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DIGITAL PARTICIPATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: EVALUATING SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR GATHERING LOCAL PUBLIC OPINION AND ADDRESSING ELITE-FOCUSED POLICY NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT
Although digital technology has advanced quickly in Nigeria, it has not resulted in genuine inclusion for rural communities, which continue to be mostly left out of official policy-making processes. Due to centralized, urban-centric viewpoints and elite-driven governance structures, rural development policies often fail to adequately address local needs and lived realities. The function of social media as a digital forum for expressing grassroots public sentiment and challenging elite-dominated policy narratives regarding rural development in Nigeria is critically analyzed in this work. The study uses a qualitative research methodology based on a systematic analysis of secondary data, such as policy documents, institutional reports, digital participation studies, media content, and chosen Nigerian case studies, all based on Participatory Governance Theory and Habermas' Public Sphere framework. According to the results, social media platforms have increased opportunities for rural residents to voice issues, establish agendas, and interact with government players, but their revolutionary potential is limited by structural digital inequalities, poor digital literacy, misinformation, algorithmic visibility biases, and elite capture of online discourse. According to the study, social media only aids in rural development governance when it is backed by inclusive digital infrastructure, formal methods for incorporating online citizen input into policy decision-making, and responsive institutions. It ends by advocating the institutionalization of digital consultation frameworks, focused investments in digital literacy and rural connectivity, and the implementation of data-driven policy feedback systems to improve people-centered rural development governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Public Opinion, Governance, Rural Development, Social Media and Digital Participation.

Introduction

In Nigeria's socioeconomic environment, rural development continues to be a difficult and complicated problem. Rural communities continue to suffer from entrenched poverty, low agricultural productivity, restricted access to high-quality healthcare and education, and inadequate infrastructure, despite decades of interventions led by the government and donors. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), as of 2024, internet penetration in rural areas is far behind urban areas, with only around 35% of rural residents using the internet, compared to over 70% in cities (NCC, 2024). These indicators highlight not just material deprivation but also structural flaws in citizen inclusion and governance, where rural stakeholders are consistently ignored in choices that have a direct impact on their means of subsistence.

Meanwhile, the landscape of civic participation and political communication has changed worldwide as a result of social media and digital communication platforms. Platforms like Facebook, X (previously Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube have become popular forums in Nigeria for exchanging information, discussing public policy, establishing agendas, and garnering political backing, particularly among young people and civil society players (Akinwale, 2022). In theory, these digital platforms allow people to express worries, share real-world experiences from their local communities, and challenge prevailing political narratives outside of traditional political avenues.

Social media, in theory, has the potential to democratize governance and give a voice to those who have historically been marginalized in mainstream political debate. The degree to which digital participation in rural Nigeria is inclusive, equitable, and meaningful, though, is still up for debate. The digital divide, inadequate broadband infrastructure in rural communities, poor levels of digital literacy, and unequal power dynamics are just some of the structural obstacles that call into question whether social media platforms actually reflect real grassroots rural viewpoints or simply replicate established elite biases in a new digital format. Additionally, it is unknown how and when online civic participation leads to real policy influence and practical results for rural development.

Despite earlier studies that have shown the use of social media for political expression in Nigeria, the majority of research is still descriptive, concentrating on usage patterns, content themes, or urban-centered case studies, without a systematic institutional examination of how digital feedback loops interact with governance structures at the rural level. There is a big academic vacuum in understanding how social media interaction serves as an institutional tool for rural citizens to challenge elite-led policy agendas and have an impact on actual governance procedures. Because of this gap, our understanding of the potential and limitations of digital participation for inclusive rural development is limited in theory and practice.

As a result, this study focuses on the role of social media in promoting digital participation for rural development in Nigeria, with a special emphasis on its potential to counter elite-driven policy narratives and impact governance outcomes. This article enhances continuing discussions on participatory governance, digital inclusion, and just rural transformation in Nigeria by moving beyond descriptive accounts to provide a critical analytical assessment based on development theory, power dynamics, and governance frameworks.

Statement of the Problem

According to the theory of digital participation, social media has the potential to broaden citizen voices, lessen elite control, and establish feedback loops between citizens and politicians. These platforms are intended to empower marginalized rural communities to express

needs, challenge policy discourses, and shape development priorities in the context of rural development. Nevertheless, the formulation of rural development policies in Nigeria continues to be dominated by centralized and elite decision-making processes that pay little attention to grassroots participation.

