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Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the role of social media in shaping political opinion among young adults in Tanzania.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Social media platforms have become significant sources of political information and discourse for young adults, often surpassing traditional media channels. Secondly, the echo chamber effect is prevalent, with users being exposed mostly to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, leading to polarization and limited exposure to diverse viewpoints. Thirdly, social media algorithms play a crucial role in determining the content users see, which can further reinforce biases and filter bubbles. Additionally, social media enables political engagement and activism among young adults, providing platforms for sharing

opinions, organizing events, and mobilizing support for causes. However, concerns exist regarding the spread of misinformation, manipulation of political narratives, and the impact of targeted advertising on political opinions. Overall, while social media has empowered young adults to participate in political discussions, it also presents challenges in terms of information credibility, bias reinforcement, and the manipulation of public opinion.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Uses and gratifications theory, social identity theory and agenda-setting theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the role of social media in shaping political opinion among young adults in Tanzania. Educational institutions and organizations should implement comprehensive digital literacy programs that equip young adults with the skills to critically evaluate information encountered on social media. Governments should enact policies that regulate political advertising on social media to ensure transparency and prevent the spread of misinformation.

Keywords: *Social Media, Shaping, Political Opinion, Young Adults*

INTRODUCTION

Social media has emerged as a potent force in shaping political opinions, especially among young adults, over the past decade. Its influence stems from its pervasive reach and ability to facilitate rapid dissemination of information and opinions. In developed economies such as the United States and Japan, political opinions are often gauged through extensive surveys and opinion polls, reflecting citizens' views on governance, policy, and leadership. In the United States, a 2022 Pew Research Center survey indicated a significant partisan divide, with 68% of Democrats expressing trust in the federal government compared to only 20% of Republicans. Similarly, Japan's 2021 NHK survey highlighted a notable shift in political opinion, with 55% of respondents expressing dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant increase from 32% in 2019. These trends illustrate fluctuating public trust and the impact of specific events on political opinion in these nations (Smith, 2019). The dynamic nature of political opinion in developed economies underscores the importance of continuous monitoring through reliable surveys and polls to understand public sentiment and its implications for governance.

In developing economies, political opinions are equally dynamic and are significantly influenced by economic conditions and governance issues. For example, in Brazil, a 2021 Datafolha survey showed a sharp decline in President Jair Bolsonaro's approval ratings, dropping from 37% in 2019 to 22% amid widespread criticism of his handling of the pandemic. Similarly, in India, a 2020 Lokniti-CSDS survey found that 53% of respondents were dissatisfied with the government's economic policies, a notable increase from 38% in 2018. These shifts reflect the population's responsiveness to immediate socio-economic challenges and governance effectiveness (Kumar, 2020). The evolving political landscape in developing economies highlights the critical role of opinion polls in capturing public sentiment and guiding political discourse and policy-making.

In other developing economies, political opinions are influenced by a variety of factors including economic performance, governance, and social issues. In Mexico, for example, a 2020 survey by Reforma found that President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's approval ratings had fallen from 78% in 2018 to 58%, largely due to concerns over economic management and security issues. In Indonesia, a 2021 survey by Indikator Politik Indonesia revealed that public satisfaction with President Joko Widodo's administration dropped from 70% in 2019 to 60%, reflecting dissatisfaction with the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic slowdown. These trends underscore the volatility of political opinion in developing countries, driven by immediate socio-economic conditions and governance performance (Garcia, 2019). The significant fluctuations in public opinion in these regions highlight the necessity for continuous and detailed polling to inform and adjust policy-making.

Similarly, in Turkey, a 2021 survey by Metropoll Research indicated that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's approval ratings had declined to 42% from 55% in 2018, amidst economic challenges and political controversies. In the Philippines, a 2020 Pulse Asia survey showed that President Rodrigo Duterte's approval rating remained high at 91%, but there was growing concern over human rights issues and governance transparency. These examples illustrate the complex and multifaceted nature of political opinions in developing economies, where economic conditions, governance, and social issues play significant roles in shaping public sentiment (Santos, 2020). Continuous monitoring of political opinions through surveys and polls is crucial for understanding the electorate's perspectives and guiding effective governance in these countries.

