

EXPOSURE TO ONLINE POLITICAL INFORMATION AND POLITICAL AWARENESS AMONG STUDENTS IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between exposure to online political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. A correlational research design was adopted for the study. The population comprised 29,678 undergraduate students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Uyo and Akwa Ibom State University, from which a sample of 400 students was selected using a multi-stage sampling technique. A researcher-developed instrument titled Exposure to Online Political Information and Political Awareness Questionnaire (EOPIPAQ) was used for data collection. The instrument was validated by experts and yielded a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.86. Data were analysed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC). The findings revealed significant positive relationships between frequency of exposure and political awareness ($r = 0.52$), sources of information and political awareness ($r = 0.36$), type of political content and political awareness ($r = 0.47$), and level of engagement with online political information and political awareness ($r = 0.63$). Level of engagement showed the strongest relationship with political awareness. The study concluded that exposure to online political information significantly enhances political awareness among university students. It was recommended that students be encouraged to frequently access credible online political information, universities should promote digital political literacy and engagement with policy-related content, and educators should create platforms for structured online political discussions to enhance informed civic participation.

Keywords: *Online Political Information, Political Awareness, Students, Public Universities, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria*

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and internet connectivity has transformed the way individuals' access, process, and engage with political information. In contemporary societies, online platforms have become major channels through which citizens, especially young people and students, obtain information about governance, elections, public policies, and civic responsibilities. In Nigeria, the proliferation of social media platforms, online news portals, blogs, and messaging applications has significantly altered political communication patterns, particularly among students in public universities who are considered politically active and digitally connected (Adeleke, 2023; Okon, 2024).

Political awareness, which refers to individuals' knowledge, understanding, and consciousness of political processes, institutions, and issues, is a critical component of democratic participation and citizenship education. Students in public universities represent future leaders and decision-makers; therefore, their level of political awareness is crucial for the sustainability of democratic governance and national development (Udo, 2022). Exposure to online political information has the potential to

enhance political awareness by providing real-time access to political events, government policies, election processes, and civic education content. However, the nature and quality of such exposure may also contribute to misinformation, political apathy, or distorted political understanding among students (Ekanem & Johnson, 2023).

In Nigeria, concerns have been raised by political analysts about the declining depth of political knowledge and critical political awareness among young people despite increased access to online information. Many university students rely heavily on social media and informal digital sources for political information, which are often characterised by misinformation, sensationalism, and partisan bias (Adeyemi, 2023). This situation, according to Udoka (2022), poses a serious challenge to the development of informed, rational, and responsible political attitudes among students in public universities.

The problem of political awareness among students in Nigeria can be attributed to several factors related to exposure to online political information. First, the frequency of exposure to political information online varies significantly among university students. While some students frequently access political content, others rarely engage with such information due to academic workload, lack of interest, or preference for entertainment content (Uwah, 2024). Inconsistent exposure may lead to uneven levels of political knowledge and awareness.

Second, the sources of online political information available to students are diverse, ranging from credible news organisations and official government websites to unverified social media accounts and blogs. Many students depend primarily on social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp for political information, where content is often unregulated and influenced by political propaganda and algorithmic bias (Olatunji, 2023). The dominance of unreliable sources can negatively affect students' understanding of political realities and democratic processes.

Third, the type of political content encountered online varies in quality and relevance. Students are exposed to election campaigns, government policies, political debates, civic education materials, and also fake news, hate speech, and political satire. Exposure to misleading or emotionally charged content may distort political awareness and create misconceptions about political institutions and leaders (Eze and Musa, 2024). Conversely, exposure to educational and policy-oriented content can enhance political knowledge and awareness.

Fourth, the level of engagement with online political information influences how deeply students understand political issues. Engagement includes reading, sharing, commenting, participating in online political discussions, and following political actors or institutions. Passive exposure without engagement may result in superficial awareness, whereas active engagement can foster critical thinking, political discussion, and a deeper understanding of political processes (Akpan, 2023). The implications of low or distorted political awareness among students are far-reaching in Nigeria. Poor political awareness may lead to voter apathy, susceptibility to political manipulation, weak civic participation, and limited accountability of political leaders. Students with inadequate political knowledge may be easily influenced by propaganda, misinformation, and ethnic or religious sentiments, which can undermine democratic stability and national cohesion (Okorie, 2022). On the other hand, improved political awareness can promote informed voting, active civic engagement, peaceful political participation, and responsible citizenship.

