Differing Influences of Political Communication:
Examining How News Use and Conversation Shape Political Engagement in Nigeria

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Nigeria is an emerging democracy with a political communication environment that supports citizen engagement. Using the differential gains model as theoretical framework, this study tests how different types of political communication relate to three forms of political engagement: non-conventional (protest), conventional (campaign volunteer), and voting. Using a "boots on the ground" sampling approach in six Nigerian geopolitical regions (*N* = 900), findings highlight how reliance on different types of political information can enhance or undermine citizen engagement. Specifically, results show political talk and texting are the most impactful across engagement types, while traditional news use discourages disruptive non-conventional engagement. Mixed evidence for the differential gains model is identified, and the role of political communication within an emerging democracy is discussed. Recommendations for governmental and nongovernmental political advocacy organizations seeking to mobilize citizens are provided.

Keywords: political engagement, Nigeria, democracy, media use, SMS, text messaging

Nigeria, the most populous country on the African continent, represents a developing democracy. Democratic consolidation, reflected in the development of strong and vibrant democratic processes, requires widespread citizen engagement (Larreguy & Marshall, 2017). Despite efforts to advance Nigeria's democracy, there has been a steady decline in citizen engagement in political processes, including elections. For instance, voter turnout in Nigerian presidential elections has dropped from 69.1% in 2003 to 34.8% in the 2019 elections, and participation is even lower in legislative races (Institute for Democracy & Electoral Assistance, 2021).

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Between the nation's return to democratic rule in 1999 and the present day, vast social, political, and technological changes have occurred, and potentially altered the landscape of citizen engagement. For instance, while a change in leadership in 2015 led to international praise for Nigeria, frustration with the leadership has led to a decline in satisfaction with democracy (Lewis & Kew, 2015). Concerning technological changes, the development and adoption of diverse citizen communication platforms and outlets has increased access to news and information, as well as participatory opportunities. Given the importance of citizen engagement in a healthy democracy, research has examined the influence of varying types of political communication on engagement. Existing research demonstrates that accessing news via traditional media, such as newspaper (e.g., Thorson, Swafford, & Kim, 2017; Zhang & Chia, 2006), radio (e.g., Holt, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Ljungberg, 2013), and television (Zhang & Chia, 2006) often leads to increased political engagement, especially in Western contexts. Likewise, online news and messaging via mobile devices also serve as important political communication tools (Holt et al., 2013; Loader & Mercea, 2011).

While there is a growing focus in studies of emerging democracies, scholars have only begun to examine the implications of varying forms of political communication on citizen engagement in emerging democracies in Africa such as Nigeria (Karam, 2018; Popoola, 2017). This study therefore aims to add to this growing area by examining the relationship between news media use and different types of political talk on three different forms of political engagement (i.e., non-conventional, conventional, and voting) in Nigeria. This work relies on primary data collected by field agents spanning six geopolitical regions of Nigeria shortly after a national election.

Using face-to-face survey interviews, field agents directly engaged with constituents to study their communication behaviors and varying forms of political engagement. Results explore the attributes of the media environment in an emerging democracy to help explain citizens' political engagement behaviors. Further, the roles of various communication modes in a society featuring considerable state control of the press are also discussed. Findings highlight the potential for both differential gains and losses in political engagement resulting from political communication within the context of an emerging democracy.

Literature Review

Even though Nigeria became independent from British colonization more than six decades ago, democracy in Nigeria remains in its budding phase (Vertigans, 2017). Soon after gaining independence, democratic rule was disrupted by a military coup on January 15, 1966, leading to decades of military rule sprinkled with a few fleeting attempts to return to democracy (Arowolo, 2019). In 1999, the military handed over power to a democratically elected government, and there have since been five presidential elections. As such, Nigeria has witnessed just over two decades of uninterrupted democratic government and remains a fledgling democracy.

Despite returning to democratic rule, the nation performs poorly on many indices of democratic governance including respect for human rights, free and fair elections, and citizen engagement with political processes (Osuji, Duru, & Okechukwu, 2019). With respect to political engagement, voter turnout has progressively shown a downward trend for presidential elections (Institute for Democracy & Electoral

Assistance, 2021), as well as state-level and local elections, which were even lower (International Republican Institute [IRI]/National Democratic Institute [NDI], 2019).

Democracies thrive on the engagement of citizens. While engagement may manifest through participation in institutional processes, such as voting in periodic elections, citizens can also participate within free societies using less conventional forms of political engagement, including signing petitions and organizing protests, and engaging in other types of aggressive action to express discontent. In Nigeria, these types of political engagement are strongly discouraged, and the government routinely uses violent tactics, including imprisoning activists and using the military to combat these activities (Uwazuruike, 2020).