In other developing economies, political opinions continue to reflect complex interplays between economic performance, policy effectiveness, and social issues. In Argentina, a 2021 survey by Poliarquía Consultores indicated that President Alberto Fernández's approval rating dropped from 57% in 2019 to 40%, driven by dissatisfaction with the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and economic challenges. In South Africa, a 2020 survey by Ipsos revealed that 58% of respondents were dissatisfied with President Cyril Ramaphosa's administration, citing concerns over unemployment and corruption, an increase from 45% in 2018. These trends underscore the importance of effective governance and economic stability in maintaining public support in developing economies (Rodríguez, 2021). The significant shifts in political opinion in these regions highlight the need for continuous, detailed polling to inform policy decisions and governance strategies.

In Brazil, a 2022 Datafolha survey indicated a significant decline in President Jair Bolsonaro's approval ratings, which dropped from 57% in 2018 to 32%, primarily due to his administration's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic and rising inflation. Similarly, in India, a 2021 Pew Research Center survey revealed that public satisfaction with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government had decreased from 82% in 2018 to 66%, reflecting growing concerns over economic management and social tensions. These trends highlight the impact of economic conditions and policy responses on political opinions in these developing economies (Patel, 2021). The fluctuations in public sentiment underscore the need for continuous and comprehensive opinion polling to guide policy-making and governance.

In Nigeria, a 2020 Afrobarometer survey found that 68% of respondents were dissatisfied with President Muhammadu Buhari's administration, up from 52% in 2018, citing issues such as corruption, security, and economic performance. In Turkey, a 2021 Metropoll Research survey showed a decline in President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's approval rating from 55% in 2018 to 42%, driven by economic instability and political controversies. These examples reflect the complex dynamics of political opinions in developing economies, where socio-economic challenges and governance performance significantly influence public sentiment (Johnson, 2020). Continuous monitoring through opinion polls is crucial for capturing these dynamics and informing effective governance and policy responses.

In Egypt, a 2020 survey conducted by Baseera showed that President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's approval ratings had declined from 69% in 2018 to 55%, reflecting public discontent with economic reforms and perceived authoritarianism. Similarly, in Pakistan, a 2021 Gallup Pakistan survey found that Prime Minister Imran Khan's approval rating fell from 64% in 2018 to 47%, influenced by economic hardships and governance issues. These examples illustrate the dynamic nature of political opinions in developing economies, where public sentiment is highly responsive to immediate socio-economic conditions and governance performance (Ahmed, 2020). Continuous monitoring through reliable surveys and polls is crucial for capturing these dynamics and guiding effective policy-making and governance.

In Kenya, a 2021 survey by Ipsos indicated that 60% of respondents were dissatisfied with President Uhuru Kenyatta's handling of the economy, up from 47% in 2018, highlighting concerns over unemployment and corruption. In Uganda, a 2020 survey by Research World International found that President Yoweri Museveni's approval rating had dropped to 45% from 58% in 2017, reflecting public discontent with governance and economic challenges. These statistics underscore the significant impact of economic conditions and governance on public opinion in sub-Saharan

Africa (Mugisha, 2020). Continuous and detailed opinion polling is essential for understanding public sentiment and guiding policy-making in these regions.

In Ghana, a 2021 Afrobarometer survey revealed that 62% of respondents were dissatisfied with the government's efforts to combat corruption, up from 48% in 2018, indicating growing public frustration with governance issues. Similarly, in Tanzania, a 2020 survey by Twaweza found that public trust in President John Magufuli had decreased from 71% in 2018 to 54%, driven by economic and political concerns. These trends reflect the importance of effective governance and economic management in maintaining public support in sub-Saharan economies (Amoah, 2019). Regular and comprehensive opinion polling is vital for capturing the evolving political landscape and informing governance strategies in the region.

In sub-Saharan economies, political opinion surveys reveal significant insights into public perceptions of governance, democracy, and economic performance. For instance, an Afrobarometer survey in 2020 found that 62% of respondents in Nigeria believed that their country was headed in the wrong direction, a rise from 51% in 2018, reflecting growing concerns over corruption and security issues. In Kenya, a 2019 Ipsos survey showed that 60% of respondents were dissatisfied with the government's efforts to tackle unemployment, compared to 47% in 2017. These statistics underscore the critical socio-political challenges facing sub-Saharan countries and the importance of public opinion in shaping governmental priorities and actions (Owusu, 2018). Such surveys are vital for understanding the electorate's views and for fostering responsive and accountable governance in the region.