Despite the fact that rural concerns are becoming more prevalent on social media networks, there is little empirical evidence that these online representations have a significant impact on official rural development policies or institutional procedures. Conventional participatory methods, such as representation through political intermediaries, community consultations, and town hall meetings, continue to be symbolic, weak, or vulnerable to takeover by local and national elites (Ibrahim & Adedeji, 2021). Despite the promise of social media to overcome these restrictions, the results of rural development indicate ongoing exclusion.

This leads to a fundamental analytical question: why hasn't the rise in digital discourse on rural development concerns in Nigeria resulted in measurable policy impact or institutional reform? This interaction is made even more complicated by the increasing presence of political players, urban-based elites, and social media influencers, which raises the possibility that digital platforms may replicate current power structures rather than democratizing political procedures. As a result, rural voices may continue to be underrepresented, selectively amplified, or reframed in accordance with elite interests.

As a result, the fundamental issue is not the lack of digital engagement, but rather the absence of organized institutional frameworks for identifying, filtering, and incorporating online rural discourse into official policy procedures. This gap between digital engagement and policy results has not been adequately explored by previous research. This gap is addressed by this study, which uses empirical analysis to examine the relationship between social media-based rural discourse and governance institutions and the reasons behind the lack of lasting impact of digital participation on Nigeria's rural development policymaking.

Research Questions

i. How well is the online rural discourse about rural development on social media represented in official government statements and policy documents?
ii. How does social media-mediated discourse challenge, reinforce, or remain separate from elite-driven policy narrative?
iii. What institutional impediments prevent the conversion of digital involvement into political influence?
iv. what mechanisms could be developed to intrgrate rural social media contributions into formal policymaking processes?

Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to evaluate social media as a means for digital participation in rural development governance in Nigeria.

The specific goals are to:

i. To explore how social media is currently employed to gather grassroots public opinion on rural development matters in Nigeria.
ii. To analyze the degree social media counter elite-driven policy narratives in rural development governance.
iii. To identify the structural and institutional elements limit the effectiveness of social media as a tool for participation in rural development.
iv. To assess how social media-driven participation be woven into formal rural development policy processes in Nigeria

Conceptual Review

Concept of Digital Participation

This research adopts a synthetic and context-sensitive operational definition of digital participation rather than seeing it as a collection of loosely connected online behaviors. Digital participation, as used here, is the continuous use of digital platforms—especially social media—by citizens to express preferences, discuss public matters, and impact governance processes within particular institutional and political environments, drawing from the literature on participatory democracy, digital inclusion, and governance.

Current scholarship may be divided into three main categories. According to the procedural camp, digital engagement is the institutionalized interaction between citizens and the government via digital platforms, with a focus on consultation, feedback, and e-government mechanisms (Macintosh, 2004; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2021). The behavioral camp views identifiable online activities like commenting, sharing, organizing, and digital activism as signs of political participation (Boulianne, 2020). Van Dijk (2020) proposes a third structural camp, which highlights the unequal access, skills, and ability to translate online expression into real-world political results that determine digital engagement.

The structural–behavioral synthesis, which is especially well suited to the Nigerian environment, is the model that this study most closely follows. Although Nigeria has a large social media penetration rate, particularly through mobile devices, digital engagement is unevenly spread across rural–urban, gender, literacy, and income divides. Therefore, digital participation in this study is not seen as necessarily democratic, but rather as a contested practice impacted by infrastructural deficiencies, political marginalization, and inadequate institutional response. Digital participation is evaluated operationally by how rural residents use social media to voice their opinions on rural development challenges, interact with public officials, and try to sway political debates, particularly at the municipal and state levels.

Rural Development

In this study, rural development is viewed as a politically embedded process within Nigeria's federal governance system, rather than as a general or solely developmental goal. The term "rural development" refers to government-led and community-influenced policies and actions that seek to enhance living conditions, infrastructure, and social services in rural regions, but whose results are influenced by political institutions, power dynamics, and governance failures.