Nigeria also features a media landscape characterized by both private and state-ownership of media outlets and a press (i.e., print media) that has historically played an adversarial role as watchdog of political actors and institutions (Daramola, 2006). While the press is mostly privately owned, the federal and state governments exert considerable influence on broadcast media via ownership of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), and various state-owned radio and television stations, many of which have greater reach than private broadcast outlets (Apuke & Tunca, 2019). With the liberalization of broadcast media, there has been a remarkable expansion of broadcast news outlets and increased access to diverse voices in the media (Daramola, 2006). Yet, government intervention in media operations remains, often manifesting through censorship or harsh anti-press laws (Freedom House, 2020).

Press freedom has further deteriorated under the current administration of Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, a former army general and military head of state. During his tenure as democratically elected president, there have been multiple reports of violence against journalists by government forces, jailing of activists, and efforts to censor the media (Conroy-Krutz, 2020; Ekwunife, Agbo, Ukeje, Agha, & Nwachukwu, 2021). It is against this background that the current study examines consumption of public affairs information as potential drivers of political engagement.

Generalized Media Use and Political Engagement

Since Putnam (1995) claimed that media use decreased civic engagement and worsened community ties, a growing body of research has examined the relationship between media use and political engagement. A substantial body of research now offers evidence of the positive effects of traditional news media (i.e., newspaper, television, and radio) on political engagement in Western contexts (Holt et al., 2013; Moeller, Vreese, Esser, & Kunz, 2014; Thorson et al., 2017). The influence of online media use on political engagement has subsequently become a primary focus in recent research. Some studies have suggested that accessing information online only enhances offline engagement among individuals who are already actively involved (Kang & Gearhart, 2010; Nam, 2012). However, increasing evidence suggests that online and social media news use has the potential to boost engagement in offline settings, including among first-time voters (Choi, Lee, & Metzgar, 2017; Dimitrova, Shehata, Strömbäck, & Nord, 2014; Holt et al., 2013).

With respect to political conversation, including that which occurs face-to-face or via mobile devices, considerable research demonstrates that political discussion is a strong predictor of engagement. Specifically, engaging in interpersonal political discussions frequently may enhance political involvement

directly or indirectly by increasing citizens' knowledge of engagement opportunities and political efficacy (Eveland & Hively, 2009; Eveland & Thomson, 2006). Political talk enhances engagement, in part, by provoking contemplation of news and prior conversations, while preparing individuals for potential expressive opportunities (Pingree, 2007).

Mobile phones provide myriad affordances that support citizen connection and expression. For instance, Short Message Service (SMS), often referred to as text messaging, offers a cheap and easy way for political campaigns to provide supporters with information and mobilize potential voters to boost turnout (Dale & Strauss, 2009). Beyond campaign efforts, mobile technology allows citizens to share information and mobilize it for diverse political activities. In fact, mobile phones have come to be considered as a kind of "liberation technology" given the numerous instances of private citizens using messaging to mobilize for collective action (Manacorda & Tesei, 2020).

A Differential Gains Perspective on News Media Effects

While the news media enable citizens to access information that may increase public affairs knowledge and political engagement, the differential gains model theorizes that interpersonal discourse is crucial to amplifying the effects of news media use on political action (Scheufele, 2002). Political talk helps citizens integrate new information with existing knowledge and provides additional information about engagement opportunities and this, in turn, enhances the effect of news use on audiences (Hardy & Scheufele, 2005; Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004; Scheufele, 2002). In fact, the differential gains model theorizes an interaction of traditional news use and discussion such that political discussion strengthens the relationship between news media use and political engagement.

Research has found evidence for the differential gains model in established democracies. For instance, online news use, including on social media platforms, was found to exert stronger effects on political engagement among individuals who frequently engage in political discussion (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Martin, 2016). Similarly, Yamamoto and Nah (2018) found evidence for differential gains from information seeking via mobile phones among individuals who frequently engage in online or offline political discussion. While some studies report mixed findings (e.g., Reichert & Print, 2017), others find that reliance on counter-attitudinal news is negatively related to engagement, and that political discussion exacerbates this association (Brundidge, Garrett, Rojas, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2014). Similarly, Su and Xiao (2022) found that the moderating effect of political discussion on news use may be dependent on the level of political trust among citizens. This may indicate that differential gains in engagement due to political discussion may vary across countries, depending on a host of other factors.

Beyond the mixed findings, studies have yet to explore the extent to which theorized relationships may differ for distinct types of political engagement. In addition, studies have tended to focus on highly democratized societies, including the United States, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, which feature relatively free media and freedom of political expression (e.g., Reichert & Print, 2017; Yamamoto & Nah, 2018). However, in an emerging democracy, factors such as state control of media, limited press freedom, and restrictions placed on political expression may limit the ability of news to provide mobilizing information, especially information related to non-conventional forms of engagement. This raises questions about the

extent to which news information and discourse would enhance citizen engagement under such circumstances. With emphasis on Nigeria, a developing democracy characterized by limited press and political freedoms, this study tests the model in a different context and with different engagement outcomes.