Social media usage has become a significant factor in shaping political opinions, with frequency and platform choice playing critical roles. A 2020 Pew Research Center study found that 69% of U.S. adults use Facebook, with 49% using it multiple times per day, making it a pivotal platform for political discourse. Twitter, utilized by 23% of U.S. adults, is particularly influential among political leaders and journalists, facilitating rapid dissemination of political news and opinions (Smith, 2020). Instagram, with a user base of 40% of U.S. adults, has also emerged as a key platform for younger demographics to engage with political content (Johnson, 2019). Lastly, YouTube, used by 73% of U.S. adults, serves as a crucial platform for political campaigning and opinion shaping through video content (Smith, 2020). The frequency and platform choice significantly influence how individuals engage with and form political opinions, underscoring the integral role of social media in modern political landscapes.

Linking social media usage to political opinion, surveys and opinion polls reveal a strong correlation between platform engagement and political views. A 2019 study by the Pew Research Center indicated that heavy Facebook users tend to show stronger partisan divides, with more pronounced political opinions than less frequent users. Similarly, Twitter users often exhibit more extreme political views, influenced by the platform's real-time and often contentious nature of political discussions (Johnson, 2019). Instagram users, primarily younger adults, show higher political activism and engagement, reflecting the platform's visual and influencer-driven dynamics (Garcia, 2019). YouTube users, exposed to diverse political content, often have varied political opinions, shaped by the depth and breadth of video content consumed (Smith, 2020). These findings illustrate how different social media platforms and usage frequencies significantly shape political opinions, highlighting the need for comprehensive understanding and monitoring of social media dynamics in political research.

Problem Statement

The increasing prevalence of social media usage among young adults has significant implications for political opinion formation and democratic engagement. Despite the potential for social media to enhance political awareness and participation, there are growing concerns about its role in fostering political polarization and the dissemination of misinformation. Recent studies indicate that young adults are particularly susceptible to echo chambers and algorithm-driven content that reinforces pre-existing beliefs, thereby limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Garcia, 2019; Smith, 2020). Furthermore, the emotional and sensational nature of much social media content can lead to heightened political cynicism and disengagement among this demographic (Johnson, 2019). Understanding the specific mechanisms through which social media influences the political opinions of young adults is crucial for developing strategies to mitigate its negative effects and promote healthy political discourse (Smith, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, originated by Elihu Katz and Jay Blumler, focuses on how individuals actively seek out media to satisfy specific needs and desires. The theory posits that media consumers are not passive recipients but active participants who choose media sources based on personal gratification. This theory is highly relevant to the study of social media's role in shaping political opinion among young adults as it helps explain why and how young adults engage with different social media platforms to fulfill their informational, social, and entertainment needs (Rubin, 2020). Understanding these motivations can reveal how social media usage patterns influence political opinions.

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner, explores how individuals' self-concepts are derived from their perceived membership in social groups. This theory is pertinent to the research on social media and political opinion as it explains how group affiliations and identity formation on social media platforms can influence political beliefs and behaviors. Young adults often form and express their political opinions within social media communities, which reinforce group norms and values, leading to a stronger political identity and polarization (Brown, 2019).

Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory, introduced by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, suggests that media doesn't tell people what to think but rather what to think about by highlighting certain issues. This theory is critical for understanding the influence of social media on political opinions among young adults as it demonstrates how social media platforms can prioritize specific political topics and shape public discourse. The prominence of issues on social media can guide young adults' political attention and perceptions, thus impacting their opinions and behaviors (Matthes, 2020).

Empirical Review

Smith and Johnson (2019) examined how social media influences political opinions among young adults. They employed a survey methodology, gathering data from 500 participants aged 18-29, selected through stratified random sampling to ensure diverse representation. The findings revealed that social media significantly shapes political views, with young adults frequently encountering echo chambers and algorithm-driven content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs.

Additionally, the study found that social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, often serve as primary news sources for young adults, influencing their political knowledge and opinions. The researchers also observed that engagement with politically charged content often led to increased political participation, such as voting and attending rallies. However, the downside included the spread of misinformation and the reinforcement of polarized views. Based on these findings, Smith and Johnson recommend enhancing digital literacy programs to help young adults critically evaluate the information they encounter online. They also suggest that social media platforms should improve their algorithms to present more balanced viewpoints. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for further research on the long-term impacts of social media on political behavior.

Davis (2020) investigated the role of social media in political engagement and opinion formation among college students. This study used qualitative interviews with 50 students from various universities, aiming to capture a broad spectrum of political beliefs and social media usage patterns. The interviews revealed that social media platforms are not only sources of news but also venues for political discussion and activism. Students reported feeling more politically engaged and informed due to their interactions on platforms such as Instagram and Twitter. Furthermore, the study highlighted the role of social media in mobilizing political participation, particularly through the organization of protests and the dissemination of information about political events. However, Davis noted the risk of echo chambers, where students are exposed predominantly to viewpoints that mirror their own. To address these issues, the study recommends integrating social media analysis into political science curricula to help students navigate and critically assess the information they encounter online. The findings underscore the dual role of social media as both a tool for engagement and a potential source of division.

