduates provided rich insights, the small size and restriction to one faculty limit generalizability. Future research should adopt comparative designs across faculties and multi-institutional studies involving diverse Nigerian universities. Larger samples, complemented by surveys, would strengthen representativeness and allow broader conclusions about youth political engagement on social media.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted in English between March and June 2024, lasting 30–45 minutes. Interviews explored experiences with X, participation in political discourse, identity formation, and voting behaviour. Although English enhanced inclusivity, the absence of indigenous languages may have excluded less fluent participants. Informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were emphasized.

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step thematic framework, with inductive coding around key domains. Triangulation was achieved across departments and supplemented with publicly available digital traces, including hashtags such as #NigeriaDecides2023, #YouthVote, #Election2023, and #EndTribalPolitics, as well as Spaces discussions. These digital traces were used to corroborate participants' accounts of misinformation, mobilisation, and political debates, thereby reducing reliance on self report; with explicit attention to positionality and how disciplinary background may have shaped interpretation. Ethical approval was obtained, and anonymity was ensured using department based codes (POS1–POS3, SOC4–SOC6, ECO7–ECO9, GEO10–GEO12).

Findings

Thematic analysis of the twelve interviewees revealed five major themes: experiences with X, participation in political discussions, impact on social identity, influence on voting behaviour, and broader reflections on social media's role. Each theme is illustrated with multiple participant responses to reflect the diversity of perspectives.

Theme 1: Experiences with X

Students consistently described X as providing informational gratifications, particularly immediacy and awareness. POS1 noted: *"I could follow results live without waiting for TV or radio."* This reflects the information-seeking function of Uses and Gratifications Theory, whereby students actively sought real-time updates. Similarly, GEO10 valued diverse perspectives: *"You hear opinions from every side, not just official sources."* Such diversity illustrates the social interaction gratification within the uses and Gratifications Theory, as students engaged with multiple voices and viewpoints. However, widespread concerns about misinformation and tribalism disrupted these gratifications. SOC5 cautioned: *"Tribal comments were everywhere; it made discussions toxic."* This demonstrates the in-group and

out-group conflict central to Social Identity Theory, where identity driven hostility undermines trust and discourages meaningful engagement.

Theme 2: Participation in Political Discussions

Engagement varied between passive consumption and active participation. Passive users, such as GEO10, admitted: *"I mostly scrolled and read without commenting,"* reflecting limited social interaction gratification within the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory. In contrast, active participants derived stronger gratifications from contributing. POS3 explained: *"Joining Spaces made me feel part of something bigger, like my voice mattered."* This illustrates the participatory gratification emphasised in Uses and Gratifications Theory, whereby interaction fosters a sense of belonging. ECO7's voter education posts highlight pro-social gratifications, aligning with Social Identity Theory's principle of in-group solidarity, as students mobilised peers around shared civic goals. Yet, SOC6's reluctance to engage in arguments demonstrates how hostile exchanges can suppress participation, again reflecting Social Identity Theory's tension between solidarity and conflict.

Theme 3: Impact on Social Identity

X strongly influenced identity formation among the undergraduates. POS2 stated: *"I became more certain of my political views because of the debates I joined,"* which illustrates Social Identity Theory's principle of identity reinforcement through group alignment. ECO9 similarly aligned with ideological communities via policy threads, reflecting the informational gratification described in Uses and Gratifications Theory combined with Social Identity Theory's emphasis on ingroup belonging. Conversely, SOC6 described inclusivity: *"I saw people from different tribes supporting the same candidate, and it made me rethink stereotypes."* This demonstrates Social Identity Theory's potential for cross group solidarity. Yet, GEO11 lamented: *"The insults and tribal comments pushed me away from politics online,"* highlighting Social Identity Theory's concept of out-group hostility, which can alienate individuals and disrupt gratifications.