Political Communication and Political Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa

As an academic field, including studies examining effects on political behavior, political communication tends to focus on established democratic nations, with less attention given to sub-Saharan Africa (Karam, 2018; Popoola, 2017). In Nigeria, various military regimes viewed the study of political communication as subversive and capable of enabling dissent (Popoola, 2017). However, with democratization, citizen empowerment, and the need for politicians to communicate with citizens, scholars are increasingly investigating the uses and effects of communication on political engagement (Karam, 2018).

Research on political communication effects in African countries has been mixed. Some studies indicate that media consumption may exert little or no effects on political engagement. Despite news media consumption via different platforms, youths in South Africa report distrust of government, lack of efficacy, and low levels of engagement in conventional politics (Bosch, 2013). In Kenya, Kipkoech (forthcoming) found news media use to have limited influence on political engagement, with TV news consumption negatively predicting engagement. Other studies conclude that media use may not translate to engagement behavior because of perceived unresponsiveness of government, cynicism, and the belief that involvement is futile (Malila, Oelofsen, Garman, & Wasserman, 2013; Malila & Oelofsen, 2016).

It should be noted that these studies, which seem to show disillusionment with politics, also suggest that citizens may simply be turning to alternative or unconventional forms of engagement including activism. Unconventional engagement uses activities that may not be authorized or sanctioned by the state to challenge the status quo and influence policy (Lamprianou, 2013). Yet, such activities may be costly, especially in less democratic societies where there remains low tolerance for political dissent (Young, 2019).

Alternatively, individuals may use activities that fall within the sphere of institutional politics. This may include activities such as voting and involvement in election campaign activities among other avenues for participation provided by the state through its institutions. Research conducted in East and Southern African countries, including Kenya, South Africa, and Mozambique, suggests that accessing news via traditional and online media platforms may help to cultivate political knowledge and increase engagement (Aker, Collier, & Vincent, 2017; Finkle & Smith, 2011). Similar results were found among heavy consumers of news via traditional media in the West African nations of Mali and Togo (Breuer & Groshek, 2017; Nisbet, 2008). Radio has been touted as an especially important source of political information and driver of involvement across the African continent, in part because of the low cost, ease of use, and access to multilingual local programming.

With the diffusion of Internet and mobile technologies across Africa, scholars are examining the role of social media and messaging in promoting engagement. In South Africa and Kenya, using social media to access news has been found to guide citizens' political decision making and enhance engagement (Kamau, 2017; Mhlomi & Osunkunle, 2017). The use of mobile technology has also been strongly linked to democratic

engagement, resulting in mobilization for both electoral and contentious politics (Manacorda & Tesei, 2020; Walton & Donner, 2017). It should be noted though that much of the existing research on mobile political messaging focuses on its utilization for collective action.

There is optimism regarding the role of social media and online platforms in providing citizens with alternative sources of information. In fact, some scholars suggest that the failure of legacy media to give voice to citizens has led to reliance on social media for information and mobilization of dissent in countries such as South Africa (Walton & Leukes, 2013) and Zimbabwe (Gukurume, 2017). Yet, others are more cautious in their assessment, and indicate that information seeking and expression fostered by online media platforms may not necessarily extend offline (e.g., Matingwina, 2018; Mutsvairo & Sirks, 2015). Kipkoech (forthcoming) finds that, despite the robust Internet infrastructure and access in Kenya, neither news use via social media nor news websites is related to political engagement.

Political discussion also influences citizen participation. Existing research indicates that engaging in political discussions online or using social media for political messaging is associated with offline engagement (Gronlund & Wakabi, 2015; Kamau, 2017). There is also evidence that offline political discussion with family and close friends enhances engagement across various countries, including Senegal, South Africa, and Kenya, among others (Finkel & Smith, 2011; Kuenzi, 2006; Mhlomi & Osunkunle, 2017). While these findings corroborate studies conducted in Western countries, research examining political discussion in interpersonal settings and the implications of this for political behavior remain limited.

In Nigeria, research has also yielded mixed results. Some have found that using social media to access news promotes online (Abdu, Mohamad, & Muda, 2017) and offline political engagement (Mustapha, Gbonegun, & Mustapha, 2016; Onyechi, 2018). However, reliance on traditional news media (e.g., TV, newspaper, and radio) for news may not enhance engagement in the same manner (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019). Conversely, Tesunbi and Nwoye (2014) found newspaper use, but not social media news consumption, to be associated with enhanced political engagement. Mounting evidence also points to mobile devices as tools for mobilization for collective action in Nigeria (Obadare, 2006; Uwalaka, Rickard, & Watkins, 2018). While scholars recognize the promise and potential of news and communication platforms, there remains a need for systematic examination of its impact on citizen engagement.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Given the existing research reviewed, as well as the unique media and political environment in Nigeria, the current study addresses the following hypotheses and research questions:

H1:   *Internal political efficacy is positively related to political engagement (i.e., non-conventional engagement; conventional engagement; voter turnout).*

RQ1:   *How is news use related to political engagement via (a) traditional media, and (b) online media?*

H2:   *Political talk will be positively related to all forms of political engagement.*

H3:   Political messaging will be positively related to all forms of political engagement.

