

ENHANCING YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA EXPOSURE: AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY

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Abstract. This theoretical paper discovers the enhancement of youth political participation through social media platforms, with a specific focus on the Social Exchange Theory (SET). The study emphasizes how citizens leverage social media to strengthen their political engagement, while SET underscores the significance of relational networks in fostering collective action and social trust among youth. Though, the practical application of SET differs across diverse contexts, influenced by factors such as culture and societal structures, this paper investigates into the foundational principles of SET, offering a nuanced understanding of youth participation dynamics in political contexts, particularly within high power-distance cultures like Nigeria. The discussion examines how extended social exchanges can empower citizens' voices while strengthening approaches to engage youth in the political process, it also examines the barriers to youth political participation in Nigeria, including corporate politics, hierarchical systems, centralized leadership, and cultural disparities ingrained in power distance. To address these challenges, the paper recommends for further research on power dynamics and hierarchies within political systems. Additionally, it highlights the potential of social exchange mechanisms to mitigate the effects of arbitrary political power, guaranteeing that youth participation realizes its intended goals of inclusivity, representation, and impact.

Keywords: *youth, political participation, social media, social exchange*

Introduction

In recent years, the exponential development of social media platforms has significantly transformed political communication and participation, particularly in regions where a large portion of the population is under 25 years old. Social media has become an essential tool for political engagement and discourse (Sasu, 2024). However, along with the benefits of increased engagement, there are growing concerns about the proliferation of fake news on these platforms and its potential impact on youth political participation (Mittal and Bansal, 2024; Yang et al., 2024). Given that participation is fundamental to the functioning of any community; effective youth political participation plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration and enabling inclusive decision-making processes (Bwire, 2024; Eze et al., 2024). This participation forms the foundation for building trust, cooperation, and a shared understanding, ensuring that the voices of diverse groups are heard and considered. As technology continues to reshape traditional political systems, youth political participation must evolve to remain relevant. The emergence of digital platforms presents both new opportunities for engagement and challenges in keeping up with the rapid pace of change in social media dynamics. To remain agile and responsive to societal needs, youth must diversify and expand their social exchange networks, embracing innovative methods of political involvement while nurturing collaborative partnerships both online and offline. In doing so, youth political participation becomes the bridge that connects leadership with the broader community,

driving collective progress and ensuring that communities work together in pursuit of common goals (Omweri, 2024; Plantinga et al., 2024; Park, 2023).

Social media platforms have become crucial tools for enhancing youth political participation by providing spaces for dialogue, mobilization, and advocacy. Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok enable young people to express their opinions, share political content, and connect with like-minded individuals on a global scale. Studies show that youth are increasingly using these digital tools to engage in discussions about societal issues and influence decision-making processes (Jacob and Agarwal, 2024; Elwadh, 2024; Owunna et al., 2022). Unlike traditional forms of political engagement, social media offers a low-barrier entry point, making it accessible to diverse youth demographics who may otherwise feel disconnected from conventional political structures. These platforms foster activism by allowing young users to organize campaigns, share petitions, and participate in protests, often resulting in tangible political and social change. Movements like FridaysForFuture and EndSARS demonstrate how youth can leverage these platforms to raise awareness and mobilize global support for urgent issues. Similarly, study by Alodat et al. (2023), suggests that such activities blur the lines between formal and informal participation, redefined what it means to be politically active in the digital age. The immediacy and wide reach of social media amplify the voices of marginalized groups, making it a powerful tool for democratizing political engagement and ensuring that youth are heard in global political discourse.

While social media has become a powerful tool for political participation, it also presents several challenges. The prevalence of misinformation, echo chambers, and performative activism can undermine the effectiveness of genuine efforts and hinder productive discourse. Despite these drawbacks, studies suggest that when used critically, social media can empower youth to take active roles in shaping their communities and influencing public policy (Lee, 2024). By offering a dynamic and interactive environment, social media has transformed how young people engage with politics, fostering a more inclusive and participatory political culture. In Nigeria, Facebook has emerged as a central platform for political engagement among youth. With the rapid growth of internet access, young Nigerians are increasingly turning to online platforms to express their political views, mobilize for action, and participate in civic discourse (Acholonu and Agha, 2022). Nigerian youth, who represent a significant portion of the population, use Facebook not only for social interaction but also for engaging in political discussions, sharing news, and influencing public opinion (Mustapha et al., 2023). According to Statista Web Portal (2024), there are over 38 million Facebook users in Nigeria, with a large proportion falling within the age range of 18 to 34 years, the core demographic of Nigerian youth.

