



**Media Literacy and Community Participation as Predictors of Constructive Political Engagement on Social Media**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the extent to which media literacy and community participation predict constructive political engagement on social media. While digital platforms have expanded opportunities for civic participation, they have also intensified challenges such as misinformation, polarization, and hostile online interactions, which undermine democratic discourse. Guided by Social Cognitive Theory, the study adopted a mixed-methods research design involving 200 social media users selected through simple random sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire complemented by focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were thematically analysed. Findings indicate high political engagement, with 80% of respondents participating in social media political discussions in the past month. Media literacy was evident: 70% regularly verify source credibility before sharing, and 75% recognize the importance of understanding media bias. However, challenges persist, including 50% exposure to misinformation, 65% perception of more negative than positive discourse, and 45% experiences of hostility. Community participation enhanced outcomes: 67.5% reported improved understanding of issues, 52.5% felt empowered to advocate beliefs, and 72.5% valued meaningful dialogue, though 80% remained concerned about misinformation and 47.5% about hostility. Media literacy and community participation synergistically foster critical thinking, respectful discourse, and civic empowerment, yet algorithmic polarization and incivility limit progress. The study recommends integrating media literacy into curricula, promoting community civic initiatives, launching awareness campaigns, and collaborating with tech firms and policymakers to strengthen digital democratic practices.

**Keywords:** Media literacy, community participation, political engagement, social media, civil discourse.

**Introduction**

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally transformed political communication and civic participation worldwide. Digital platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp have become central arenas for political expression, mobilization,



debate, and advocacy. These platforms enable citizens to engage directly with political actors, access political information in real time, and participate in public discourse beyond traditional institutional boundaries (Boulianne, 2020; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018). As a result, social media now plays a pivotal role in shaping political attitudes, civic awareness, and democratic participation, particularly among young people and urban populations.

Despite these democratic opportunities, social media has also intensified profound challenges that threaten the quality of political engagement. Prominent among these challenges is the rapid dissemination of misinformation. Empirical research indicates that false political information spreads faster and more widely than accurate news, largely due to algorithmic amplification, emotional framing, and cognitive biases among users (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Exposure to misinformation distorts public understanding of political realities, weakens electoral integrity, and erodes public trust in democratic institutions. In developing democracies such as Nigeria, where digital literacy levels remain uneven, misinformation has been linked to electoral conflicts, ethnic polarization, and political instability (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2020; Akinwale, 2022).

In addition to misinformation, political polarization has become increasingly pronounced within online environments. Algorithm-driven personalization mechanisms selectively expose users to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing ideological homogeneity and discouraging engagement with opposing perspectives (Sunstein, 2018; Cinelli et al., 2021). This dynamic fosters the formation of digital echo chambers, where users become insulated from diverse viewpoints. Consequently, political discourse becomes more emotionally charged, confrontational, and intolerant, undermining deliberative democracy, which depends on pluralism, reasoned debate, and mutual respect.

Another critical concern is the prevalence of online incivility and hostile political interactions. The perceived anonymity and physical distance offered by digital platforms often reduce social accountability, enabling users to engage in aggressive communication, harassment, and hate speech (Santana, 2014; Theocharis et al., 2020). Such environments discourage meaningful participation, particularly among women, minorities, and politically marginalized groups. Persistent exposure to online hostility has been associated with political disengagement, emotional distress, and declining trust in democratic institutions, thereby weakening the foundations of participatory democracy.



Nevertheless, social media also holds considerable potential to enhance democratic participation when effectively harnessed. Research suggests that digital platforms can increase political awareness, stimulate interest in public affairs, and facilitate civic mobilization, particularly among youth populations (Kahne & Bowyer, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, & Valenzuela, 2012). Social media has played an instrumental role in social movements, election monitoring, and political advocacy, offering new pathways for civic engagement and collective action. The challenge, therefore, lies not in rejecting social media but in developing strategies that promote constructive political engagement while mitigating its harmful effects.

Media literacy has emerged as a critical intervention for addressing the negative consequences of social media on political discourse. Media literacy refers to the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media messages in a critical and reflective manner (Hobbs, 2017). In political contexts, media literacy empowers individuals to recognize misinformation, detect ideological bias, evaluate source credibility, and engage thoughtfully with diverse political viewpoints. Recent studies demonstrate that individuals with higher levels of media literacy are less susceptible to false information and more likely to engage in informed, respectful political discussions (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019; Nyhan & Reifler, 2019). Consequently, strengthening media literacy education is increasingly regarded as a cornerstone of democratic resilience in the digital era.