RQ2:   Is the influence of (a) traditional and (b) online news use on political engagement stronger among those who frequently engage in political discussion?

RQ3:   Is the influence of (a) traditional and (b) online news use on political engagement stronger among those who frequently engage in SMS political messaging?

Method

Data for this study came from a sample of adult Nigerian voters across six geopolitical regions, collected between March 23, 2020, and April 5, 2020. Survey data were collected from 150 participants from a state in each of the six regions (*N* = 900). Nigeria has a population of approximately 216 million people, spread out across six geopolitical regions (United Nations Population Fund [UNPF], 2022). Each of the geopolitical regions (i.e., North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-East, South-South, and South-West) is dominated by ethnic groups that show considerable religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity. Further, each of the regions features between five and seven states. To ensure that the sample reflected differences in religion, education, and values seen across the country, the population was divided into strata with each geopolitical area representing one stratum. One state was randomly selected from each stratum, leading to the selection of six states (i.e., Anambra, Bauchi, Edo, Nasarawa, Oyo, and Sokoto states). Next, two smaller sampling units (i.e., local government areas) from each state were randomly selected.

Once the local areas were selected for data collection, six field agents were recruited from a research-based nonprofit organization in Nigeria to assist with on-location data collection. The two female field agents were specifically recruited to aid access in geopolitical regions where male field agents would face cultural obstacles that would create problems gaining access to female respondents. After agreeing to the assignment, field agents were trained by the lead author to collect interviewer-administered surveys, or to allow for self-administered responses in instances when the surveys were required to be left and recollected at a later date. Field agents approached and interviewed voluntary participants in popular residential and business districts in the areas selected.

With approval from the Institutional Review Board at the lead author's home institution, field agents involved in data collection purposively sampled participants in each region and paid participants ₦800 upon survey completion, which is approximately $2 (USD). While the resulting sample is not representative, various strategies were used to ensure that a diverse range of perspectives were represented. Sampling decisions were guided by safety considerations and accessibility, such that areas considered to be unsafe or inaccessible due to the terrain were avoided. As such, field agents employed both face-to-face and drop-off and pick-up strategies during a data collection. Interestingly, during data collection, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down most aspects of society. This included the shutdown of the Nigerian mail service, which prevented the field agents from sending the physical surveys to the lead author in the United States. As a result, survey responses were verbally transmitted to the lead author via WhatsApp one at a time during compatible times to allow for data analysis. Several months later, once mail service resumed, the manually input data was reconciled with the physical surveys to ensure accuracy.

Measures

Political Interest

This item was assessed using items adapted from the American National Election Studies survey (2016). Respondents were asked how interested they were in (a) election campaign activities, (b) actions of politicians and government officials, and (c) events in politics and government. Recorded using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not interested*, 5 = *very interested*), responses combined to form an index (α = .81; *M* = 2.89, SD = 1.17).

Internal Efficacy

This psychological attribute was evaluated using a measure adapted from Craig and Maggiotto (1982). Respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the following statements: (a) I consider myself to be well-qualified to participate in politics; (b) I feel that I have a good understanding of the important political issues facing our country; (c) I feel that I could do as good a job in public office as most other people; and (d) I think that I am better informed about politics and government than most people (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). These items were combined to form an index (α = .87; *M* = 3.19*,* SD = 1.01).

Traditional News Media Use

To assess news use through traditional platforms, measurement was adapted from Holt et al. (2013). Using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *several times a day*), participants were asked how frequently they accessed political news on three different platforms, including (a) television, (b) radio, and (c) newspapers. Responses were found to be reliably related before being combined into an index (α = .72; *M* = 3.06*,* SD = 1.00).

Online News Media Use

Assessment of news accessed through online platforms was measured with items adapted from Holt et al. (2013). Using the same 5-point Likert-type scale as above, participants were asked how frequently they accessed political news on (a) online news sites and (b) social media/networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Responses were merged to form an index (*r* = .86; *M* = 3.09, SD = 1.33).

Political Talk

This was measured using items adapted from Shah, Cho, Eveland, and Kwak (2005). Respondents were asked about the frequency of discussing politics with (a) neighbors, (b) friends, (c) family members, and (d) coworkers (1 = *never* to 5 = *several times a day*). Responses were combined to form an index (α = .83; *M* = 2.92*,* SD = 1.01).

Political SMS Messaging

This variable was assessed using items adapted from Campbell and Kwak (2011). Respondents were asked how often they used SMS messaging (i.e., mobile text messaging) or social media messaging to discuss politics and public affairs with (a) family, (b) friend, (c) neighbors, and (d) coworkers (1 = *never* to 5 = *several times a day*). Items were combined into an index (α = .89; *M* = 2.36*,* SD=1.12).