Classical development viewpoints prioritize poverty reduction, livelihood improvement, and human capital investment (Todaro & Smith, 2020; Chambers, 2021). In Nigeria, however, these strategies frequently ignore the political economy of rural development, where results are heavily influenced by federalism, ineffective municipal administrations, corruption, donor-driven initiatives, and elite seizure. In Nigeria, rural development policies are put into practice by ministries, parastatals, and local government councils, which are frequently unaccountable to rural communities in terms of their empirical implementation.

As a result, this research follows a political-institutional framework for rural development that is in line with UNDP (2022) and Ellis and Biggs (2020) but rooted in Nigerian reality. Rural development is put into practice by policy decisions, financial priorities, and implementation procedures that have an impact on agriculture, rural infrastructure, healthcare, and education, particularly those that are discussed and debated in digital forums. Therefore, the study directly connects rural development with participation and policy-making by analyzing

how rural people use social media to engage with political players and institutions in order to advance their interests in government processes.

Social Media as a Governance Tool

This work views social media as a governance tool as a dual-use infrastructure that may promote participation while also allowing for symbolic interaction, surveillance, and control. This upbeat perspective is insufficient for comprehending governance in hybrid or fragile democracies like Nigeria, even though earlier literature has focused on transparency, co-production, and responsiveness (Mergel, 2016; Criado et al., 2020; Bertot et al., 2020).

Critical scholarship emphasizes how social media regulation may replicate power inequalities through algorithmic visibility, performative engagement, propaganda, and digital authoritarian methods (Kassen, 2021). Governments can seem responsive online while really merely managing their brand and reputation and dodging real policy changes. Nigeria provides an example of this tension, where government officials actively use sites like Facebook and X (Twitter) yet seldom institutionalize citizen input into the decision-making process.

As a result, this research takes a critical governance perspective, considering social media as a forum for debate between the public voice and government authority rather than as a neutral participatory platform. Nigerian cases are analyzed rather than symbolically treated: Social media is looked at as a venue where political figures strategically highlight, ignore, challenge, or frame stories about rural development. In practice, social media governance is evaluated by analyzing patterns of response, agenda-setting, and the translation (or non-translation) of online conversation into policy results.

Grassroots Public Opinion

Grassroots public opinion is defined as the collective expression of the preferences, complaints, and demands of non-elite citizens as expressed through daily communication practices, especially in digitally mediated forums. The frameworks of Habermas (1989) and Manin (2021), which offer fundamental insights into public debate and mass opinion, make the unrealistic assumption that communication ability is somewhat equal in African digital environments.

This work uses African digital scholarship and Dahlgren (2020) to address grassroots public opinion as located, unequal, and frequently split. Digital inequality in Nigeria, influenced by literacy, language, connection, and algorithmic prejudice, dictates who has a voice, whose voice gets heard, and whose ideas have an impact on government. According to Nyabola (2021), urban elites, influencers, and politically connected individuals frequently overshadow grassroots voices.

This research operationalizes popular opinion at the grassroots level by considering in concrete terms who participates (community members and rural residents), where they speak (social media channels), how often they participate, the issues they bring up, and the degree to which their words are noticed or elicit institutional action in order to go beyond abstraction. As opposed to an idealized deliberative consensus, grassroots public opinion is examined as a collection of online narratives based on real rural life experiences, in accordance with Ojebode et al. (2022).

Elite-Driven Policy Narratives

Elite-driven policy narratives are prevalent interpretations of public issues shaped and pushed by political elites, technocrats, and key media figures to influence policy agendas and validate specific policy decisions. Stone (2012) describes elite-driven policy narratives as tactical stories crafted by powerful agents to frame policy issues and sway public opinion. Fischer (2019)

regards these narratives as communicative tools used by technocrats and political leaders to dominate policy discussions and sideline alternate viewpoints. Jones and McBeth (2020), utilizing the Narrative Policy Framework, explain elite policy narratives as oversimplified causal tales designed to control policy dialogue and influence decision-making. Hajer (2021) describes elite-driven narratives as discourse coalitions that solidify particular interpretations of social issues while dismissing grassroots insights. In Nigeria, Eze and Onyishi (2025) define elite-driven policy narratives as centralized portrayals of development matters shaped by political elites and media institutions, often out of touch with rural experiences and citizens' concerns.