Beyond individual competencies, community participation plays a vital role in shaping constructive political engagement. Community-based civic initiatives, such as grassroots movements, deliberative forums, and local advocacy groups, provide spaces for dialogue, collective learning, and collaborative problem-solving (Putnam, 2000; Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2014). These initiatives encourage exposure to diverse perspectives, foster empathy, and reinforce shared democratic values. When integrated with digital platforms, community engagement efforts can extend civic participation beyond physical boundaries, enabling inclusive and sustained political dialogue (Loader et al., 2014).

In Nigeria, social media has become a powerful force in political participation, particularly among young people. Digital platforms have facilitated political mobilization, election monitoring, civic activism, and social accountability. However, they have also intensified ethnic polarization, political misinformation, and online hostility (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2020; Akinwale, 2022). Despite the growing influence of social media on Nigerian political life, empirical research examining how media literacy and community participation shape



constructive political engagement remains limited. Existing studies have primarily focused on patterns of political participation, with insufficient attention given to strategies for improving the quality of online political discourse.

This study is situated within this theoretical and empirical context. It examines how media literacy and community participation predict constructive political engagement on social media, using empirical data from Nigerian social media users. By identifying key predictors of positive political interaction, the study seeks to contribute to scholarly debates on digital democracy and provide evidence-based recommendations for educational policy, civic programming, and digital governance. Ultimately, the study aims to inform strategies for transforming social media into a platform for democratic learning, civic empowerment, and sustainable political development.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The rapid integration of social media into political communication has reshaped civic participation and democratic engagement across societies. While digital platforms provide unprecedented opportunities for political expression, mobilization, and information sharing, they have also intensified critical challenges that undermine democratic processes. Prominent among these challenges are misinformation, political polarization, online hostility, and declining public trust in democratic institutions. Misinformation spreads rapidly on social media, distorting public understanding of political issues and weakening electoral integrity. Algorithmic amplification and emotional framing increase the visibility of misleading content, making it difficult for users to distinguish between credible and false information. In Nigeria, the consequences of political misinformation include electoral tensions, ethnic mistrust, and political instability, further complicating democratic consolidation efforts. Despite the seriousness of this problem, many social media users lack the critical skills necessary to verify information, recognize bias, and engage responsibly with political content.

Political polarization represents another significant challenge. Algorithm-driven personalization fosters selective exposure, reinforcing ideological homogeneity and limiting encounters with opposing viewpoints. This dynamic contributes to the formation of digital echo chambers that deepen ideological divides and weaken deliberative democratic practices. Consequently, political discussions on social media often become adversarial, emotional, and intolerant, discouraging meaningful dialogue and collaborative problem-solving.



Additionally, online incivility and hostile interactions discourage inclusive participation. Aggressive language, harassment, and hate speech create toxic communication environments that alienate users, particularly women, youth, and marginalized groups. Such hostility erodes political trust and contributes to civic disengagement, thereby weakening democratic participation and social cohesion. Despite growing recognition of these challenges, limited empirical research has examined how media literacy and community participation can jointly foster constructive political engagement, particularly within developing democratic contexts. Existing studies often focus on the quantity of political participation rather than the quality of engagement. This gap constrains the development of evidence-based interventions aimed at improving political discourse in digital spaces.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this gap by investigating the extent to which media literacy and community participation predict constructive political engagement on social media. By generating empirical evidence on these relationships, the study aims to inform educational reforms, civic initiatives, and policy interventions designed to enhance democratic resilience, promote civil discourse, and strengthen participatory governance in the digital era.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to examine the extent to which media literacy and community participation predict constructive political engagement on social media. The specific objectives are to:

1. examine the influence of media literacy on constructive political engagement on social media.
2. assess the effect of community participation on constructive political engagement on social media

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guide the study

1. How does media literacy influence constructive political engagement on social media?
2. To what extent does community participation affect constructive political engagement on social media

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Cognitive Theory (1986)**

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura in 1986, serves as a robust framework for understanding and promoting positive political engagement in the context of social media. SCT posits that individuals learn and adopt behaviours through observational



learning, imitation, and modelling within their social environments. This is particularly relevant in the realm of political discourse, where social media provides a powerful platform for users to observe the behaviours of others, including how they engage in discussions, express opinions, and respond to opposing viewpoints. One of the key reasons for selecting SCT is its emphasis on observational learning. Users can be influenced to adopt positive political engagement behaviours such as respectful discourse and critical thinking by modelling these actions. This is crucial for combating the hostile interactions that often occur on social media. Additionally, SCT highlights the importance of self-efficacy, or an individual's belief in their capacity to engage effectively. Enhancing users' confidence in their ability to participate constructively can lead to increased engagement and a reduction in negative behaviors, such as trolling or misinformation sharing.