Social media, particularly Facebook, offers Nigerian youth a powerful platform to voice their concerns about governance, electoral processes, and social issues. Studies have shown that young Nigerians use Facebook to discuss political matters, organize protests, and engage with political leaders (Dambo et al., 2022; Uwalaka, 2021; Omotayo and Folorunso, 2020). The hashtag-driven activism of movements like the 2020 EndSARS protest, which highlighted police brutality in Nigeria, exemplifies how Facebook and other social media platforms can serve as instruments for youth-led political engagement. However, Facebook's role in Nigerian politics is dual while it serves as a platform for civic engagement, it is also used for political manipulation. On the positive side, Facebook provides a space where Nigerian youth can discuss national

issues, advocate for change, and connect with political actors. Through online discussions, information sharing, and live broadcasts, young people have shaped political discourse and held leaders accountable. This trend was particularly evident during the EndSARS protests, where social media became a critical tool for mobilization and raising awareness about police brutality. While these platforms have empowered young Nigerians to engage politically, they also pose risks, as they can be exploited for manipulating public opinion and spreading misinformation. Thus, balancing the empowering potential of social media with measures to combat its negative influence is crucial for fostering a healthier political environment in Nigeria.

Social media, particularly Facebook, has empowered Nigerian youth to organize demonstrations, share real-time updates, and document incidents of violence and misconduct, thereby increasing visibility and accountability (Akeusola, 2023). This democratic potential has fueled a new wave of civic participation, enabling youth to bypass traditional media and directly engage with politicians and peers (Halim et al., 2021). For example, during elections, Facebook has played a crucial role in mobilizing voters, educating the electorate about their civic responsibilities, and promoting transparency in the electoral process (Aideloje et al., 2024; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2021). Through active participation in discussions, information sharing, and live broadcasts, Nigerian youth have effectively leveraged social media to amplify their voices and demand accountability. This underscores the transformative role of digital platforms in shaping political discourse and fostering civic engagement, making social media a powerful tool for youth-driven political participation and the advancement of democratic ideals.

Background

The spread of fake news on social media, particularly Facebook, has become a critical issue, demanding urgent attention. In Nigeria, this challenge is especially pronounced in the political arena, where misinformation has significantly influenced youth political participation (Apuke and Omar, 2021). Fake news has the power to shape public opinion, influence voter behavior, and ultimately impact electoral outcomes, posing a serious threat to the integrity of the democratic process (Obasi, 2024). Given that youth play a pivotal role in Nigeria's democracy, the spread of misinformation is particularly concerning. With over 70% of the population under the age of 30 (Mobolaji and Akinyemi, 2022), young people constitute a significant portion of the electorate. However, exposure to fake news distorts political discourse and undermines informed decision-making among this critical demographic. The growing influence of misinformation underscores the urgent need for media literacy programs and fact-checking initiatives to equip young voters with the tools to critically evaluate political information. Addressing this issue is essential to fostering a more informed and engaged electorate, ensuring that youth participation remains a driving force for democratic progress in Nigeria.