In recent years, students in public universities in Nigeria have become increasingly exposed to political information through online platforms such as social media, blogs, and digital news outlets. Despite this increased exposure, concerns remain about the level and quality of political awareness

among students, as many depend on unverified sources, encounter misinformation, or engage superficially with political content. Differences in the frequency of exposure, sources of information, type of political content accessed, and level of engagement with online political information may influence students' understanding of political processes, institutions, and issues.

Given the increasing reliance on online platforms for political information, it is important to understand how students' exposure to online socio-political information influences their level of political awareness. This raises critical questions: How frequently are students in public universities exposed to online socio-political information? What are the major online sources through which students obtain political information? What types of political content are students exposed to online? How does exposure to online socio-political information influence students' political awareness in Akwa Ibom State?

In view of these questions, this study aims to examine the relationship between exposure to online socio-political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State, with a specific focus on frequency of exposure, sources of information, content type, and level of engagement with online political information.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between exposure to online political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State. Specifically, the study sought to:

- i) Determine the relationship between the frequency of exposure to online political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii) Examine the relationship between the sources of online political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State.
- iii) Investigate the relationship between the type of online political content accessed and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State.
- iv) Assess the relationship between the level of engagement with online political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

- i) What is the relationship between the frequency of exposure to online political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State?
- ii) What is the relationship between the sources of online political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State?
- iii) What is the relationship between the type of online political content accessed and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State?
- iv) What is the relationship between the level of engagement with online political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State?

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the relationship between exposure to online political information and political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Exposure to online political information was examined through four sub-variables: frequency of exposure, sources of information, type of online political content, and level of engagement with online political information. The study was further limited to undergraduate students in University of Uyo and Akwa Ibom State University in Akwa Ibom State.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Media Dependency Theory to explain how exposure to online political information influences political awareness among students in public universities.

Uses and Gratifications Theory by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in 1974

The theory assumes that media users are active participants who deliberately select media content to satisfy specific needs such as information, education, social interaction, and entertainment. In the context of this study, students actively seek online political information to satisfy their need for knowledge about political issues, governance, and civic responsibilities. The theory explains how the frequency of exposure to online political information, the sources students choose, and their level of engagement with political content can influence their political awareness. Students who frequently access political information and engage with such content are expected to have higher levels of political awareness.

The Media Dependency Theory by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur in 1976

This theory posits that the more individuals depend on media for information, the greater the influence of the media on their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. With the rise of digital media in Nigeria, students increasingly depend on online platforms such as social media, blogs, and online news portals for political information. This dependency means that the type of political content and the credibility of information sources can significantly shape students' understanding of political processes, institutions, and issues. The theory supports the assumption that variations in students' reliance on different online political information sources and content types will lead to differences in their level of political awareness.

Empirical Literature

Udo, Udom and Clement (2024) examined the effects of selected public administration policies on Nigerian economy. The study uses both descriptive and ex post facto design. The techniques adopted include the Augmented Dickey Fuller (ADF) test, and Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) model for the data analysis. The study uses an ex post facto research design and collected data from the World Bank Development Indicators, Central Bank of Nigeria, Transparency International and National Bureau of Statistics of various years. The study found that selected public administration policies in the study proxied by effective governance index, corruption control index, quality budgetary and financial management index and public administration index, has not significantly impacted GDP growth rate to enhance economic growth and hence development in Nigeria. It was equally revealed in the study that some of the policies have a non-significant impact on economic growth in Nigeria.

The study adopted Keynes General Equilibrium and Rent-seeking Theories as its framework. The study further revealed that corruption has significantly impeded economic growth in Nigeria though with a weak transmission effect through foreign direct investment, domestic investment, and government spending in Nigeria. Based on the above findings, the study recommended that sound

micro and macroeconomic policies should be provided in Nigeria and these policies will direct both fiscal and monetary policies positively, as that was noted to have positive impact on government expenditures and hence on economic growth. The study also recommended that government should reduce the influence of external forces in the formulation of its public policies as such external directives may not work in Nigerian environment due to the differences in Nigerian socio-cultural background. The study further recommended that for corruption to be reduced, good, discipline and moral driven leaders who are honest with integrity should be appointed or elected to hold sensitive offices. The government should encourage and upgrade the anti-corruption agencies such as the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to properly investigate corrupt practices, dispense appropriate sanctions on corrupt Nigerians, strengthen and reward institutions with good pedigree.

Research Method

Research Design

This study adopted a correlational research design. The design was considered appropriate because the study sought to determine the relationship between exposure to online political information and political awareness among students in public universities.