Dependent Variables

Political Engagement

Multiple items were used to assess political engagement in Nigeria, including voting in elections at various national, state, and local levels, and specific nonvoting activities. To determine whether the nonvoting indicators reflect different dimensions of the latent variable (i.e., political engagement), a principal components analysis was conducted using oblique rotation since the items were expected to be correlated. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure indicated excellent sampling adequacy, KMO = .89 (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999), and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (χ^2 (36) = 3273.82, *p* < .001). The communalities were moderate (i.e., > .55), and all items had factor loadings greater than 0.65. Two factors had eigenvalues greater than 1 and collectively explained 63.26% of the variance.

The two extracted factors reflected different dimensions of political engagement, including: (a) unconventional engagement, composed of four items which fall outside of the sphere of institutional politics in Nigeria and may involve challenging the status quo during political campaign engagement; and (b) conventional engagement, consisting of five items assessing institutional, state-endorsed forms of political and electoral campaign engagement. Voter turnout was evaluated using four items asking about previous voting behaviors at various levels. Given the four-year election cycle for electoral activities at various levels in Nigeria, participants were asked about political activities they had performed in the last four years.

Unconventional Engagement

To assess one's level of participation in nontraditional forms of political engagement, individuals were asked about four activities. Recorded on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *several times*), participants were asked about their participation over the last four years in varying manifestations of non-conventional political engagement, including (a) writing or signing petitions to the government; (b) joining a pressure group to demand government action; (c) being involved in political activism, protest, or demonstrations; and (d) using force or violence to demand political change. This factor was assessed for internal consistency and demonstrated satisfactory reliability before being combined into an index (α = .76; *M* = 1.71, SD = .92).

Conventional Engagement

This item measured traditional forms of political engagement during a political campaign. Respondents were asked about their frequency of participation in five varying forms of conventional political

engagement during the last four years using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 5 = *several times*). The five manifestations of traditional political campaign engagement included (a) distributing campaign materials in support of a political candidate; (b) attending a political campaign rally; (c) participating in town hall or other forum with politicians to deliberate with them and know their agenda; (d) participating in voter education efforts during elections; and (e) mobilizing voters to support a political candidate or a party platform online or offline. Items were checked for internal consistency before being combined into an index (α = .86; *M* = 2.36, SD = 1.21).

Voter Turnout

Engagement in voting behavior was assessed with a series of four questions. Respondents were asked whether they had (a) voted for a candidate in the last presidential election; (b) voted for a candidate in the last governorship election; (c) voted for a candidate in the last senate election; and (d) voted for a candidate in the last local government elections (0 = *no*, 1 = *yes*). Responses were merged into an additive index (*M* = 2.78, SD = 1.50).

Demographics

Four control variables, which consisted of age, sex, education, and income, were included in the model. The average respondent was found to be aged 33.69 years (SD = 9.70). The sample featured a slightly higher proportion of males (55%). Concerning education, the average participant was found to have completed secondary school or had some undergraduate education (*M* = 5.60, SD = 2.52). Regarding income, respondents' average income was between ₦30,000 and ₦60,000 (i.e., $75–$150 USD) per month.

Statistical Analysis

To answer the research questions and hypotheses, hierarchical regression analyses were performed. Demographic variables, including age, sex, education, and income, were entered in the first block. The second block featured political orientations, including political interest and internal political efficacy. Political communication variables composed of news use via traditional media, online media news use, political talk, and SMS political messaging were entered in the third block. Lastly, interaction terms were entered into the fourth block. In cases where interaction terms indicated possible multicollinearity, the news media and communication variables were centered before creating the interaction terms, after which acceptable VIF and tolerance values were established.

Findings

H1 predicted that internal political efficacy would be positively related to the three types of political engagement (i.e., non-conventional engagement, conventional engagement, voter turnout). According to Table 1, internal political efficacy was not a predictor of participating in non-conventional forms of political engagement (β = .06, *p* = .21). On the other hand, internal political efficacy among Nigerian constituents was found to be a positive predictor of participating in conventional forms of political engagement (β = .25,

p < .001) and voter turnout (*β* = .16, *p* < .001). As the predicted relationship was found to exist for two types of political engagement, H1 was partially supported.

RQ1 examined the influence of individuals' news use via (a) traditional platforms and (b) online media on the three types of political engagement. As seen in Table 1, frequent news consumption through traditional platforms was found to negatively predict non-conventional types of political engagement (*β* = −.18, *p* < .001). Consuming news via traditional media platforms was not a statistically significant predictor of conventional engagement (*β* = .01, *p* = .76). Conversely, accessing news through traditional media outlets was found to positively predict voting (*β* = .12, *p* = .002). Regarding online platforms, news consumption through online websites and social media platforms was not significantly related to non-conventional engagement (*β* = .07, *p* = .10). Further, online news use was not a statistically significant predictor of engagement in conventional forms of political engagement (*β* = −.05, *p* = .15) or voting turnout (*β* = −.02, *p* = .56, see Table 1).

H2 predicted that political talk would be positively related to the three types of political engagement. Findings revealed that engaging in political talk positively predicted both participation in non-conventional (*β* = .16, *p* < .001) and conventional forms of political engagement (*β* = .15, *p* < .001). However, frequently talking about politics with friends and family was not found to predict voting (see Table 1).