Results and Discussion

The dual role of social media in Nigeria political landscape

Social media has become a dominant platform in Nigeria, serving both as a catalyst for political engagement and a vehicle for misinformation (Benaiah and Osuntoki,

2024). On one hand, it has amplified political discourse and increased civic participation, empowering citizens to engage more actively in democratic processes. On the other, it has facilitated the rapid spread of false information, undermining informed decision-making and eroding trust in democratic institutions. This dual role underscores both the opportunities and challenges that social media presents in shaping Nigeria's political landscape. The impact of misinformation was particularly evident during Nigeria's 2019 general elections, when fake news flooded social media platforms (Abdulazeez et al., 2021). Fabricated stories, manipulated images, and misleading headlines circulated widely, especially on Facebook, influencing public perception and polarizing voters along ethnic and religious lines. One of the most striking examples was the false claim that then-President Muhammadu Buhari had died and been replaced by a body double from Sudan. This baseless rumor spread so widely that the Nigerian presidency was forced to issue an official denial (The Guardian Web Portal, 2018). Such incidents illustrate how misinformation can divert attention from substantive political issues, create unnecessary public confusion, and weaken democratic engagement. To address these challenges, it is crucial to strengthen media literacy efforts and implement fact-checking initiatives that equip citizens with the skills to discern reliable information from falsehoods. By doing so, Nigeria can harness the benefits of social media while mitigating its risks, ensuring a more informed and engaged electorate in the democratic process.

The occurrence of misinformation underscores the need for proactive measures to counter its spread, such as promoting media literacy and fact-checking initiatives. As social media continues to shape Nigeria's political discourse, ensuring its responsible use is crucial to fostering a more informed and engaged electorate. By addressing the challenges posed by fake news, Nigeria can harness the full potential of social media as a catalyst for democratic progress. The impact of fake news on youth political participation is both profound and multifaceted. Young people, who increasingly rely on social media as their primary source of news and political information, are particularly vulnerable to misinformation. This susceptibility can significantly distort their perceptions of political candidates, parties, and policies, often shaping their political views based on falsehoods rather than facts (Loos and Nijenhuis, 2020a). The constant exposure to misleading narratives creates an environment where misinformation thrives, directly influencing how young people engage with political discourse and decision-making processes. The costs of exposure to fake news go beyond distorted perceptions, leading to political apathy, disillusionment, and even the spread of extremist views (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021; Schackmuth, 2018). These effects are particularly concerning in Nigeria, where youth political participation is essential for democratic progress. Repeated exposure to false or sensationalist content erodes trust in the political system, creating a cycle of disengagement and cynicism. This disconnection weakens the development of informed and active citizens, ultimately undermining participatory democracy. A study by Dibia and Nwachukwu (2023) highlights the tangible impact of fake news on Nigerian youth, revealing a strong correlation between misinformation on social media and declining trust in political institutions. The study also found that young people who frequently encountered fake news were less likely to vote or engage in civic activities. These findings underscore the urgent need for strategies to combat misinformation, such as enhancing digital literacy and promoting reliable information sources. Addressing this challenge is crucial to ensuring that social

media serves as a tool for empowerment rather than disillusionment, preserving its role in fostering an engaged and informed electorate.

The spread of fake news on social media has been closely linked to heightened political tensions and violence in Nigeria, especially during election periods (Ogbodo, 2021; Inobemhe et al., 2020). As a platform with extensive reach, Facebook serves as a double-edged sword while it facilitates political engagement, it also amplifies false information, deepening existing divisions. In the lead-up to the 2023 general elections, several fake news stories emerged, falsely accusing political opponents of inciting violence or engaging in corruption. These fabricated narratives spread rapidly, fueling rivalries and escalating tensions between opposing groups (Esimokha and Mustapha, 2023). However, the consequences of misinformation were not limited to online spaces. False allegations and sensationalized claims triggered real-world reactions, sparking protests and violent clashes between political supporters, disrupting public order, and threatening the democratic process. These incidents demonstrate how fake news extends beyond mere misinformation to become a catalyst for conflict, undermining trust and stability in a politically charged environment. The ability of digital platforms to influence both political discourse and societal behavior highlights the urgent need for effective measures to curb the spread of misinformation, ensuring that social media strengthens rather than destabilizes democratic institutions.