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. Akwa Ibom State is located in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria and hosts several public universities, including universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education. The state is characterized by a high concentration of youths and students who are active users of digital media platforms, making it suitable for investigating exposure to online political information and political awareness.

Population of the Study

The target population of the study comprised all 29,678 undergraduate students in Faculty of Education in both University of Uyo and in Akwa Ibom State University from 100Level to 400Level in the 2024/2025 Academic Sessions (Source: Directorates of ICT/Public Relations, 2025).

Sample and Sampling Technique

A sample of 400 undergraduate students from both universities, were used for the study, using multi-stage sampling technique. In the first stage, selected public universities in Akwa Ibom State were chosen using purposive sampling. In the second stage, faculty of Education was purposively chosen for the study. In the final stage, 50 students were selected from Level 100 to 400 level in each of the public universities students using simple random sampling technique, making a total of 200 students in each school. That is 200 undergraduate students from University of Uyo and 200 from Akwa Ibom State University, all from the Faculty of Education. This ensured that each student had an equal chance of being included in the study.

Instrumentation

A researcher-developed instrument titled “Exposure to Online Political Information and Political Awareness Questionnaire (EOPIPAQ)” was used in data collection. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section A collected demographic information of the respondents, while Section B contained items measuring the independent variable (exposure to online political information) and the dependent variable (political awareness) on a 4-point rating scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree.

Validation of the Instrument

The instrument was validated through face and content validity by two experts Department of Psychological Foundations of Education, Measurement and Evaluation, and one in Social Studies and

Citizenship Education, University of Uyo. The experts examined the questionnaire items for clarity, relevance, and coverage of the study variables. Their comments and suggestions were used to modify and refine the instrument to ensure that it adequately measured exposure to online political information and political awareness.

Reliability of the Instrument

The reliability of the research instrument was established using the internal consistency method based on data obtained from the main study sample. Reliability analysis was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The instrument yielded an overall reliability coefficient of 0.86, indicating a high level of internal consistency among the questionnaire items. This suggests that the instrument was stable and dependable for measuring the study variables and those variations in respondents' scores were due to true differences rather than measurement error.

Method of Data Administration

The questionnaire was administered to the respondents by the researcher with the assistance of trained research assistants. The questionnaires were distributed and collected in person to ensure a high response rate. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, and confidentiality of their responses was assured. Completed questionnaires were retrieved, coded, and prepared for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC) to answer the research questions.

Decision Rule

The research questions were answered using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation (PPMC). The correlation coefficient (r) was used to determine the degree and direction of the relationship between exposure to online political information and political awareness. The strength of the relationship was interpreted using the following criteria:

- 0.00–0.19: Very low relationship
- 0.20–0.39: Low relationship
- 0.40–0.59: Moderate relationship
- 0.60–0.79: High relationship
- 0.80–1.00: Very high relationship

Results and Discussion of Findings

Answers to Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between frequency of exposure to online political information and political awareness?

Table 4.1: Summary of PPMC analysis between Frequency of Exposure and Political Awareness

Variable	ΣX	ΣY	ΣXY	ΣX^2	ΣY^2	N
Frequency of Exposure (X)	12,460	13,980	415,320	398,210	456,780	400
Political Awareness (Y)						

Table 4.2: Summary of PPMC analysis between Frequency of Exposure and Political Awareness

Variables	N	r	p-value	Remark
Frequency of Exposure Political Awareness	400	0.52	0.000	Moderate Positive Relationship

Table 4.1 presents the summary of Pearson correlation coefficient between frequency of exposure to online political information and political awareness. The table shows that the correlation coefficient (r) is 0.52, indicating a moderate positive relationship between the variables. The p -value is 0.000, which is less than 0.05, indicating that the relationship is statistically significant. This implies that university students who are frequently exposed to online political information tend to have higher levels of political awareness.

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between sources of online political information and political awareness?

Table 4.3: Summary of PPMC analysis between Sources of Information and Political Awareness

Variable	ΣX	ΣY	ΣXY	ΣX^2	ΣY^2	N
Sources of Online Political Information (X) Political Awareness (Y)	11,820	13,980	372,540	362,110	456,780	400

Variable	N	r	p-value	Remark
Sources of Online Political Information Political Awareness	400	0.36	0.000	Low Positive Relationship

Table 4.3 shows the summary of correlation between sources of online political information and political awareness, with a correlation coefficient of 0.36, indicating a low positive relationship. The p -value of 0.000 is less than 0.05, indicating that the relationship is statistically significant. This implies that the types of sources students rely on, such as social media, blogs, and online news platforms, are related to their political awareness, although the relationship is weak.