Methodology

The link between digital engagement and rural development governance in Nigeria is investigated in this study using a qualitative research approach. The study is based on empirically grounded case studies and methodically chosen secondary data, which are selected to guarantee replicability, credibility, and methodological transparency.

Several sources were used to gather the data. Official government policy documents pertaining to citizen participation, digital governance, and rural development were examined, such as the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy for Nigeria for the years 2020-2030 and associated rural development frameworks published by the Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy. In addition, reports from international and national development organizations, notably the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), were included because of their methodological rigor and empirical emphasis on governance, digital inclusion, and rural development results in Nigeria. Peer-reviewed scholarly journal articles published between 2015 and 2024 were also analyzed and chosen using keywords like digital governance, rural participation, and Nigeria to make sure they were pertinent to the study's aims. The media reports and documented social media campaigns related to rural development and governance that were deliberately chosen were included in order to depict modern digital interactions and public debate.

The research incorporates three illustrative case studies that depict various modes of digital participation influencing how rural development is governed in Nigeria, all of which are part of a larger dataset. These consist of the #EndSARS digital advocacy campaign, which was investigated for its effects on political awareness, digital mobilization, and the visibility of rural issues in national online discussion; the National Social Investment Program (NSIP), which was analyzed with a focus on its digitally mediated beneficiary registration, feedback mechanisms, and information dissemination among rural populations; and the Rural Broadband Initiative, which was implemented in a few Nigerian states and evaluated for its contribution to increasing digital access and allowing rural participation in online civic and governance platforms. These instances were deliberately chosen to illustrate activism-driven, policy-driven, and infrastructure-driven forms of digital engagement, enabling comparative analysis across various governance environments.

Content and thematic analysis approaches were used for the data analysis. Following a defined procedure that included data familiarization, initial coding, and theme creation, thematic analysis was carried out. To find common themes connected to digital inclusion, rural representation, policy responsiveness, and citizen-government engagement, textual content from policy papers, institutional reports, academic literature, and media outlets was systematically coded. These codes were then categorized into larger analytical topics that reflected the connection between digital interaction and governance outcomes. In order to investigate how

digital participation and rural development challenges were framed across various sources and case settings, thematic analysis was used in conjunction with content analysis. This integrated analytical approach moves beyond descriptive analysis to generate analytically sound conclusions, allowing for a more thorough understanding of the significance, patterns, and policy consequences of digital participation in Nigeria's rural development environment.

Theoretical Framework

This investigation uses Habermas' Public Sphere Theory and Participatory Governance Theory as analytical frameworks that inform data interpretation and thematic analysis as well as explanatory lenses. The fundamental ideas of each theory are operationalized into empirical indicators that serve as a framework for analyzing digital participation and policy responsiveness in Nigeria's rural development setting.

According to the theory of participatory governance, successful governance particularly for marginalized groups necessitates ongoing citizen participation in policy development, implementation, and evaluation (Fung & Wright, 2003). This research uses an analytical definition of participation as measurable digital behaviors by which rural populations interact with governmental procedures. Empirically, participation is assessed using indicators such as the frequency and content of rural-focused contributions on social media platforms, evidence of online interaction between citizens and public officials, the presence of feedback mechanisms in digitally mediated government programs, and documented instances where citizen input is acknowledged or referenced in policy discussions or implementation processes. By determining if digital engagement progresses from merely symbolic expression to actual participation in decision-making, these indicators assist in the analysis of policy papers, news reports, and case study data.

The theory also emphasizes that institutional responsiveness is a prerequisite for participatory government. In the analysis, responsiveness is defined as noticeable government responses to concerns voiced online by rural residents, such as policy changes, public pronouncements about online feedback, or the incorporation of citizen-generated data into program design. The lack of such responses is seen as a restriction of participatory governance, implying participation without power. By using this model, the study may analyze the efficiency of digital engagement management in addition to its existence.

Habermas' theory of the public sphere, which emphasizes the creation of public opinion via inclusive and rational discussion in communicative environments (Habermas, 1989), supports this viewpoint. The research utilizes well-defined empirical indicators to assess the operation of social media sites as a digital public sphere, using this theory. The evidence used to gauge the inclusiveness of the public sphere includes the representation of rural areas in online forums, the accessibility of digital platforms to rural users, and the variety of opinions expressed in discussions about development. The deliberative quality is assessed by looking at the discourse's nature, such as if it includes reasoned arguments, issue-based debates, and policy narrative challenges, or if it is primarily influenced by misinformation, elite messaging, or token participation.