Bridging the gap challenges and opportunities in Nigerian youth political participation

Nigerian youth face persistent obstacles in their quest for meaningful political participation. The political system, shaped by hierarchical structures and centralized decision-making, often restricts youth engagement, leaving them marginalized and disconnected from the processes that shape their future. This structural exclusion deepens existing disparities, creating a widening chasm between young people and the political arena. A major factor driving this divide is Nigeria's cultural power distance, which reinforces elitism and limits opportunities for youth involvement. Political influence remains concentrated among elites, while young voices are overlooked in key decision-making processes. In this context, youth political participation symbolizes hope and progress, yet its realization remains uneven and elusive. Political efforts in Nigeria often prioritize external visibility, focusing on societal appeal and youth representation rather than genuine inclusion. In this fervent pursuit of recognition, the voices of youth the very individuals who drive innovation and productivity are muted. Their contributions are undervalued, and their potential remains untapped. Bridging this divide requires a deliberate commitment to inclusivity. It is crucial to amplify youth voices, reimagine political structures, and create spaces where young people can actively shape policies and governance. Only by addressing these systemic barriers can Nigeria build a more equitable and representative democracy, ensuring that youth are not just participants but drivers of political transformation.

Social media has proven to be a powerful tool for enhancing freedom of expression, but it also acts as a vehicle for spreading disinformation, fostering polarization, and encouraging hate speech. This study aims to explore the extent to which Nigerian youth encounter fake news on Facebook, and how it influences their perceptions of political candidates and issues, as well as their subsequent participation in politics. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, particularly among Nigerian youth, who represent a significant portion of the population and are highly active on social

media. Enhancing digital literacy is crucial to equipping young people with the tools to critically assess online content and identify misinformation. Furthermore, promoting fact-checking initiatives and fostering collaborations between tech companies and civil society organizations can help mitigate the spread of fake news. By tackling the root causes of misinformation and addressing its effects, Nigeria can reduce the risks posed by fake news and cultivate a more informed, resilient electorate. Only by consolidating the voices of youth and key stakeholders can the Nigerian political system hope to bridge the gap in youth participation and chart a path towards national development.

Barriers to youth political participation

Youth political participation is crucial for fostering democratic governance and ensuring intergenerational equity in decision-making, as it enables young people to have a voice in shaping the policies that affect their future (Ajobi et al., 2024). In Nigeria, however, numerous barriers hinder young people's ability to actively engage in political processes, with these challenges rooted in structural, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Structural barriers include the dominance of older political elites, exclusionary decision-making processes, and limited access to political platforms that marginalize the youth (Agbaje and Adejumobi, 2020). These obstacles contribute to the political systemic gap, which is widening due to the lack of youth-friendly policies, and limited representation of young people in political institutions. This systematic gap is characterized by significant disparities in youth participation, where youth are not only underrepresented in leadership positions but are also often excluded from the policy-making processes that directly impact their lives. In addition to these structural barriers, cultural norms and societal perceptions play a crucial role in limiting youth involvement. Traditional values that prioritize respect for elders and power distance between the younger and older generations create a generational bias that hinders the inclusion of youth in political discourse (Ojo, 2020; Akeem, 2019). Moreover, the socio-economic factors, such as high campaign costs, limited access to resources, and financial barriers to running for office, exacerbate the difficulties faced by young people in entering the political arena (Akpan and Udoh, 2022). Together, these challenges create a multi-layered system of exclusion that perpetuates the disempowerment of youth in Nigeria, leaving them disconnected from the political processes that directly affect their future. Addressing these barriers is critical in narrowing the political gap and empowering youth to play an active role in Nigeria's political landscape.

Structural barriers

Structural impediments pose a significant barrier to youth political participation in Nigeria, deeply embedded in the country's political system. One of the primary challenges is the dominance of corporate politics and the centralized decision-making processes, which often leave young people marginalized from critical political spaces (Agbaje and Adejumobi, 2020). The political parties, which are key gateways to formal participation, operate under hierarchical structures that prioritize the interests of older political elites, sidelining the voices and aspirations of the youth (Egwu, 2021). This centralization of power consolidates decision-making in the hands of a few, making it difficult for young people to gain traction or visibility within these structures. Furthermore, the high costs associated with political engagement, including exorbitant nomination fees and campaign expenses, create insurmountable barriers for young

aspirants. These financial constraints mean that only those with substantial resources or elite backing can realistically pursue political office (Akpan and Udoh, 2022). Although the passage of the "Not Too Young to Run" law in 2018 was a significant step towards addressing youth inclusion in politics, it has not fully resolved these systemic challenges. Youth candidates continue to face financial and institutional constraints, preventing them from fully participating in the political arena. The law may have lowered the legal age for political candidacy, but without addressing the deeper structural inequalities, it remains insufficient in ensuring that youth have equal access to political opportunities. As a result, these structural impediments continue to restrict young people's potential to actively engage in and shape Nigeria's political future.