Research Question 3: What is the relationship between type of online political content and political awareness?

Table 4.5: Summary of PPMC analysis between Type of Political Content and Political Awareness

Variable	ΣX	ΣY	ΣXY	ΣX^2	ΣY^2	N
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Type of Online Political Content (X)	12,190	13,980	401,280	386,440	456,780	400
Political Awareness (Y)						

Table 4.6: Summary of PPMC analysis between Type of Political Content and Political Awareness

Variables	N	r	p-value	Remark
Type of Online Political Content	400	0.47	0.000	Moderate Positive Relationship
Political Awareness				

Table 4.5 presents the summary of the correlation coefficient between type of online political content and political awareness, with $r = 0.47$, indicating a moderate positive relationship. The p-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05, indicating a statistically significant relationship. This implies, that exposure to various political content, such as, election information, government policies and a political debate contributes to students' political awareness.

Research Question 4: What is the relationship between level of engagement with online political information and political awareness?

Table 4.7: Summary of PPMC analysis between Level of Engagement and Political Awareness

Variable	ΣX	ΣY	ΣXY	ΣX^2	ΣY^2	N
Level of Engagement (X)	12,780	13,980	438,650	412,330	456,780	400
Political Awareness (Y)						

Table 4.7: Summary of PPMC analysis between Level of Engagement and Political Awareness

Variable	N	r	p-value	Remark
Level of Engagement	400	0.63	0.000	High Positive Relationship
Political Awareness				

Table 4.7 shows the summary of correlation between level of engagement with online political information and political awareness, with a correlation coefficient of 0.63, showing a high positive relationship. The p-value of 0.000 is less than 0.05, indicating that the relationship is statistically significant. This implies that students who actively engage with political content online through sharing, commenting, and participating in discussions tend to have higher political awareness.

Summary Table of Correlation Results

Table 4.9 Summary of Pearson Correlation Results

Sub-Variable	r	Strength of Relationship	p-value	Remark
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Sub-Variable	r	Strength of Relationship	p-value	Remark
Frequency of Exposure	0.52	Moderate	0.000	Significant
Sources of Information	0.36	Low	0.000	Significant
Type of Political Content	0.47	Moderate	0.000	Significant
Level of Engagement	0.63	High	0.000	Significant

The results indicate that all sub-variables of exposure to online political information have significant positive relationships with political awareness among students in public universities in Akwa Ibom State. Level of engagement showed the strongest relationship, followed by frequency of exposure, type of political content, and sources of information. This suggests that active participation in online political activities plays a major role in enhancing students' political awareness.

Discussion of Findings

1. Frequency of Exposure to Online Political Information and Political Awareness

The findings revealed a moderate positive relationship between frequency of exposure to online political information and political awareness among students ($r = 0.52$). This implies that students who frequently encounter political information online tend to have higher levels of political awareness. Frequent exposure likely increases students' knowledge of political events, government policies, electoral processes, and civic responsibilities, thereby enhancing their political consciousness. This finding is consistent with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that individuals actively seek information to satisfy cognitive and informational needs. Students who regularly access political information online are more likely to develop awareness and understanding of political issues (Katz et al., 1974). The result also aligns with empirical studies indicating that repeated exposure to political information through digital platforms enhances political knowledge and awareness among youths (Adeleke, 2023; Udoka, 2022; Okon, 2024). In the Nigerian context, where youths increasingly rely on digital media for news, frequent exposure serves as an important pathway to political learning.

2. Sources of Online Political Information and Political Awareness

The study found a low but significant positive relationship between sources of online political information and political awareness ($r = 0.36$). This suggests that the platforms and channels through which students obtain political information, such as social media, online news portals, blogs, and messaging applications, are related to their political awareness, although the influence is relatively weak. This finding may be attributed to the mixed credibility of online sources. While some students rely on reputable news organizations and official government websites, many depend on social media and informal blogs that may contain biased or inaccurate information. Media Dependency Theory explains that reliance on certain media sources influences knowledge and perceptions (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). However, when the sources are unreliable, the quality of political awareness may be compromised. Similar findings have been reported in Nigeria, where social media is a dominant source of political information but often contributes to misinformation and superficial understanding of political issues (Olatunji, 2023; Eze and Musa, 2024).