Table 1. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Three Types of Political Engagement.

	Non-Conventional Political Engagement	Conventional Political Engagement	Voter Turnout
Demographics/Control			
Age	−.10**	.00	.13***
Sex (Male)	−.01	−.07*	−.02
Education	−.08*	−.02	−.08*
Income	.21***	.18***	.02
Incremental R² (%)	**7.9%***	**13.8%***	**6.3%***
Political Orientations			
Political Interest	.08	.17***	.14***
Internal Pol. Efficacy	.06	.25***	.16***
Incremental R² (%)	**6.1%***	**21%***	**13.6%***
Political Communication			
Trad. News Use	−.18***	.01	.12**
Online News Use	.07	−.05	−.02
Political Talk	.16***	.15***	.00
Political SMS	.33***	.18***	.23***
Incremental R² (%)	**12.9%***	**5.3%***	**6.2%***
Interactions			
Trad. News X Talk	.02	.04	−.18***
Trad. News X SMS	−.02	−.03	.02
Online News X Talk	.04	−.04	.08#

Online News X SMS	.06	.04	−.04
Incremental R² (%)	**.6%***	**.2%**	**2.0%***
Total R²	**27.5%**	**40.3%**	**28.1**

Note. The beta weights are final standardized regression coefficients.
# *p* < .06; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001

H3 predicted that the use of SMS for political messaging would be positively related to the three types of political engagement. As seen from Table 1, frequently communicating with others about politics via SMS was found to positively predict participation in non-conventional forms of political engagement (β = .33, *p* < .001). Further, frequent political SMS messaging was also found to positively predict conventional political engagement (β = .18, *p* < .001) and voter turnout at the polls (β = .23, *p* < .001).

RQ2 asked whether the influence of (a) traditional and (b) online news use on political engagement is stronger among those who frequently engage in political discussion. The moderating effect of political talk on traditional news use was not statistically significant for non-conventional or conventional forms of political engagement (see Table 1). However, the moderating effect of interpersonal political talk on traditional news use was statistically significant and negative (β = −.18, *p* < .001). Likewise, the moderating effect of political talk on online news use was not statistically significant for non-conventional or conventional forms of political engagement. However, the interaction of interpersonal political talk and online news use on voting turnout approached statistical significance (β = .08, *p* = .06).
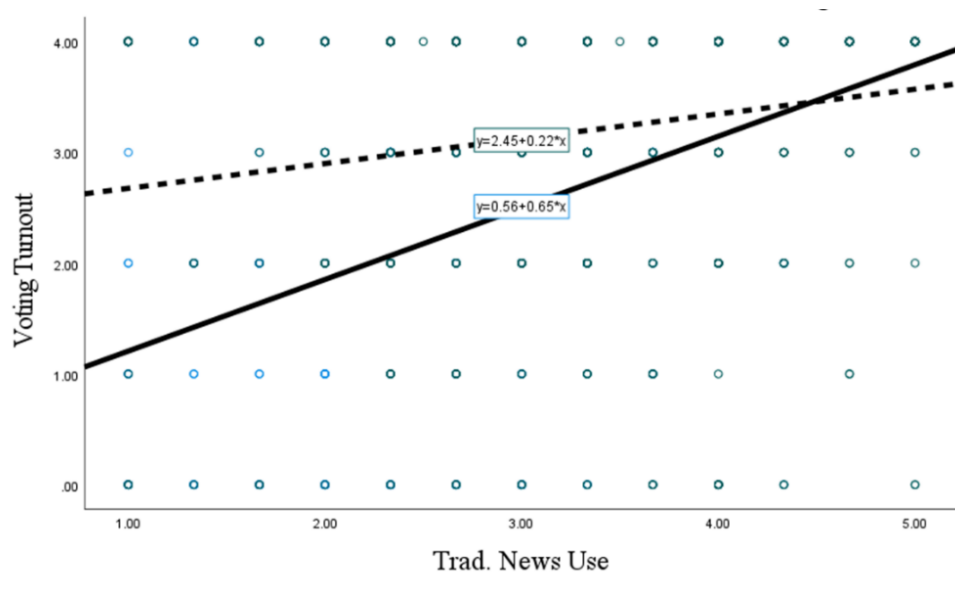

Figure 1. Interaction of traditional news use and political discussion on voting.