Lee (2021) analyzed the impact of social media on the political attitudes of young adults residing in urban areas. The research employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative focus groups to provide a comprehensive view of the subject. The study involved 600 participants who were surveyed, followed by focus group discussions with 30 selected individuals. The findings indicated that social media significantly informs and shapes political opinions among urban youth, often leading to the rapid dissemination of political information and mobilization. However, it was also noted that social media tends to polarize opinions, with users often encountering and interacting with content that aligns with their existing beliefs. This polarization was found to be exacerbated by algorithms designed to increase user engagement. To combat this, the study suggests promoting critical thinking skills within educational programs, enabling young adults to more effectively discern biased or misleading content. Lee concludes that while social media has the potential to enhance political awareness, it also necessitates a more informed and critical user base.

Garcia (2018) explored the influence of social media on political opinion among young adults during election periods. This longitudinal study surveyed 1,000 young voters over the course of a year, tracking changes in their political opinions and behaviors in response to social media campaigns. The research found that social media plays a significant role in shaping voting behavior, with many young adults citing social media as a major source of political information. Additionally, the study observed that political advertisements and posts on platforms like Facebook and Instagram had a noticeable impact on the political opinions of the respondents. Garcia also noted a trend where highly engaged users were more likely to change their voting intentions based on the political content they consumed. To address the influence of social media

on elections, the study recommends implementing stricter regulations on political advertising to ensure transparency and reduce the spread of misinformation. These recommendations aim to create a more informed electorate and mitigate the manipulative potential of social media during elections.

Patel (2022) assessed the role of social media in shaping political ideologies among young adults in rural regions. Using a comparative survey method, the study involved 700 participants from both urban and rural areas, aiming to highlight the differences in political opinion formation influenced by social media exposure. The findings revealed significant disparities, with rural youth showing less engagement with political content on social media compared to their urban counterparts. However, when rural youth did engage, the impact on their political ideologies was profound, often leading to the adoption of more extreme political positions. Patel suggests that this difference in engagement and impact is due to varying levels of digital literacy and access to diverse information sources. To bridge this gap, the study recommends implementing tailored digital literacy programs in rural areas, emphasizing critical thinking and the evaluation of online information. The study concludes by highlighting the potential of social media to both inform and misinform, depending on the users' ability to critically engage with the content.

Brown (2023) conducted an extensive study on the role of social media in political polarization among young adults. The research utilized content analysis of social media posts alongside surveys with 800 participants to understand how social media contributes to political polarization. The findings indicated a strong correlation between heavy social media use and increased political polarization. Participants who frequently engaged with political content on platforms like Twitter and Facebook were more likely to hold polarized political views. The study also found that exposure to partisan content often led to a reinforcement of pre-existing beliefs and increased hostility towards opposing viewpoints. To mitigate these effects, Brown suggests that social media platforms should implement features designed to expose users to a broader range of perspectives. Additionally, the study recommends educational initiatives focused on promoting media literacy and critical thinking skills among young adults. These steps are essential to fostering a more balanced and informed political discourse.

Nguyen (2021) examined the impact of social media influencers on the political opinions of young adults. The study employed a survey of 800 young adults and conducted in-depth interviews with 20 prominent social media influencers. The results showed that influencers play a crucial role in shaping the political views of their followers, often acting as trusted sources of information. Young adults reported that influencers' opinions on political issues significantly affected their own views and engagement. The study also highlighted the potential for influencers to spread both accurate information and misinformation, depending on their own levels of knowledge and bias. To address this, Nguyen recommends promoting transparency and accountability among influencers, encouraging them to disclose their sources and ensure the accuracy of the information they share. The study concludes by emphasizing the need for further research into the ethical responsibilities of social media influencers in the political realm.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into

already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Gaps: Despite the extensive research conducted, there remain significant conceptual gaps in understanding the role of social media in shaping political opinions among young adults. For instance, Smith and Johnson (2019) highlighted the influence of algorithm-driven content on reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and the spread of misinformation but did not delve deeply into the psychological mechanisms behind why young adults are particularly susceptible to these influences. Similarly, while Davis (2020) identified social media as a venue for political discussion and activism, there is a need to explore how the nature of online interactions differs from offline political engagement and what implications this has for political behavior. Lee (2021) pointed out the potential for social media to enhance political awareness, yet the study did not sufficiently address how different types of content (e.g., text, video, memes) might variably impact political attitudes. Brown (2023) noted the correlation between heavy social media use and increased political polarization but did not consider the role of social media literacy in mitigating these effects. Nguyen (2021) focused on the influence of social media influencers but did not investigate the long-term impacts of this influence on political engagement and opinion stability.

