

Social Media News Use and Gender Inequality in Online Political Engagement: A Three-Country African Perspective

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Saifuddin Ahmed, Nanyang Technological University

Dani Madrid-Morales, University of Houston



Social Media Use & Political Engagement



- Social media platforms have created new opportunities for political engagement; however, their actual impact on influencing gender inequality in engagement remains less explored.
- Political scientists have long observed that those sections of society which are more engaged in political affairs have an advantage in influencing political outcomes as compared to others (Norris, 2001; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).



Research Gaps



1. In focusing on high-income countries, **few studies have focused on gender as a potential factor in political inequality** (c.f. Valenzuela et al., 2016). Instead, studies of the mobilization-reinforcement framework have focused on age, education, income, and political interest as the stratifying factors affecting political inequality.
2. Also, in focusing on advanced, high-income democracies with well-understood challenges, is that **it is not clear how the findings explain how the remaining 85% of the world's population** uses social media for political engagement



Research Gaps



3. Most previous work has overlooked the role of **cognitive activities of social media users in structuring learning and participation**. Evidence suggests that social media use and its effects are not generalizable; they are dependent on how users process the information they encounter.
 - This cross-national comparative study recognizes the gaps mentioned above and **investigates the role of news use of social media in influencing gender inequality in online political engagement** across three African nations: Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa.





Online Political Engagement



Online Political Engagement

- We operationalize the political effect of social media in terms of online political engagement. There is ample empirical evidence suggesting a positive relationship between offline and online political engagement.
 - *H₁*: Electoral voting behavior is positively associated with online political engagement.
- Beyond voting, governments also control other forms of offline engagement. In many African countries, governments are known to ban protests, and security forces frequently respond violently to demonstrations (Brown, 2016).
 - *H₂*: Participatory intent is positively associated with online political engagement.





Gender-Inequality in Political Engagement



Gender & Political Engagement

- An engaged public is a key to democratic good (Verba, 1996). Consistent patterns of unequal engagement along prevailing lines of stratification, such as gender, are a threat not only to political voice of the marginalized but also to the strength of a democracy.
- Some studies suggest men are more engaged in online political activities than women (Strandberg, 2013; Vochocova et al., 2016). Others have found no stratification (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2015; Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012). Little research has been done in Africa.
 - H_3 : Men are more likely to be involved in online political engagement than women.





Media Use and Online Political Engagement



Media Use & Political Engagement

- The growing use of the Internet, and especially social media for political news purposes has heightened the scholarly investigation on its influence on participatory behavior of the citizens.
- In the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, some have argued that while social media avails the opportunity for citizens to share their opinions and engage in discussions, it does not translate into meaningful political engagement (Kamau, 2017; Mutsvairo & Sirks, 2015; Wakabi, 2017).
 - *RQ₁: How does a) social media b) online media c) print newspaper d) radio and e) television news use relate to online political engagement?*





Social Media: Reducing or Amplifying Gender-Inequality?



Social Media Use & Gender Inequality

- The widespread use of social media has rejuvenated hopes for a invigorated public sphere that can overcome political inequality.
 - The **mobilization thesis** argues that social media can empower the disengaged, because it lowers the costs of engagement and expands the means to participation (Xenos et al., 2014; Vaccari, & Valeriani, 2016).
 - Skeptics have proposed the **reinforcement thesis**, which suggests that social media will either replicate or even amplify offline inequalities since the online realm is not independent of offline power hierarchies (Gustaffson, 2012; Schlozman, Verba, & Brady, 2010).
 - *RQ2: Does social media use for news purposes amplify or reduce online engagement gaps between men and women?*





Education, Social Media Use, and Gender- Inequality



Education, Gender & Media Use

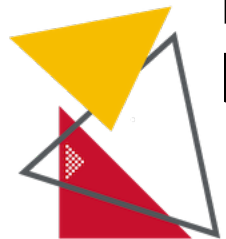
- The inconsistent findings in the mobilization-reinforcement literature demand more refined conceptualizations and analyses when examining the effect of social media use on participatory gaps.
- Previous research in the Global North has found that education plays a role in participatory behavior: those with higher levels of education are more engaged in politics. However, is still uncertain how education would interplay with the influence of social media on participatory gaps in the African context.
 - *RQ₃: How does education shape the role of the media news use (print newspaper, television, radio, and social media) in gender-related engagement gaps?*





Method

- The **2016 Pew Global Attitudes Spring Survey** was used to address the hypothesis and research questions. The data comprises responses from individuals in Kenya ($N = 1124$), Nigeria ($N = 1094$), and South Africa ($N = 1112$).
- We fitted **hierarchical regression models** to test the hypotheses and research questions for the three countries.
- Control variables were entered in the first block, followed by independent variables in the second block, and the two-way interaction to test the mobilizing role of social media in the third block.