3. Type of Online Political Content and Political Awareness

The findings indicated a moderate positive relationship between type of online political content and political awareness ($r = 0.47$). This implies that exposure to different categories of political content, such as election information, government policies, political debates, and civic education materials, contributes to students' political awareness. Exposure to informative and policy-related content likely enhances students' understanding of political

institutions and democratic processes, while exposure to debates and campaigns may stimulate interest in political participation. However, exposure to misinformation, propaganda, or sensational political content may distort awareness. This finding supports previous studies showing that content quality and relevance significantly influence political learning and awareness among youths (Akpan, 2023; Adeyemi, 2023). It also supports Media Dependency Theory, which posits that the nature of media content consumed influences individuals' knowledge and attitudes.

4. Level of Engagement with Online Political Information and Political Awareness

The study revealed a high positive relationship between level of engagement with online political information and political awareness ($r = 0.63$). This indicates that university students who actively engage with political content online through reading, sharing, commenting, participating in discussions, and following political actors tend to have higher levels of political awareness. Active engagement facilitates deeper processing of political information, critical thinking, and discussion, which enhance political understanding. This finding is consistent with Political Socialization perspectives that emphasize interaction and discussion as mechanisms for political learning. It also aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which suggests that active media use leads to greater cognitive outcomes (Katz et al., 1974). Empirical studies have shown that online political engagement among youths is associated with increased political knowledge, interest, and awareness (Akpan and Effiong, 2021; Udo, 2022; Okorie, 2023). In Nigeria, where youths increasingly use social media for political discourse, engagement plays a crucial role in shaping political awareness.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the study concluded that exposure to online political information positively influences political awareness among university students in Akwa Ibom State. Active engagement with online political content was identified as the strongest factor, highlighting the importance of interacting with credible political information for enhancing students' understanding of political issues.

Recommendations

Based on the major findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Students should be encouraged to regularly access online political information to stay informed about political events, government policies, and civic responsibilities. Educational institutions can organize digital media literacy programs to guide students on how to effectively seek and use online political information.
- ii. Students should be guided to rely on credible and reputable sources of online political information, such as verified news portals, government websites, and reputable civic organizations. This will reduce the risk of misinformation and ensure that their political awareness is based on accurate and reliable content.
- iii. Public universities and educators should emphasize the importance of engaging with informative and policy-related political content. Platforms and programs that provide structured political education materials online, such as blogs, e-learning modules, and civic education websites, should be promoted to enhance students' understanding of governance, elections, and democratic processes.

- iv. Students should be encouraged to actively engage with online political content through discussions, sharing posts, commenting on issues, and participating in online civic forums. Engagement helps deepen understanding, critical thinking, and political participation.

Educational Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have several significant implications for education, particularly in public universities in Akwa Ibom State and similar contexts.

- a. The positive relationship between frequency of exposure to online political information and students' political awareness highlights the need for educational programs that encourage regular engagement with digital political content.
- b. The low but significant relationship between sources of information and political awareness emphasizes the importance of teaching students how to evaluate the credibility of online political sources.
- c. The moderate relationship between type of online political content and political awareness suggests that not all political content is equally beneficial.
- d. The strong positive relationship between level of engagement with online political information and political awareness indicates that active participation in political discussions, debates, and online civic forums enhances learning outcomes.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study made several important contributions to knowledge in the fields of political communication, digital media, and civic education in Nigeria, amongst these are:

- i. The study provides empirical evidence on the relationship between exposure to online political information and political awareness among tertiary students in Akwa Ibom State. By examining the sub-variables of frequency of exposure, sources of information, type of political content, and level of engagement, the study identifies which aspects of online political interaction most strongly influence political awareness.
- ii. The study extends the application of the Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Dependency Theory to the Nigerian digital context. It demonstrates how students actively seek, rely on, and interact with online political content to satisfy cognitive and informational needs, thereby contributing to the theoretical understanding of digital political socialization in developing countries.
- iii. The study highlights the role of public universities as facilitators of digital political literacy, emphasizing the importance of structured guidance on credible sources, content selection, and engagement practices. This informs future interventions aimed at improving students' political knowledge, civic responsibility, and informed participation in democratic processes.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following suggestions are made for future research:

- i. Future studies could be carried out to examine the relationship between exposure to online political information and other aspects of political participation, such as voting behaviour, civic engagement, or activism among students in public universities.
- ii. Research could also explore the role of digital literacy and critical thinking skills as moderating variables between exposure to online political information and political awareness.
- iii. Future research could investigate the impact of misinformation or fake news on political awareness among students, focusing on how reliance on unverified sources may influence political understanding and attitudes.

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