



Social Media and Political Communication: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: The rise of social media comes with it the opportunity to influence political communication. This is because of the ease with which social media help political leaders to access their followers and the citizenry to participate in the political process. There is therefore the need to understand the direction of research regarding social media and political communication in Africa in relations to mostly the developed world.

Objective: Based on this, the researchers conduct a comparative analysis of how scholars have investigated the subject of political communication and social media use in Africa and other parts of the world.

Method: To do this, the researchers employed a systematic review which analysed empirical articles in the said area among African and non-African States from 2015 to 2024. The study was conducted qualitatively and quantitatively.

Findings: Findings show that, even though the phenomenon is developing faster in the Western world, it is also a growing occurrence in Sub-Saharan Africa with recent political activities and discourse being directed by social media. Also, results suggest that X and Facebook are the most used social media platforms by the reviewed articles. Four dominant themes emerge in the analysis, which are 'misinformation and deception,' 'bias and polarization,' 'political agenda setting and public opinion,' and 'political engagement and interactivity.' It is observed that the African studies project the positive use of social media in the political discourse more than the non-African studies which focus more on the negative impact.

Conclusion: The researchers conclude that social media use is fast becoming a major political communication tool globally with growing interest in Africa, which has capacity to influence the political discourse positively and negatively.

Unique Contribution: This study adds to studies in the area of social media use and political communication by observing how the phenomenon is unfolding in Africa as compared to other parts of the world, mostly the Western nations. This would help to place in scholarship the extent to which Africa is adapting the phenomenon viz-a-viz the state of adaptation by other countries of the world.

Key Recommendation: Having determined the extent of use of social media in Africa, the researchers recommend further studies into the use of social media and traditional communication in Africa. This would help to reveal the extent to which modern communication technology is influencing the ethnic discourse in the various societies of Africa.

Keywords: Political, Communication, Social Media, Misinformation, Participation



INTRODUCTION

The widespread nature of social media has revolutionized the way politicians communicate with citizens, making it an essential tool for political engagement (Chadwick 2006; Nwafor & Nwabuzor 2021). According to Pew Research Center (2015), there has been a massive increase in social media use in recent years, which now enables journalists to tap into the opinions of ordinary people by just entering a search string. Social media thereby represents the ideal means to gauge public opinion on policies and political positions, build community support for candidates running for public offices (Couldry & Hepp 2017; Zeng et al. 2010), and help citizens on how to perceive the political environment (Kubin & Christian 2021).

Central to this potency of social media is its ability to ensure interactivity between political players in the political sphere (Mamman, 2019; Passarella, 2017; Aligwe & Nwafor, 2016), giving birth to a new type of political interaction and transforming the nature of political communication (Papakyriakopoulos, 2020). This development therefore could impact democracy in a way. The advent of social media and social network sites has reopened the debate on whether the internet can become an uncoerced public sphere that can promote democracy, interactions, flow of information and ensure accountability (Benkler, 2006; Hermida, 2010; Jungherr et al., 2020; Khasawneh, 2013). Therefore, online activity is an active and purposeful strategy for managing the public sphere (Barberá 2020; Brown & Pearson 2018; Enjolras, et al. 2013; Hong & Nadler 2011; Mir, et al., 2022; Roberts 2018; Zeng et al. 2010)

Again, one can say that the politics of misinformation, enabled by social media technologies (Frau-Meigs, 2017; Nwafor et al., 2014), negatively affects democracy as it unfolds on the internet. Through tracking of a person's online behavior, algorithms of social media platforms can create profiles of users (Collier, 2015; Thaler & Sunstein, 2009; Zak, 2014). These profiles can be used to provide recommendations or pieces of information to specific target groups. As a result, propaganda and disinformation can influence voters' opinions and decisions (Ammicht-Quinn et al., 2018; Frau-Meigs, 2017; Mayer-Schoenberger & Cukier, 2013; Reisach, 2021; EC, 2022a).