Findings I

Table 2: Predicting online political engagement across three countries

	Online Political Engagement		
	Kenya	Nigeria	South Africa
Step 1			
Age	-.022	-.063*	-.131***
Education	.212***	.276***	.130***
Urbanity (Urban = 0)	.017	-.069*	.038
Financial difficulty	.013	.060*	.016
Household size	-.031	.019	.116***
R-sq (%)	4.9	9.3	4.9
Step 2			
Political action intention	.012	.084**	.096**
Voting	.040	.064*	.057*
Gender (Males = 1)	.070*	.020	.087**
Television news use	.012	.006	.003
Print newspaper use	.096**	.072*	.008
Radio news use	-.030	.032	.037
Online news use	.088*	.111*	.098*
Social media use	.194***	.236***	.148***
R-sq change (%)	9.1	11.2	6.5
Step 3			
Gender x social media use	-.004	.144*	.140*
R-sq change (%)	.01	.3	.3
Total R-sq (%)	13.9	20.9	11.7
N	1058	1015	1020

Notes: Urbanity and gender are dummy coded.

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; # $p < .10$

- The findings suggest support for *H1*, as **political action intention was positively associated with online engagement** in Nigeria and South Africa.
- For *H2*, **voting was found to be a statistically significant predictor only for Nigeria.**
- The **gender inequality findings (*H3*)** support the thesis that men were more likely to engage in online political activities.



Findings II

Table 2: Predicting online political engagement across three countries

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- It is inferred that **political action intention** is somewhat predictable of online engagement, but **voting behavior** is not a consistent predictor.
- Differences between males and females were not significant for Nigeria, but **ultimately reasonably consistent** with the expectation of this study (beta value for Nigeria, though insignificant, are in the expected direction).



Findings III

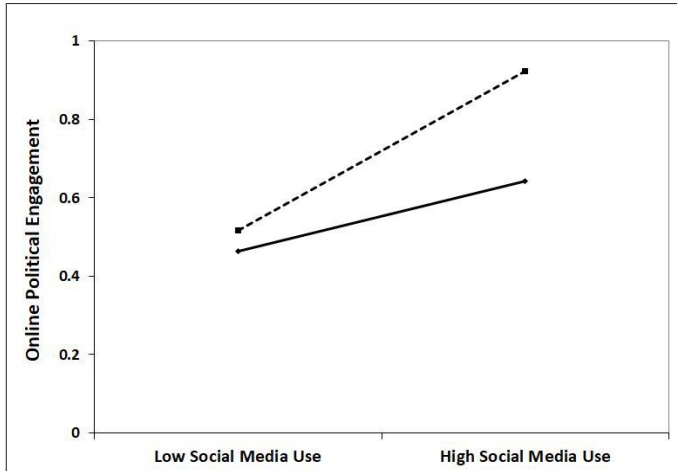
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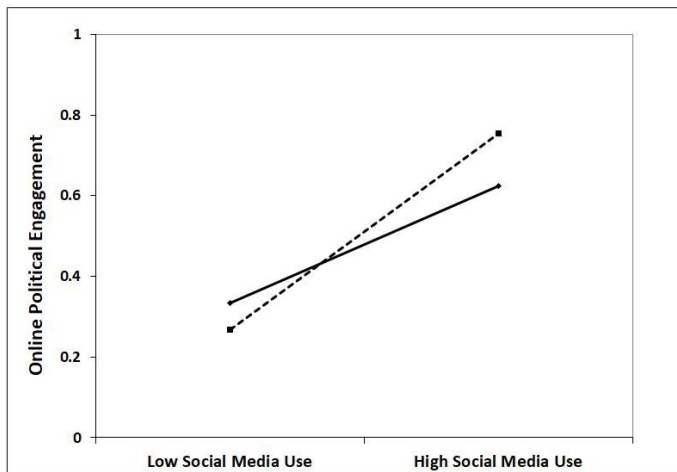
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- RQ1 concerned the role of news use across different media and its relationship with online engagement.
- The results show consistent support for **social media news use** and **online newspaper and blog use** to be positively associated with online engagement.
- The results are consistent with previous empirical research.