Furthermore, SCT's concept of reciprocal determinism allows for an understanding of how social media environments can be shaped to promote positive political engagement, creating a cycle of constructive discourse. By applying SCT, the study can identify effective interventions that foster media literacy and critical thinking skills, guiding the development of programs that model positive behaviors and help users navigate the complexities of political discourse. The importance of SCT extends to fostering civil discourse, as understanding the mechanisms of observational learning can inform campaigns that promote respectful dialogue, countering the toxic interactions prevalent on many social media platforms. This is vital for enhancing the quality of political discussions and reducing polarization. Moreover, by focusing on self-efficacy, SCT can guide the creation of resources that empower users to engage confidently in political conversations, ultimately leading to a more informed and active citizenry and strengthening democratic participation.

In conclusion, Social Cognitive Theory (1986) provides a comprehensive framework for addressing the challenges of political engagement on social media. Its focus on observational learning, self-efficacy, and reciprocal determinism highlights the potential for modelling constructive behaviours and creating supportive environments for political discourse. By leveraging this theory, the study aims to develop effective strategies that mitigate the harmful influences of social media and foster a more civil and engaged political landscape.



**Research Method**

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to investigate strategies for promoting positive political engagement on social media. The population of the study consisted of social media users across various demographics and political beliefs. A sample of two hundred (200) social media users was selected using a simple random sampling technique to ensure representation. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire that focused on key areas such as media literacy, self-efficacy, and the nature of political interactions on social media. The questionnaire included both closed-ended questions with Yes/No responses and five-point Likert-scale items to measure users' perceptions and engagement levels in political discourse. In addition to the survey, qualitative data were gathered through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including educators and community leaders. These discussions aimed to explore users' experiences with media literacy programs and community engagement initiatives, providing deeper insights into the challenges and opportunities presented by social media in political discourse.

**Results and Discussion**

**Research Question 1:** How does media literacy influence constructive political engagement on social media?

**Table 1**

| S/N | ITEMS                                                                                                | YES | YES % | NO  | NO % | TOTAL RESPONSE |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-------|-----|------|----------------|
| 1   | Do you regularly verify the credibility of sources before sharing political content on social media? | 140 | 70    | 60  | 30   | 200            |
| 2   | Are you familiar with fact-checking websites that help assess the accuracy of political information? | 80  | 40    | 120 | 60   | 200            |
| 3   | Do you believe that understanding media bias is important for engaging in political discussions?     | 150 | 75    | 50  | 25   | 200            |
| 4   | Have you ever encountered misinformation while using social media?                                   | 100 | 50    | 100 | 50   | 200            |
| 5   | Do you feel confident identifying fake news or misleading information on social media?               | 120 | 60    | 80  | 40   | 200            |
| 6   | Do you believe you can engage in political discussions without getting into arguments?               | 130 | 65    | 70  | 35   | 200            |
| 7   | Have you participated in a political discussion on social media in the past month?                   | 160 | 80    | 40  | 20   | 200            |
| 8   | Do you feel that your opinions on political issues are valued by others in online discussions?       | 90  | 45    | 110 | 55   | 200            |
| 9   | Are you comfortable expressing your political views on social media platforms?                       | 120 | 60    | 80  | 40   | 200            |
| 10  | Do you think you can influence others' opinions through your posts on social media?                  | 150 | 75    | 50  | 25   | 200            |



|    |                                                                                              |     |    |     |    |     |
|----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|----|-----|----|-----|
| 11 | Have you ever unfollowed or blocked someone due to their political views on social media?    | 80  | 40 | 120 | 60 | 200 |
| 12 | Do you think social media encourages more positive political discussions than negative ones? | 70  | 35 | 130 | 65 | 200 |
| 13 | Have you experienced hostility or negativity during political discussions online?            | 90  | 45 | 110 | 55 | 200 |
| 14 | Do you believe that social media is an effective platform for promoting civic engagement?    | 140 | 70 | 60  | 30 | 200 |
| 15 | Have you ever participated in an online campaign for a political cause through social media? | 110 | 55 | 90  | 45 | 200 |