RQ3 asked whether the influence of (a) traditional and (b) online news use on political engagement is stronger among those who frequently engage in SMS political messaging. As seen in Table 1, SMS political messaging did not have a statistically significant moderating effect on the relationships between traditional

news use and engagement outcomes (i.e., including non-conventional, conventional, and voter turnout). Similarly, SMS political messaging failed to moderate the relationships between online news use and all three types of political engagement.
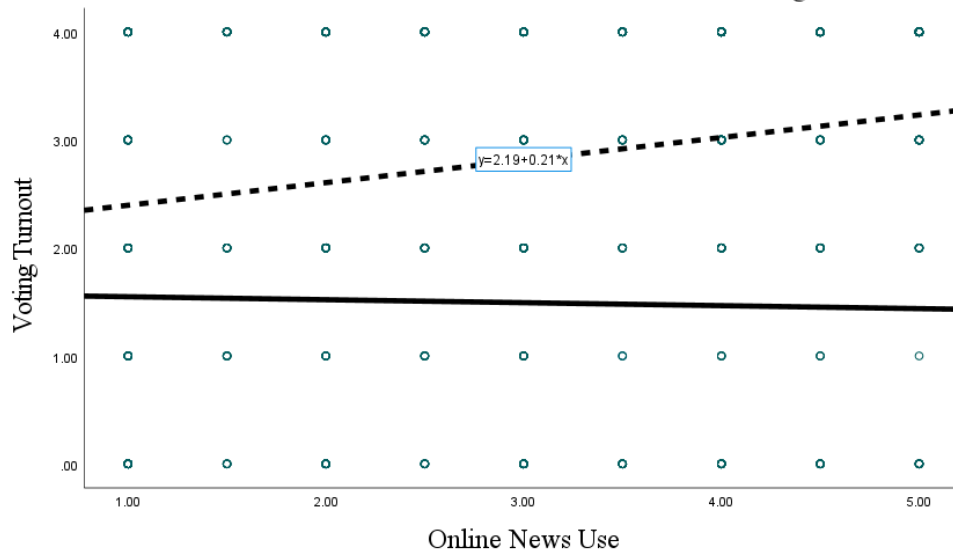

Figure 2. Interaction effect of online news use and political discussion on voting.

Discussion

The major goal of this study is to investigate how varying types of political communication, including news use and political talk, relate to three different forms of political engagement in an emerging democracy. Using survey data collected from Nigerian voters across the six geopolitical regions of the country, this study assessed their news consumption, communication, and political engagement behaviors. Overall, results showcase the important role of traditional media in supporting engagement in institutional politics, such as turnout at the polls and the potential of interpersonal communication to enhance involvement in diverse forms of politics.

Concerning one's political orientations, findings seen here show internal political efficacy was only predictive of conventional forms of political engagement and voting. That is, internal political efficacy did not predict participation in non-conventional forms of political engagement among Nigerians. This result is quite telling considering that internal efficacy is a well-known predictor of engagement, especially in Western societies (Halpern et al., 2017; Wojcieszak, Bimber, Feldman, & Stroud, 2016). However, in less democratized societies, nontraditional types of engagement, such as protest or expression of dissent, are costly and often suppressed violently by the authorities (Young, 2019). Except under unusual circumstances, citizens may prefer less costly or dangerous forms of political engagement, viewing non-institutional political activities only as a last resort. Despite a general decline in political engagement in Nigeria (Institute for Democracy & Electoral Assistance, 2021; IRI/NDI, 2019), efficacious individuals still participate through

voting and diverse campaign activities. These results not only lend support to the existing research, but also demonstrate the need to enhance citizens' belief in their ability to engage in politics and influence the political system.

Results show that those who frequently get their news from traditional media are more likely to participate by voting, but unlikely to engage in non-conventional or disruptive politics. These contrasting findings may reflect the ways in which state influence on media can shape news content and thus influence citizens' attitudes and participatory decisions. Existing research indicates that accessing news from traditional media such as TV and radio is related, with increased engagement expressed through voting (Esser & Vreese, 2007; Thorson et al., 2017). Yet, the negative relationship between traditional news media use and non-conventional engagement (e.g., protest) is potentially a function of state control of media outlets in Nigeria. In fact, it appears that traditional news media in Nigeria support the status quo by encouraging a state-sanctioned form of engagement while discouraging alternative/non-conventional forms of political engagement.

News consumption via online news media is not related to voter turnout and engagement in non-conventional or conventional forms of politics. This finding may be surprising in view of research conducted in Western democracies, which have touted the Internet and social media as tools capable of enhancing connectedness among citizens and increasing political engagement (e.g., Vromen, 2017; Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014). Yet, research on online news use and political engagement in sub-Saharan African countries, including Nigeria remains mixed, with some studies suggesting that information seeking online has limited influence on offline engagement (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019; Mustapha & Omar, 2020). Moreover, various factors, including the motivations for using online or social media platforms for accessing news, may influence behavioral outcomes (Heiss et al., 2019).

Results show that engaging in political talk positively predicted engagement in both non-conventional and conventional forms of politics. This is consistent with research demonstrating that discussing politics with fellow citizens promotes cognitive elaboration, deepens understanding, and enhances political engagement (Eveland & Thomson, 2006). Indeed, political talk has been found to be a consistent predictor of political engagement across nations with varying levels of democratization (Gil de Zúñiga, Diehl, Huber, & Liu, 2019). Yet, among Nigerian constituents, frequent talk about politics is not associated with voting. This is surprising considering that "talk-centric" democracy (i.e., political conversation among citizens) is viewed as a precursor of and foundation to goals-based forms of democracy, such as voting (Chambers, 2003). Yet, if political institutions are not responsive to citizen discourse or there remain practices such as electoral fraud which can subvert the will of the people, as is the case in many emerging democracies including Nigeria, engaged citizens seeking change may resort to nonvoting efforts (Daxecker et al., 2019).