Findings IV



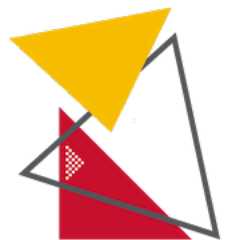
South Africa



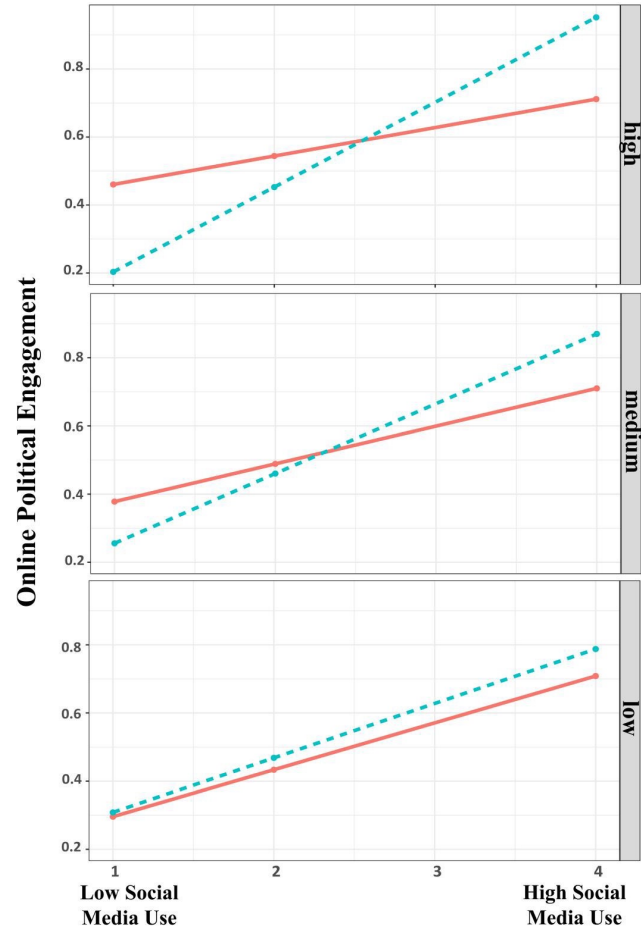
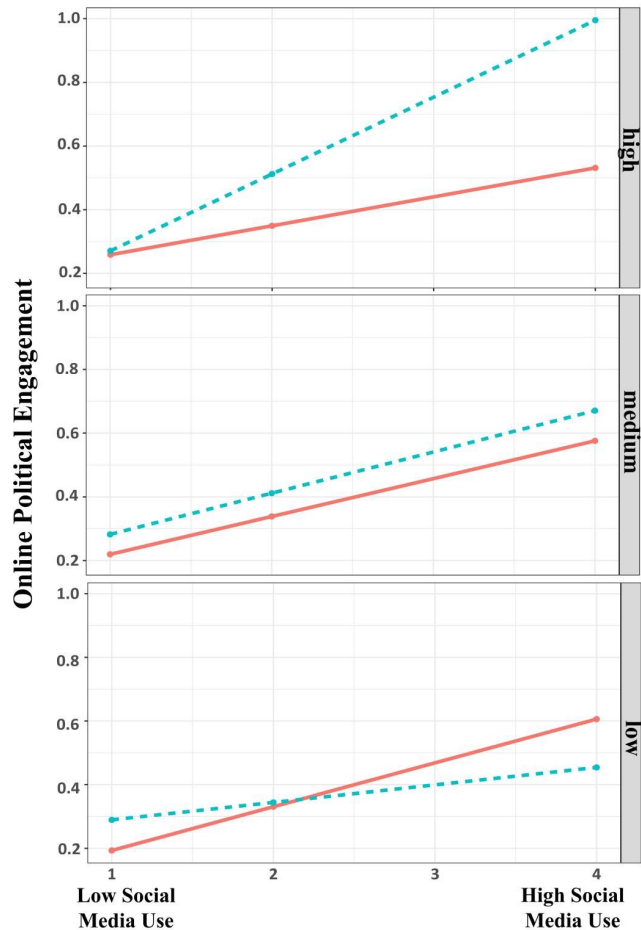
Nigeria

◆ Female
■ Male

- The two-way interaction between gender and social media news use (RQ_2) was found to be statistically significant for Nigeria and South Africa.
- At lower levels of social media use, the political engagement gaps between males and females are significantly less, whereas, at higher levels of social media use, the difference in the gaps are significantly more.



Findings V



- The three-way interaction between gender, social media news use, and education (RQ_3) was found to be statistically significant for Kenya and Nigeria.
- At lower levels of education, higher use of social media for news purposes is associated with higher levels of engagement for females than males, but this pattern reverses with an increase in education levels.

Discussion



- Our analysis confirms that gender-inequality exists in the studied contexts and use of online mediums (news websites, blogs, and social media) and print newspaper for informational purposes are beneficial for political engagement.
- The results suggest that higher use of social media for news purposes was associated with a greater participatory divide between men and women in Nigeria and South Africa.
- The findings of the last research question (RQ3) suggest that education as a moderating factor can reinforce the role of social media in gender driven participatory inequality.



Thank you!

sahmed@ntu.edu.sg

dmorales2@uh.edu