Most significantly, the research defines public sphere failure as circumstances in which digital conversation does not result in the development of well-informed opinions or influence government. The empirical indicators of such failure are the paucity of rural visibility in mainstream narratives, the algorithmic marginalization of rural material, the elite capture of online conversations, and the continued disconnect between online debates and official policy results. These indicators help in the interpretation of media material and case study data,

enabling the research to determine if social media improves or limits democratic conversation for rural communities.

The Public Sphere Theory and Participatory Governance Theory work together as complementary analytical tools. The assessment of who participates, how they participate, and whether participation has an impact on governance is structured by participatory governance theory. The analysis of how rural concerns are communicated, discussed, and legitimized in online environments is guided by public sphere theory. This framework ensures that theory actively informs data analysis by explicitly connecting theoretical concepts to empirical indicators, allowing for a systematic examination of how social media-mediated participation influences, and is constrained within, Nigeria's rural development governance environment.

Empirical Analysis and Discussion

Social Media and Grassroots Opinion Expression

In Nigeria, empirical data reveals that social media platforms have grown to be important alternative venues for expressing public opinion at the grassroots level, particularly in rural and semi-rural areas where formal participation channels are still underdeveloped. Issues pertaining to local development, such as the deteriorating feeder roads, the conflict between farmers and herders, insecurity, the erratic power supply, the substandard primary healthcare infrastructure, and the neglect of public schools, are actively discussed on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (previously Twitter).

WhatsApp groups serve as neighborhood digital forums, in particular. For instance, WhatsApp groups for farmer associations in rural communities throughout Benue and Oyo States have been utilized to disseminate pictures and brief videos showing damaged rural roads and delayed fertilizer distribution during the 2020–2022 agricultural seasons. These articles were reposted in a number of instances by local civil society groups like BudgIT and related Facebook advocacy pages, which helped to raise awareness of topics that are often overlooked in mainstream media coverage.

Similar to this, during the COVID-19 lockdown in certain areas of Kaduna and Ogun states, WhatsApp groups for rural communities shared concerns about the exclusion of rural families from government food assistance programs. Following this, journalists and development supporters shared screenshots of these debates on X, which elicited responses from government representatives. These instances show how social media reduces participation barriers by allowing rural citizens to bypass bureaucratic grievance channels and immediately share their real experiences using visual evidence.

In addition to reporting on problems, social media has been utilized for grassroots activism. In rural districts during the 2023 general elections, community-based WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages disseminated voter education materials, polling unit details, and accounts of electoral misconduct. Despite their uneven coverage, these techniques demonstrate the growing integration of social media into regular grassroots governance engagement, expanding participation beyond physical town hall gatherings and regular elections.

Elite Capture and Narrative Dominance

Empirical examples from Nigeria demonstrate the continued dominance of elites in influencing online narratives about rural development, even with the wider participation made possible by social media. Political elites, urban-based commentators, and well-funded advocacy organizations have an excessive amount of digital visibility due to verified accounts, extensive followings, media collaborations, and professional content production capabilities.

The #EndSARS protests in 2020 provided a vivid example. The main focus of mainstream media and X centered on experiences of urban protests in Abuja and Lagos, while sporadic references were made to police misconduct and rural insecurity in communities throughout the South East and North Central. Urban activists, journalists, and political influencers, who framed the issue in terms of overarching political messaging rather than local rural security concerns, were the primary conduits for rural perspectives.

The elite narrative dominance is evident throughout election cycles. In the 2019 and 2023 elections, political elites frequently framed problems pertaining to rural development, such as rural healthcare and access to agricultural inputs, as campaign slogans rather than addressing them through consistent communication with rural populations. Although party spokespersons and elite influencers frequently drove viral hashtags and campaign narratives, firsthand reports from rural voters had little traction unless they were supported or reframed by well-known people.