Some systematic reviews have been done in the area of social media and political communication. For instance, Tan, et al. (2024) analyzed literature between 2010 and 2020 to offer an overview of research on social media use for political information. Hasan and Anuradha (2025), Okoro and Nwafor (2013) explore the role of social media platforms in facilitating political mobilization, highlighting their impact on information dissemination, grassroots organizing, public opinion formation, and the challenges they pose, such as misinformation and government surveillance. Omar and Ondimu (2024) present a literature review exploring the multifaceted impact of social media in transforming communication, social behaviour, political engagement, and cultural norms. Kubin and von Sikorskia (2021) assess the full breadth of research on media and polarization. Hussein, et al. (2023) employ bibliometric analysis to scrutinize the pivotal journals, institutions, and countries that promote social media and political discourse in Africa, and Nwachukwu (2017), Nwafor et al., (2013) explored the influence of social media on the political participation of the youth in Nigeria. These studies focused on one particular region without comparing studies between different regions of the world regarding the



use of social media for the promotion of political communication. This study, therefore, presents a comparative analysis of the use of social media between African and non-African States. This would help to unearth Africa's performance in the adaptation of social media as a political communication tool in relation to others.

The following research questions guided the:

RQ1: What are the bibliometric characteristics of studies on social media and political communication among African and non-African States?

RQ2: Which social media platforms were featured the most by the reviewed articles?

RQ3: What are the thematic focus areas on the study of social media and political communication?

METHOD

Study retrieval

This study adopted a systematic review methodology to examine research articles relevant to the contribution of social media to shaping political communication. A systematic search was conducted across two databases: ResearchGate and Academia.edu. The key phrases used in the search were political communication among African States, social media use among State actors, social media use and political interactions in Africa and other parts of the world, political information flow among African and other States, etc. The search was initiated in April 2024 and was limited to articles published on or before 31 March 2024. Additionally, the search was restricted to articles published in English. The search yielded a total of 143 articles (see Figure 1 in the next page).

Study selection process

Selection for articles was based on two inclusion criteria: (1) articles had to be peer reviewed, (2) articles had to be specifically focused on social media and impact on political communication in Africa and other parts of the world; the main focus of the paper had to be on how social media shapes (or relates to) political participation. Papers whose main research question, or primary analysis, were based on how media relates to political communication in the said regions were deemed as having a main focus on this topic. After coding all studies, we examined the studies both quantitatively and qualitatively. We conducted a thematic analysis of the articles in answering RQ 3.

Quantitative coding process

Two persons coded the papers on a variety of dimensions following a systematic codebook. The coders extensively read through each paper – coding a variety of categories: year of publication, country of sample, type of social media platform, and method used. Finally, we coded what type of political communication was studied (i.e. interactive or opinion sharing, etc.). After the coder read through all the articles, the first author randomly selected six articles and coded them on category 1 (e.g. Publication Year), then again randomly selected six articles and coded them on another dimension (e.g. Country of Sample), and so on. The first author coded approximately



6.38% of all codes. There was 93.94% agreement between the first author and the research assistant.