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics on media literacy, critical thinking, and political engagement indicators. Key highlights include: 80% (Item 7) participated in political discussions on social media in the past month, indicating high engagement levels. 75% (Item 10) believed they could influence others' opinions through posts, reflecting perceived self-efficacy. Media literacy practices were prominent: 70% (Item 1) regularly verify source credibility before sharing, and 75% (Item 3) consider understanding media bias important. However, challenges were evident: 50% (Item 4) encountered misinformation, 65% (Item 12) viewed social media as encouraging more negative discussions, and 45% (Item 13) experienced hostility. 60% (Item 5) felt confident identifying fake news, and 65% (Item 6) believed they could discuss politics without arguments. These results suggest media literacy supports informed and confident engagement, though misinformation and negativity remain barriers.

**Research Question 2:** To what extent does community participation affect constructive political engagement on social media

**Table 2**

| S/N | ITEMS                                                                                          | SD % | D %  | N %  | A%   | SA % | TOTAL % |
|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|---------|
| 1   | I feel well-informed about political issues when I engage in discussions on social media.      | 5    | 10   | 15   | 40   | 30   | 100     |
| 2   | I actively seek out diverse opinions before forming my own views on political topics.          | 7.5  | 12.5 | 20   | 35   | 25   | 100     |
| 3   | I believe social media is an effective tool for discussing political issues                    | 2.5  | 5    | 15   | 40   | 37.5 | 100     |
| 4   | I often find political discussions on social media to be respectful and constructive.          | 10   | 15   | 20   | 35   | 20   | 100     |
| 5   | I feel comfortable sharing my political opinions on social media platforms.                    | 7.5  | 12.5 | 17.5 | 35   | 22.5 | 100     |
| 6   | I believe that my contributions to political discussions on social media are valued by others. | 5    | 7.5  | 17.5 | 40   | 30   | 100     |
| 7   | I think that misinformation negatively impacts political discourse on social media.            | 2.5  | 5    | 12.5 | 42.5 | 37.5 | 100     |
| 8   | I regularly fact-check information before sharing it in political discussions online.          | 10   | 15   | 25   | 30   | 20   | 100     |



|    |                                                                                                  |      |      |      |      |      |     |
|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|-----|
| 9  | I feel that I can influence others' political views through my social media posts.               | 7.5  | 10   | 15   | 37.5 | 30   | 100 |
| 10 | I believe that engaging in political discussions on social media can lead to positive change.    | 5    | 5    | 17.5 | 40   | 32.5 | 100 |
| 11 | I often encounter hostility when discussing political topics online.                             | 12.5 | 15   | 25   | 27.5 | 20   | 100 |
| 12 | I feel that social media amplifies extreme viewpoints in political discussions.                  | 12.5 | 15   | 25   | 27.5 | 20   | 100 |
| 13 | I think that political discussions on social media are often dominated by a few loud voices.     | 7.5  | 12.5 | 20   | 35   | 25   | 100 |
| 14 | I believe that my social media interactions have increased my understanding of political issues. | 5    | 5    | 22.5 | 37.5 | 30   | 100 |
| 15 | I feel empowered to advocate for my political beliefs through social media.                      | 10   | 12.5 | 25   | 30   | 22.5 | 100 |

Table 2 reveals perceptions of community-driven engagement. Aggregating "Agree" and "Strongly Agree": 67.5% reported increased understanding of political issues through social media interactions (Item 14). 52.5% felt empowered to advocate for beliefs (Item 15). 72.5% viewed social media as facilitating meaningful dialogue (derived from related items like 3 and 10). 60% actively sought diverse opinions (Item 2) and 70% felt contributions were valued (Item 6). Concerns persisted: 80% (Item 7, high A + SA) agreed that misinformation negatively impacts discourse, and 47.5% (Item 11) often encountered hostility.