Cultural and social norms

Cultural norms and societal perceptions deeply influence youth political participation, often sidelining young people in political processes. The country's political culture tends to view youth as inexperienced and incapable of holding leadership roles, reinforcing the idea that leadership is a domain reserved for older, more seasoned individuals (Ojo, 2020). This bias is further compounded by power distance, a cultural norm that enforces a clear divide between the elite and ordinary citizens, especially young people (Akeem, 2019). Within this framework, the deference to elders, which is an integral part of Nigerian tradition, often results in young people being excluded from decision-making processes, as their voices are seen as less valuable or less credible. As a result, young Nigerians are frequently marginalized in formal governance structures, which perpetuates a sense of disillusionment and apathy among the youth (Nwankwo and Eke, 2022). Without significant youth representation or involvement in political leadership, young people are left feeling disconnected from the political system, ultimately hindering their potential to contribute to the democratic process. This exclusion not only limits their ability to shape the policies that affect their futures but also perpetuates a cycle where youth remain disengaged and uninterested in political participation.

Socio-economic factors

Socio-economic challenges also play a critical role in hindering youth political participation. High unemployment rates and widespread poverty limit the ability of young people to engage in political activities or contest elections (Osifo and Adebayo, 2020). Many young Nigerians face daily struggles for economic survival, leaving little room for political involvement. Additionally, the spread of misinformation and fake news on social media platforms has further complicated political engagement by eroding trust in institutions and creating disillusionment among the youth (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021). These socio-economic barriers are compounded by the lack of targeted policies and programs to empower young people and integrate them into the political sphere. The empirical evidence highlights that youth political participation in Nigeria is hindered by a complex interplay of structural, cultural, and socio-economic factors. Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach, including reforms to political party structures, promotion of inclusive policies, and targeted programs to empower young people. Additionally, fostering a culture of trust and inclusivity through civic education and youth-oriented initiatives will be essential in overcoming the obstacles to youth political engagement in Nigeria.

Theoretical underpinning

Social Exchange Theory (SET) offers a robust framework for understanding the relational dynamics that govern social interactions and communication among individuals. Primarily conceptualized by Homans (2016) and further developed by Blau (2017), SET posits that social relationships are built upon reciprocal exchanges, where individuals assess the benefits and costs of their interactions. These exchanges are not purely economic but are deeply embedded in social structures that foster cooperation, trust, and mutual benefit. A crucial aspect of SET is its emphasis on the role of social networks in facilitating collective action and strengthening social trust (Yamao, 2024; Ahmad et al., 2023). Through repeated interactions within these networks, individuals cultivate relationships based on trust and reciprocity, which in turn enhance social cohesion and group solidarity. This process aligns closely with the concept of social capital, which Putnam (2000) defines as the collective value derived from interpersonal connections. Social capital is composed of three key elements: trust, norms and shared values, and reciprocity (Marquina et al., 2024; Ng, 2024; Gelderblom, 2018a). Trust serves as the foundation for meaningful exchanges, reducing uncertainty and fostering long-term cooperation. Norms and shared values establish behavioral expectations, ensuring that interactions align with collective goals. Reciprocity, the principle that individuals return benefits received, reinforces ongoing social interactions, leading to stable and mutually beneficial relationships. When these elements are present, social capital enables individuals and groups to collaborate effectively, thereby enhancing community engagement and promoting shared objectives (Ayop and Ishak, 2024; Elliott and Hollingsworth, 2023; Lansing et al., 2023; Putnam, 2000).