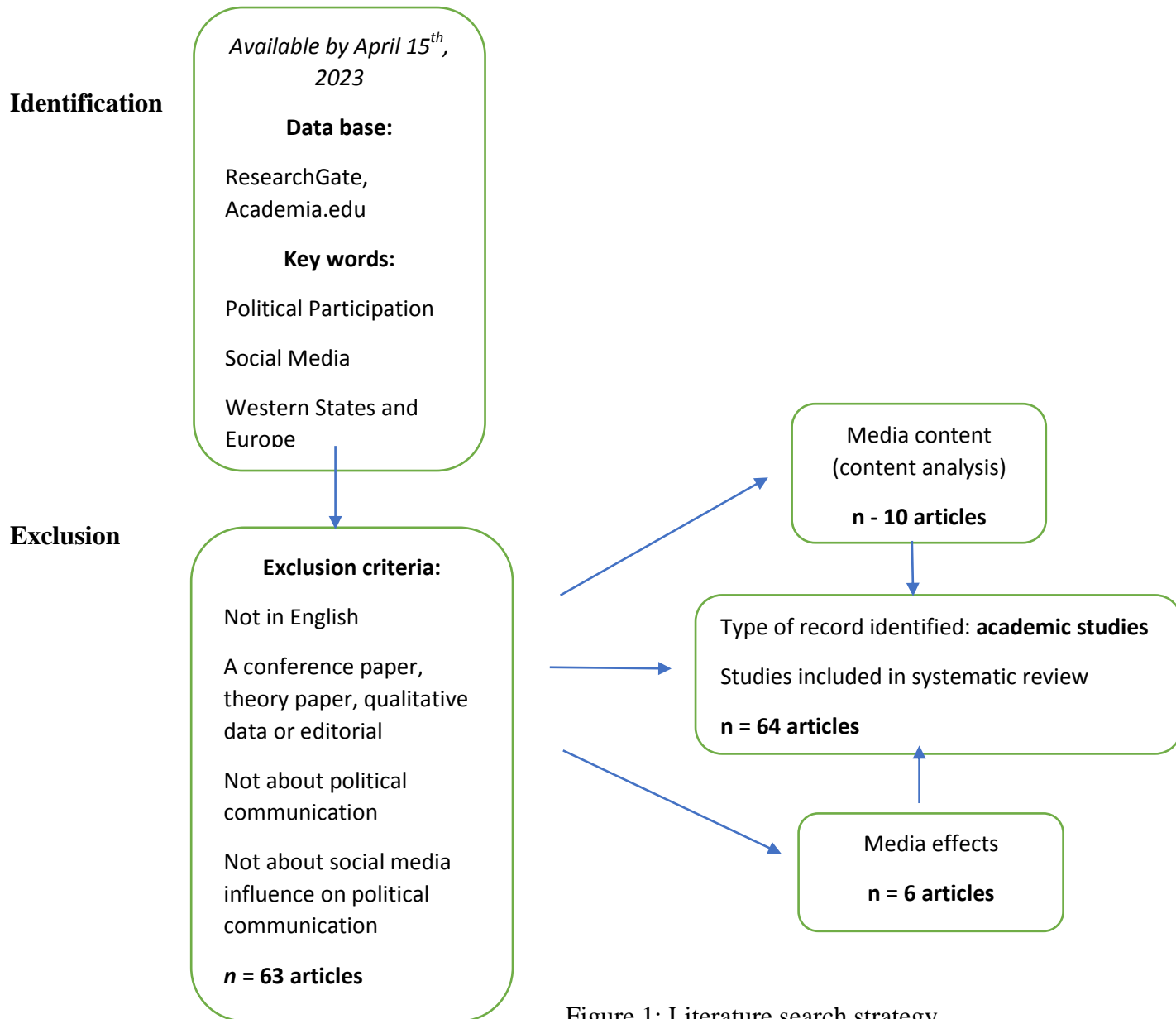


Figure 1: Literature search strategy



FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

RQ1: What are the bibliometric characteristics of studies on social media and political communication among African and non-African States?

Analysis of time information

From the data, it was revealed that the oldest relevant article was from 2015. Additionally, we observed an increase in publications from 2015 up to 2019, then it started dropping sharply until 2024, suggesting growing interest in the subject up to a point, and then a possible decline in interest by researchers to go into this phenomenon (see Table 2). These trends in the increasing number of publications studying the role of social media in political communication in the first part of the study period could be based on the inherent yearly growth rate of published research (Bornmann & Mutz, 2015) and an increasing interest in politics across many African and other societies.

Country of sample

Our analysis revealed a quite substantial emphasis on samples from the United States (N = 13) – a trend seen throughout social science research (Arnett, 2016). The second largest number of samples came from Germany (n = 8). The third largest is from Nigeria (n = 5). Additionally, there were many samples from European countries where there were increasing use of social media for political campaigns (e.g. Baxter & Marcella, 2012; Jungherr, 2012). These countries included Sweden (n = 4), Russia (n = 4), and Spain (n = 3). Also, some African countries produced articles on the subject of social media and political discourse (eg. Adamu, 2020; Yussif, et al., 2024) such as Ghana (n = 2), Zimbabwe (n = 1), Ethiopia (n = 1) (see Table 2). These results suggest a growing interest in the use of social media in political activities in Africa and other parts of the world.

Methods used by reviewed studies

Table 1: Distribution of methods

Method	Frequency
Survey	25
Unspecified	17
Content analysis	13
Discourse analysis	4
Experiment	3
Observation	3
Text analysis	2
Case Study	2
Interview	2
Geometric topic model	1
CDA	1
Audio-visual analysis	1
Total	64



From Table 1, it can be observed that quite a substantial number of the studies (18) used survey designed (eg. Boukes, 2019; Garrett, R. K., 2019) whilst 12 of the studies each used content analysis (eg. Gilardi, et al., 2021; Heidenreich, et al., 2020) or unspecified methods (eg. Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). Three of the studies used experiments (eg. Anderson et al., 2018), whilst one study each used Discourse Analysis (Bagga-Gupta & Rao, 2018), Geometrical topic model algorithm (Papakyriakopoulos, et al., 2019) and Text analysis (Just & Sterling, 2021). The largely used survey design suggests the mostly quantitative nature of the said studies which is so designed to reach as many people or posts as possible to understand the widespread nature of the kind of political communication among the selected populace.