Theme 4: Influence on Voting Behaviour

Voting behaviour reflected the dimensions of Uses and Gratifications Theory, namely information seeking, reinforcement, and disruption. ECO9's decision after reading policy threads illustrates informational gratification, as the platform provided knowledge that shaped electoral choice. POS1 stated: *"I already knew my candidate; X just reinforced it,"* which demonstrates reinforcement gratification, where prior preferences were strengthened rather than altered. In contrast, POS2 noted the disengaging effect of misinformation: *"After seeing so much propaganda, I didn't even bother voting".* This reflects disrupted gratifications, whereby exposure to conflicting or unreliable content undermined trust and discouraged participation. Social Identity Theory further explains how tribal hostility discouraged engagement, as outgroup conflict weakened students' sense of political belonging and contributed to withdrawal from the electoral process.

Theme 5: Broader Reflections on Social Media's Role

Students perceived X as both empowering and risky in their political engagement. POS1 asserted: *"It gave young people a platform to speak up,"* which reflects the participatory

gratification described in Uses and Gratifications Theory and the principle of in-group solidarity in Social Identity Theory. SOC4 added: *"It made politics feel closer to us,"* demonstrating how gratifications fostered civic awareness and a sense of proximity to political processes. Yet, ECO8 warned: *"It can mislead impressionable youths if there's no fact checking,"* highlighting disrupted gratifications resulting from misinformation. GEO11's concern about tribalism illustrates Social Identity Theory's concept of out-group hostility, whereby identity driven divisions discourage participation. Finally, GEO12's description of X as *"like a classroom for politics"* emphasizes the informational gratification central to Uses and Gratifications Theory. Collectively, these reflections confirm X's dual nature: a catalyst for democratic participation and simultaneously a potential amplifier of division.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that X (formerly Twitter) played dual role in shaping political engagement among Social Sciences undergraduates during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. Within the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory, students employed X to satisfy informational, reinforcement, and participatory needs. However, these gratifications were disrupted when misinformation and hostile exchanges undermined trust, discouraging some students from voting or participating.

Social Identity Theory further clarifies how online communities shaped belonging and activism. Students reported solidarity through candidate aligned groups and civic mobilisation, consistent with the principle of in-group cohesion. Yet, tribalism and hostile discourse reinforced out-group divisions, discouraging participation and alienating some individuals. These dual dynamic highlight the tension between identity driven mobilisation and polarisation in Nigeria's digital political sphere.

Taken together, Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Identity Theory reveal that X is not a neutral platform but a contested space where gratifications and identity dynamics intersect. For Social Sciences undergraduates, disciplinary orientation towards governance made them particularly sensitive to both the empowering and polarising effects of online engagement. These insights extend global scholarship on youth mobilisation while situating Nigerian undergraduates' experiences within local challenges of misinformation and tribal politics.

Conclusion

This study shows that X (formerly Twitter) has become a critical platform for political engagement among Social Sciences undergraduates in Nigeria, enabling immediacy, interactivity, and direct access to political discourse. It fostered awareness, candidate evaluation, and identity formation during the 2023 presidential election, but its impact was limited by misinformation, tribalism, and echo chambers.

The integration of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Social Identity Theory demonstrates that political engagement through X is shaped by both individual motivations for information and participation, and collective identity dynamics that can mobilise or polarise. The broader

implication is that the democratic potential of social media depends on whether gratifications are met within inclusive communities or disrupted by divisive content.

Recommendations

To strengthen youth political participation and mitigate the risks associated with social media use, several recommendations emerge from this study:

1. Enhance Digital Literacy: Universities and officials should integrate digital literacy programmes into curricula to equip students with skills to critically evaluate online political information and resist misinformation.
2. Promote Inclusive Online Communities: Moderated discussions and peer-led initiatives should be encouraged to reduce hostile exchanges and foster respectful debate across ethnic and political lines.
3. Address Tribalism in Digital Spaces: Civic education campaigns should challenge ethnic bias and promote national identity, reducing the polarising effects of tribal affiliations in online discourse.
4. Strengthen Student Engagement Structures: Faculties of Social Sciences should create platforms for structured political dialogue, linking academic training with practical civic participation.
5. Policy and Institutional Support: Government agencies and civil society organisations should collaborate to ensure that social media platforms are leveraged responsibly, combining online engagement with broader institutional reforms that promote transparency and trust in democratic processes.

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