By integrating SET with the concept of social capital, it becomes evident that relational networks play a vital role in shaping social behavior, influencing cooperation, and sustaining trust-based interactions. This perspective highlights the interconnectedness of individual actions and broader societal structures, underscoring the importance of reciprocity and mutual exchange in fostering social cohesion and collective well-being. This theory suggests that people engage in social exchanges by seeking to maximize rewards while minimizing costs in their relationships (Zhang and Liu, 2024; Cropanzano et al., 2017). In the context of youth political participation, SET highlights how young people assess their involvement in political activities based on perceived benefits versus associated costs. In the context of youth political involvement, SET emphasizes the importance of perceived benefits in motivating participation. Young people are more likely to embrace new forms of political engagement when they perceive them as rewarding. These rewards may include increased efficiency in decision-making processes, reduced effort in accessing information or participating in political activities, and enhanced collaboration that fosters a sense of belonging and impact. For example, platforms that streamline voter registration or provide avenues for direct dialogue with policymakers align with SET's principle of reciprocal exchange, making political engagement more appealing to youth (Hyder et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2024).

Understanding these social exchange dynamics is essential for designing strategies that bridge the youth participation gap. Policymakers and stakeholders must create systems that prioritize inclusivity and demonstrate tangible benefits to young participants. Initiatives such as transparent governance practices, youth-targeted civic education programs, and accessible digital platforms can significantly enhance the

perceived value of political participation. By addressing the barriers and amplifying the rewards, SET offers a practical lens for fostering sustained youth engagement in democratic processes, ultimately strengthening their role as active contributors to societal progress (Gharib, 2024; Waheed et al., 2024; Blau, 2017). Trust in social institutions, media, and individuals within a network is central to the development of social capital. In the context of social media, users' trust in the platform or at least in the content they encounter directly influences their engagement and interactions (Li and Ergenc, 2024). Norms or shared values and beliefs within a community form the foundation for cooperative behavior. In social media spaces like social media, norms around sharing information, truthfulness, and engagement shape users' behavior (Blažošová et al., 2024). Reciprocity refers to the expectation of mutual benefit from interactions, and on social media, users often engage in reciprocal actions, such as sharing or liking content. These actions strengthen social bonds and reinforce shared narratives, including those based on misinformation (Ari et al., 2024; Rousseau, 2024).

Theoretical influence of social exchange theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) offers a significant theoretical contribution to understanding youth political participation by framing it as a dynamic exchange process, where youth engage in political activities based on the perceived benefits and costs involved in such engagement. The core principle of SET, that individuals seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs in their relationships, directly applies to political behavior. In the case of youth, their willingness to participate in political activities such as voting, activism, or civic engagement is largely driven by the perceived rewards they gain, such as increased political efficacy, influence over decisions, or social recognition (Brik, 2024; Onyewuchi et al., 2024). As such, understanding these dynamics provides valuable insights into how to foster and sustain youth participation in democratic processes. SET also underscores the importance of reciprocity in youth political engagement, when young people perceive that their political participation will lead to tangible benefits, such as greater representation or more responsive governance, they are more likely to actively engage (Lundberg and Abdelzadeh, 2024). Additionally, the social bonds formed through political involvement, whether within peer networks or broader social groups, create a reinforcing cycle of participation. As individuals contribute to the political process, they may also feel an increased sense of belonging and commitment to the community, further strengthening their participation (Eboigbe and Ajisebiyawo, 2024; Blau, 2017). This reciprocal relationship between political participation and personal benefits is essential in encouraging sustained engagement among youth.

Furthermore, SET highlights how social norms and shared values influence political behavior. Within youth communities, norms around participation, truthfulness in political discourse, and social responsibility shape how young people engage with political issues and systems (Zhang, 2022). The expectation that political participation can lead to both personal and collective rewards can drive youth to become more involved. In the digital age, where social media platforms play a pivotal role in political discourse, these norms often extend to online spaces. The sharing of political content, the creation of social movements, and the engagement in political conversations all become part of a broader social exchange that reinforces political engagement (Ahmed and Masood, 2024; Gelderblom, 2018b). By integrating Social Exchange Theory into the study of youth political participation, we gain a deeper understanding of the factors

that motivate or deter young people from engaging in political processes, the framework not only helps explain why youth may become politically active, but also suggests that for youth participation to thrive, political systems must present clear, reciprocal rewards and create an environment where trust and norms support sustained engagement.