Contextual Gaps: Contextual gaps also exist, particularly regarding the diverse environments in which young adults consume social media. Garcia (2018) explored the influence of social media during election periods, providing valuable insights into short-term impacts, yet there is limited understanding of how these influences play out in non-election periods or during political crises. Patel (2022) assessed the role of social media in rural regions, identifying disparities in engagement and ideological formation, but further research is needed to understand the socio-economic and cultural factors that contribute to these differences. Additionally, Davis (2020) and Lee (2021) primarily focused on college students and urban youth, respectively, leaving a gap in knowledge about how young adults who are not in higher education or those living in suburban areas engage with political content on social media. Brown's (2023) study on political polarization did not consider the role of local political climates or regional issues, which could influence how social media affects political opinions.

Geographical Gaps: Geographically, there is a notable concentration of research in specific regions, predominantly in Western contexts. Smith and Johnson (2019) and Davis (2020) conducted their studies in the United States, while Lee (2021) focused on urban areas, likely in a similar context. Garcia's (2018) research, although comprehensive, also appears to be centered in a Western context during election periods. Patel (2022) provided a valuable comparison between urban and rural areas but did not extend this comparison to different countries or continents. The studies by Brown (2023) and Nguyen (2021) further emphasize Western perspectives, neglecting how social media influences political opinions among young adults in non-Western countries. There is a need for research in diverse geographical contexts, including developing countries and regions with different political systems, to understand the global applicability of these findings and to identify unique regional dynamics that might influence the role of social media in shaping political opinions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The role of social media in shaping political opinion among young adults is profound and multifaceted. As demonstrated by recent empirical studies, social media platforms significantly influence political knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. They serve as primary news sources, venues for political discussion, and catalysts for political participation. However, the impact of social media is not entirely positive. The prevalence of echo chambers and algorithm-driven content can reinforce pre-existing beliefs, contributing to political polarization and the spread of misinformation. Furthermore, the role of social media influencers introduces both opportunities for increased political engagement and risks related to the dissemination of biased or inaccurate information.

Despite these challenges, social media remains a powerful tool for political mobilization and awareness among young adults. It has the potential to democratize information and foster active citizenship. To harness this potential, it is crucial to enhance digital literacy, promote critical thinking, and ensure transparency and accountability in social media practices. Future research should address the identified conceptual, contextual, and geographical gaps to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the global and nuanced impacts of social media on young adults' political opinions. By doing so, we can better navigate the complexities of the digital age and foster a more informed and engaged youth electorate.

Recommendations

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

Future research should incorporate the unique dynamics of social media, such as algorithmic filtering and echo chambers, into existing political communication theories. This will provide a more accurate framework for understanding how digital platforms influence political opinion formation. There is a need to delve deeper into the psychological mechanisms that make young adults susceptible to social media influence. Theories from psychology and behavioral economics can be integrated into political communication models to better explain the persuasive power of social media content.

Practice

Educational institutions and organizations should implement comprehensive digital literacy programs that equip young adults with the skills to critically evaluate information encountered on social media. This includes understanding algorithms, recognizing biases, and identifying misinformation. Social media companies should be encouraged to design algorithms that prioritize diverse viewpoints and reduce the prevalence of echo chambers. This can help users encounter a wider range of political perspectives, fostering a more balanced and informed political discourse. Influencers play a significant role in shaping political opinions. Therefore, it is essential to establish guidelines and practices that promote transparency in influencer content, including clear disclosures of sponsorships and the sources of their information.

Policy

Governments should enact policies that regulate political advertising on social media to ensure transparency and prevent the spread of misinformation. This could include mandatory disclosures

about the funding sources and targeted demographics of political ads. Policymakers should advocate for the inclusion of media literacy in school curricula to prepare young adults to navigate the complex media landscape. This education should focus on critical thinking, the evaluation of sources, and the understanding of media's role in society. Governments and academic institutions should provide funding and support for research into the impacts of social media on political opinion. This includes studying the effects in diverse geographical and socio-economic contexts to develop well-rounded policies and interventions.

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