Table 2: Distribution of publications by country of origin and year

Country	Frequency	Year	Frequency
USA	13	2024	1
Unspecified country	9	2023	1
Germany	8	2022	3
Nigeria	5	2021	7
Spain	4	2020	8
Sweden	4	2019	12
Russia	4	2018	14
Indonesia	3	2017	8
Italy	2	2016	6
Britain	2	2015	4
Pakistan	2		
Ghana	2		
Belgium	1		
The Netherlands	1		
Austria	1		
Finland	1		
Poland	1		
China	1		
Chile	1		
Philippine	1		
Zimbabwe	1		
Kenya	1		
Ethiopia	1		
Cote D'Ivoire	1		
Mali	1		
Total	72	Total	64

From Table 2, it can be realized that the years 2024 and 2023 recorded one study each whilst 2022 recorded three studies. Also, 2021 and 2020 had seven and eight studies respectively. 2019



and 2018 recorded the highest with 12 and 14 studies respectively whilst 2017 had eight studies. Year 2016 and 2015 recorded six and four studies respectively. This trend suggests an increasing number of publications from 2015 until it peaked in 2018, and then it started declining from 2019 to 2024.

RQ2: Which social media platforms were featured the most by the selected articles?

Social media platform	Frequency
X	32
Facebook	23
Not clearly stated	16
Instagram	6
WhatsApp	3
YouTube	3
Blogs	2
Yahoo Messenger	1
TikTok	1
Sputnik news	1
Total	75

From the analysis above, 32 studies used *X* with 23 using *Facebook*. Sixteen of the studies did not specify which of the networking sites they used with six studies using *Instagram*. Three studies used *YouTube* and two studies were conducted using blogs. One study each used *TikTok*, *Yahoo Messenger*, and *Sputnik news*. This suggests a very dominant use of *X* and *Facebook* by selected social media platforms in championing political communication.

RQ3: What are the thematic focus areas on the study of social media and political communication?

Qualitative analysis

The following analysis discussed the various themes discernible from the various articles whilst they discussed the subject of social media and political communication. The themes that emerged were ‘**misinformation and deception.**’ ‘bias and polarization,’ ‘political public agenda setting and public opinion,’ and ‘political engagement/interactivity.’



Table 4: Distribution of themes between African and non-African nations.

Themes	African	Non-African	Total
Misinformation and deception	3 (11.53%)	24 (42.86%)	27 (32.93%)
Bias and polarization	3 (11.53%)	10 (17.86%)	13 (15.85%)
Political public agenda setting and public opinion	8 (30.77%)	14 (25.00%)	22 (26.83%)
Political engagement / interactivity	12 (46.15%)	12 (21.43%)	24 (29.27%)
Total	26 (100%)	56 (100%)	82 (100%)

From the data above, it could be observed that the non-African researchers were far more pronounced on the theme of ‘misinformation and deception’ (24, 42.86%) far more than that of the African researchers (3, 11.53%). Again, research involving African countries were still low on the subject of social media serving as a bias and a polarization tool (3, 11.53%) with the non-African dwelling on it substantially (10, 17.86%). However, research involving African States were quite visible when it came to the issue of social media setting the public agenda and influencing public opinion (8, 30.77%) but was still a bit lower in terms of percentage in reference to non-African research in the said area (14, 25.00%). Finally, both African and non-African researchers were very pronounced when it came to the theme of political engagement and interactivity with both sets of studies presenting 12 articles each.

Themes used by the articles:

Misinformation and deception

This theme explores some of the ongoing activities on social media regarding the flow of political communication. 27 (32.93%) articles found that most of the communication that flows through various social media platforms were either misinformation (e.g. Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), purported to deceive citizens to follow a certain line of political thinking, or misperceptions (e.g. Garrett, 2019) that are either presented by politicians or through algorithm operations of these social media platforms. Again the theme observed that there were a lot of fake news (e.g. Vosoughi, et al. 2018) also targeting unsuspecting citizens by mostly politicians or their aids or ordinary social media users, leading to articles that clearly showed incivility (e.g. Goyanes, et al., 2021) on the internet through attacking opponents unfairly and resulting in a lot of manipulation (e.g. Reisach, 2021). Especially, manipulation is seen during electioneering campaigns (e.g. Steir, et al., 2018) where politicians use social media to influence voting patterns.