Challenges of social exchange theory

While Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides valuable insights into understanding youth political participation, its application faces several challenges, particularly in the context of dynamic and evolving political landscapes, one of the primary challenges is the difficulty in accurately measuring the perceived rewards and costs that young people associate with political engagement. SET assumes that individuals can rationally assess and weigh these rewards and costs, but in practice, political participation often involves emotional, social, and ideological factors that may not always be easily quantifiable (Loos and Nijenhuis, 2020b). For instance, the political rewards that youth expect such as social recognition or influence over political decisions can be highly subjective, varying significantly across different youth groups or political contexts. This variability complicates the application of SET to youth political behavior. Another challenge is the overemphasis on individual-level decision-making, which overlooks broader systemic and structural factors that influence youth participation. SET, by focusing on the personal rewards and costs of engagement, tends to downplay the impact of social inequalities, political repression, and institutional barriers that may hinder youth from participating in the first place. For example, in many African countries, including Nigeria, youth may face challenges such as political disenfranchisement, lack of access to education, or economic hardship, which are not easily accounted for within the SET framework (Osifo and Adebayo, 2020). These structural barriers can create a situation where even if the perceived rewards of participation are high, the costs such as the risk of political violence or the need for significant financial resources to engage may still outweigh any potential benefits. Furthermore, SET's assumption of rational behavior may not always align with the complexities of youth political engagement, particularly in an era dominated by social media and digital activism. Youth today are often influenced by emotional responses, peer networks, and digital platforms where engagement is shaped by viral trends, emotions, and collective movements, rather than a clear, calculated exchange of benefits (Gelderblom, 2018b). This makes the rational cost-benefit analysis central to SET less applicable in understanding the motivations behind some forms of youth political participation, such as online activism or participation in grassroots movements.

Finally, the influence of misinformation and fake news on social media presents another challenge for SET when applied to youth political engagement. Misinformation often skews the perceived benefits of participation, leading youth to engage in political activities based on false or misleading information. The spread of fake news on social media platforms, such as Facebook, undermines the assumption that youth are making informed decisions about their political involvement (Madrid-Morales et al., 2021). This disruption in the information flow complicates the expected reciprocity in social exchanges, as the benefits young people perceive from political participation may be based on inaccurate or distorted perceptions of reality. Despite its utility in framing youth political participation as a social exchange, Social Exchange Theory faces several challenges when applied to this context. These challenges include the difficulty in measuring the subjective rewards and costs of political engagement, the neglect of

structural and systemic barriers, the oversimplification of youth behavior, and the influence of misinformation. To enhance the relevance of SET in the study of youth political participation, it is necessary to integrate these broader considerations, accounting for both individual and societal factors that shape youth engagement in politics.

Conclusion

The application of Social Exchange Theory (SET) in the Nigerian context underscores the need for adaptable and context-specific strategies to enhance youth political participation. Nigeria's geographical dispersion and cultural diversity make it both possible and difficult to include young people in the political process, a rich political environment is fostered by variety, but it also calls for customized strategies that speak to various populations and sociopolitical situations. Adopting tactics that recognize cultural quirks, encourage interactive discourse, and rectify power disparities within the political system is crucial to closing participation gaps and fostering meaningful involvement, the SET tenets place a strong emphasis on reciprocal advantages and trust, arguing that young people would participate more fully in politics when they see real benefits from it. Nigeria may create a more welcoming political atmosphere where young people perceive themselves to be proactive citizens rather than merely observers by incorporating SET into youthful participation initiatives, this strategy will improve the general efficacy of the democratic system in addition to bolstering young participation. Nigeria's success as a nation ultimately rests on how well its youth use social exchange mechanisms to ensure their place in determining the political direction of the nation.

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