Concerning SMS messaging, individuals who frequently communicate about politics through SMS were found to be highly involved across all forms of political engagement. This included their self-reported voting behavior, as well as engagement in both conventional political campaign activities and non-institutional forms of politics. While the increased access to Internet connected mobile phones in many sub-Saharan African nations has spawned considerable research about the potential benefits of

political mobile messaging, the bulk of existing research focuses on political messaging as a tool for mobilization toward collective action (e.g., Obadare, 2006; Uwalaka et al., 2018). The current findings demonstrate that political messaging via mobile phones can be used to mobilize citizens for forms of engagement beyond contentious politics.

With regard to moderation relationships explored, the results were mixed with limited support for the differential gains model. Specifically, forms of conversation including face-to-face discussion and SMS political messaging did not enhance the relationship between news use and conventional or campaign engagement. However, results highlight the potential for political talk to strengthen the influence of news use in some cases while weakening it in others. For instance, results show that engaging in frequent political talk suppresses the informational effect of traditional news use on voter turnout. Conversely, frequent political talk seems to enhance the effect of online news use on voting turnout. Neither online news use nor political discussion alone had the same influence.

Further inspection of the interaction effects suggests that while traditional news use may generally enhance turnout, this effect is strongest for heavy traditional news consumers who do not often discuss politics with others (see Figure 1). Conversely, as seen in Figure 2, the effect of online news use on voting turnout is strongest among individuals who frequently engage in political discussion with others. Interpersonal political talk may undermine the influence of traditional media by exposing citizens to political information that differs from or contradicts state-sanctioned narratives presented on traditional news media outlets. In contrast, online and social media platforms enable citizens to consume diverse information, including citizen-produced content. Such information may be more consistent with informal political talk and thus amplify the influence of online news on turnout (Kamau, 2017).

Consistent with earlier work, these findings suggest that potential gains or losses due to political talk may depend on other factors, such as type of news source (i.e., traditional or online) and the specific type of engagement (Su & Xiao, 2022). Although individuals relying on traditional news media show disengagement from non-conventional, potentially disruptive political activities, users of traditional media are not dissuaded from engaging in disruptive political activities if they also engage in frequent political talk. That is, political talk appears to nullify the negative effect of traditional news use on non-conventional engagement.

Theoretically, the mixed results seen here may indicate that macro-level factors that vary as a function of democratization (e.g., freedom of expression) can augment or limit the moderating effect of political discussion. In fact, with considerable state control of and/or influence on the media (Apuke & Tunca, 2019), everyday political talk may offer citizens an avenue to create and share narratives that run counter to state-endorsed positions (Wasserman, 2011). This could undermine the informational effect of traditional news media, thus suppressing their influence on voter turnout.

Taken together, the results of this study highlight the ways in which different types of news media information and communication may shape citizen engagement in an emerging democracy. First, findings showcase the limitations of different news media sources, especially traditional sources of news which may be subject to greater state influence in a nation like Nigeria. Second, results raise questions about the extent

to which the Internet, social media, and online news platforms function as catalysts of democratic engagement and highlight the need for further study to investigate how and under what conditions access to information online would promote citizen engagement. For instance, recent research indicates that factors such as motivations for online news use (Knoll, Matthes, & Heiss, 2020) as well as the level of involvement (e.g., consumptive vs. expressive news use; Gil de Zúñiga, Bachmann, Hsu, & Brundidge, 2013) may serve as important considerations in political behaviors.

Perhaps most importantly, this study points to political conversation among citizens, in person or via mobile devices, as a tool for empowering citizens and enhancing democratic engagement. While political messaging has been shown to be effective in mobilizing citizens for collective action, it is evident that mobile technology can equally be used to mobilize citizens for many political causes or activities. By enabling information sharing about issues of common interest and aiding connection among individuals within trusted networks, political messaging via SMS plays a decidedly more important and broader role in boosting political engagement.

This study has limitations. First, we relied on a non-representative sample drawn from six geopolitical regions across a single country in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite efforts to ensure that ethnic, social, and political differences unique to each geopolitical region are represented, this limits the generalizability of findings. Moreover, the reliance on cross-sectional data and retrospective self-report limits our ability to make causal statements about the observed relationships. Regardless, this work contributes to the existing research on the effects and implications of political information consumption and citizen communication in an emerging democracy. Future research should examine the conditions under which political information accessed through the media may translate to increased engagement in emerging democracies, as well as citizens' use of creative and alternative forms of engagement to participate in democracy. Methodologically, future research can advance this line of research by using longitudinal data to explore the directionality of relationships.

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