Bias and polarization

The next theme that was derived from the articles was ‘bias and polarization’ (13, 15.85%), which suggests that some of the posts were tilted towards promoting one political persuasion or the other without making efforts to stick to the bare facts. For example, Kubin and von Sikorski (2021), in assessing the role of social media on political communication, find that pro-attitudinal media exacerbates polarization. Also, Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2019) observe that hyperactive



users become opinion leaders, as well as having an agenda-setting effect, thus creating an alternate picture of public opinion.

Political public agenda setting and public opinion

This theme, presented by 22 (26.83%) articles, explores the subject of setting the agenda for public discussion and finding the opinion of citizens on most political issues, suggesting that social media has become a strong tool for establishing and gauging public opinion. Gilardi et al., (2021), for example, observed that not only do the traditional media set the agenda, but the social media agenda of parties and the social media agenda of politicians influence one another. Again, Bakers and Harder (2016) observed that X was regularly used as a representation of public opinion. Second, many items generalized these opinions to larger groups with strong emotions. Also, Yussif, et al. (2024) observed that Ghanaian political parties have a strong presence on social media.

Political engagement/interactivity

This theme, made up of 24 (29.27%) articles, suggests how social media have become a tool for the engagement between political leaders and their constituents. For example, Hamid, et al. (2021) find a more comprehensive model of the relationship of information quality of social media, reputation, trust, social media political marketing activities and political involvement of the millennial generation in Indonesia. Also Haro-de-Rosario, et al. (2016), in determining social media use and enhancement of citizen engagement with local government, find that Facebook is preferred to X as a means of participating in local government issues. Again, Bagga-Gupta and Rao (2018) highlighted the contrastive ways in which the dominating political parties and citizens use language in their communication whilst Madueke, et al. (2017) and Nanoh, et al, (2019) suggest that the use of social media has grossly affected the participation of individuals in the day to day political process.

CONCLUSION

In this systematic review, we gathered articles assessing how (social) media shape political communication. Based on our review, we made four observations. First, our quantitative analyses revealed an increase in research on political communication starting in 2015, then a sudden reduction after 2019. One explanation for this increasing interest is related to the growing ease of use of social media in political activities in Africa and mostly western countries. The decrease in research after 2019 could be as a result of a declining interest in research in the subject of social media and political communication since it may be gradually becoming a mainstream issue in politics.

Our quantitative analyses of the content of media highlighted an intense focus on analyzing X and Facebook for most of the studies. This review therefore helped to establish that both sites were instrumental in channeling out political communication that had both positive and negative impact on the communication process. Finally, our qualitative analysis reveal that there was an increasing number of research that find social media platforms as being used to propagate incivility due to the promotion of manipulation, and the spreading of fake news which misinforms the audience member and makes them have misperceptions about issues and political



actors. That notwithstanding, it was observed that quite fewer African studies dwelt on the negative use of social media in political communication with the non-African projecting it more. Irrespective of this negative picture portrayed by the researchers, some also reveal that most social media platforms have become means of promoting political engagement between political actors and their constituents because there was the readiness to interact on the platforms created by social media. There is also the suggestion that social media platforms have become the means through which public opinion is shaped and the agenda for public discussion is determined

The studies therefore suggest that, while social media platforms such as *X* and *Facebook* have increasingly been exploited by some political actors to pursue uncivil agendas, they have simultaneously emerged as powerful tools for fostering political engagement and enhancing democratic participation across many States. It can therefore be concluded that social media platforms have had both a negative and a positive impact on the nature of political communication as it continues to evolve among the said countries with the positive impact being more pronounced in Africa. In line with this revelation, it would be instrumental to also research into the use of social media as a mobilization factor among traditional African societies to understand how it is shaping traditional communication among the various ethnic communities in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Alexander Nyarko Yeboah conceived the study, including the design, Alexander Nyarko Yeboah and Charles Kofi Arthur collated the data, and Alexander Nyarko Yeboah and Bubune Malik handled the analysis and interpretation, while Alexander Nyarko Yeboah drafted the initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.



Data availability statement

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available and can be accessed using the link below:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/15_gtU6L9QJ6i57M70pFtYlczyuutBfON/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=106399827252917230477&rtpof=true&sd=true

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