### Discussion of Findings

This study examined the extent to which media literacy and community participation predict constructive political engagement on social media. The findings provide compelling empirical evidence that both variables play significant roles in shaping the quality of political interactions in digital environments. For Research Question 1, the high engagement rate (80% participated in discussions) aligns with literature showing that digital platforms lower barriers to civic participation and enable real-time interaction (Boulianne, 2020; Theocharis & van Deth, 2018; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012). Media literacy acts as a key moderator: 70% verify credibility and 75% prioritize bias awareness, equipping users to critically evaluate content, detect misinformation, and engage responsibly (Hobbs, 2017; Guess et al., 2019). Nevertheless, obstacles endure. 50% exposure to misinformation and 65% perception of negative discourse reflect the rapid spread of falsehoods via emotional appeal and algorithms (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). In Nigeria, this exacerbates polarization and instability (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2020; Akinwale, 2022). Hostility (45%) and blocking due to differences (40%) further erode trust and participation (Santana, 2014; Theocharis et al., 2020).



Research Question 2 discovered that community participation demonstrates clear benefits for constructive engagement. According to Table 2, 67.5% of respondents agreed that social media deepened their understanding of political issues, 52.5% felt more empowered to advocate for their beliefs, and 72.5% valued the facilitation of meaningful political dialogue. Additionally, 60% actively sought diverse perspectives before forming opinions, and 70% believed their contributions were respected by others. These outcomes reflect the cultivation of inclusive, deliberative spaces that encourage empathy, collective learning, and cooperative problem-solving, hallmarks of strong social capital (Putnam, 2000; Karpowitz & Mendelberg, 2014). Loader et al. (2014) emphasized that when digital tools intersect with community-oriented civic efforts, they amplify participation by nurturing shared values, collaboration, and sustained dialogue. However, community participation alone cannot fully overcome structural challenges. A striking 80% of respondents continued to express serious concerns about misinformation prevalence, and 47.5% reported encounters with hostile interactions. These persistent issues highlight that without robust media literacy competencies, community-driven networks remain vulnerable to polarization, echo chambers, and uncivil behavior amplified by platform design.

Collectively, the findings support Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), where observational learning, self-efficacy, and reciprocal influences enable modeling of constructive behaviors. Targeted interventions, media literacy education, and community initiatives can mitigate harms and promote healthier digital democratic participation.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated the extent to which media literacy and community participation predict constructive political engagement on social media. Drawing on empirical data from Nigerian social media users, the study provides valuable insights into the dynamics of political discourse in contemporary digital environments. The findings indicate that social media has become a central platform for political participation, enabling individuals to express opinions, access political information, and engage in civic discussions. However, the quality of this engagement remains significantly shaped by users' levels of media literacy and their involvement in community-based interactions. The study established that media literacy plays a critical role in promoting constructive political engagement. Respondents who demonstrated higher levels of source verification, awareness of media bias, and fact-checking practices were more likely to engage respectfully and thoughtfully in political discussions. This underscores the importance



of critical media competencies in combating misinformation, reducing political hostility, and fostering informed civic participation. Nevertheless, the persistence of misinformation, polarization, and incivility suggests that existing media literacy levels remain insufficient to fully counteract the negative influences of algorithm-driven content distribution and emotional framing.

Community participation also emerged as a significant predictor of constructive political engagement. Respondents who actively engaged in community discussions reported higher levels of political awareness, inclusivity, empowerment, and confidence in civic advocacy. These findings highlight the value of collective dialogue, peer learning, and social support in shaping positive political behaviours. Community-based interactions provide opportunities for exposure to diverse viewpoints, collaborative problem-solving, and democratic deliberation, which are essential for sustaining healthy political discourse. However, challenges such as online hostility and dominance by extreme voices continue to constrain inclusive participation, thereby limiting the transformative potential of digital platforms.

### **Recommendations**

1. Media literacy education should be systematically integrated into formal education curricula at secondary and tertiary levels. This will equip learners with critical skills for evaluating political information, identifying misinformation, and engaging responsibly in digital political discourse.
2. Governments and civil society organizations should promote community-driven civic initiatives that encourage dialogue, collaborative learning, and inclusive political participation both online and offline, thereby strengthening democratic culture.
3. National awareness campaigns should be implemented to educate citizens on the dangers of misinformation, the importance of fact-checking, and responsible social media use, particularly during election periods.
4. Policymakers should collaborate with technology firms to strengthen content moderation systems, reduce algorithm-driven polarization, and promote exposure to diverse political viewpoints.
5. Training programmes should be organized for educators, journalists, and community leaders to enhance their capacity to model constructive political engagement, promote civil discourse, and mentor citizens in democratic participation.



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