This imbalance is also reflected in policy debates. For example, the online conversation around the National Livestock Transformation Plan was mostly dominated by political elites, media commentators, and ethnic advocacy organizations, with the opinions of small-scale farmers and pastoralists in impacted rural areas being largely mediated through elite interpretations. These instances demonstrate that while rural residents have the ability to express themselves online, their voices are frequently muted, selectively amplified, or reframed in order to align with elite political agendas. As a result, social media usage in Nigeria enhances the volume of voices without ensuring parity in impact. Digital spaces have a tendency to replicate current power dynamics, leading to worries that elite capture online may diminish the revolutionary potential of grassroots digital interaction.

Institutional Responsiveness Deficit

A key empirical observation is the weak connection between online public opinion and formal policy-making processes in Nigeria. Although government bodies, ministries, and elected officials are increasingly active on social media, their engagement with content generated by citizens tends to be largely symbolic, reactive, or infrequent. Responses usually consist of public relations messaging, denial of accountability, or temporary acknowledgments, rather than a systematic integration of digital feedback into planning, budgeting, or implementation processes. There is scant evidence of organized systems for gathering, examining, and converting grassroots opinions from social media into tangible policy actions at local, state, or federal tiers. This lack of institutional responsiveness diminishes the potential benefits of digital involvement, as people might view online participation as superficial instead of significant. Over time, this growing disappointment can erode trust in both digital engagement and the overall democratic process. The lack of evident policy feedback channels emphasizes the divide between communicative involvement and meaningful governance results in rural development.

Digital Divide and Uneven Participation

Another key empirical challenge is the ongoing digital divide, which influences who joins online discussions and whose opinions get recognized. Numerous rural regions still grapple with issues like poor internet access, high data expenses, limited Smartphone availability, low digital skills, and unreliable electricity. These hurdles disproportionately impact women, seniors, and the poorest groups within rural communities, restricting their ability to regularly participate on social media sites. Consequently, the “grassroots voice” showcased online might only represent a portion of rural society usually younger, more educated, or better-off individuals rather than capturing the entire spectrum of rural experiences. This imbalanced participation

threatens to create a skewed understanding of rural needs and priorities, which can mislead policymakers and development actors. Without intentional actions to close digital gaps, social media-driven participation could mistakenly leave out the most vulnerable rural populations it aims to empower

Misinformation, Trust, and Policy Credibility

The analytical findings also indicate that misinformation and disinformation present serious obstacles to utilizing social media as a dependable tool for gathering grassroots public opinion. Rumors, unchecked assertions, politically driven falsehoods, and emotionally charged stories often spread quickly, especially during times of instability or electoral contests. In rural areas where access to validated information is scarce, such misinformation can influence perceptions, breed distrust, and skew policy discussions. For government entities, the spread of misinformation complicates engagement with online conversations, as differentiating authentic grassroots issues from distorted narratives becomes challenging. This predicament can cause policy indecision or outright rejection of online feedback, further reducing institutional responsiveness. Simultaneously, constant exposure to misinformation erodes citizens' faith in both digital platforms and government officials. Tackling this issue requires not only regulatory and platform-specific measures but also initiatives to boost digital literacy, enabling citizens to critically assess online information and engage meaningfully in policy-related dialogues.

Implications

Amplification of Grassroots Voices and Agenda-Setting

Social media platforms enable rural communities to voice their concerns, share their experiences, and rally around local issues like safety, poor roads and support for farmers, and power shortages. This online visibility allows rural voices to connect with larger audiences, including lawmakers, journalists, and advocacy groups, providing the chance for grassroots issues to shape public conversations and developmental priorities. However, this increased visibility relies on access, participation, and citizens' ability to use online platforms effectively.

Persistence of Elite Domination and Narrative

Distortion Even though social media creates spaces for participation, powerful figures such as politicians, urban influencers, and leaders of civil society often controls the conversation. This leads to rural issues being portrayed in ways that favor elite interests, pushing genuine grassroots viewpoints aside. As a result, the potential for social media to democratize discourse may be weakened, reinforcing existing disparities and sustaining policies that do not address the real needs of rural communities. It emphasizes that digital platforms by themselves cannot automatically democratize policy-making.

Weak Institutional Integration and Policy Responsiveness

The research reveals a noticeable gap between online citizen participation and official policy processes. Feedback from social media conversations is seldom systematically gathered, analyzed, or integrated into decision-making. This lack of institutional responsiveness limits the transformative power of digital engagement and suggests that without organized frameworks, social media might act more as a venue for expression rather than a powerful tool for affecting rural governance.

Exacerbation of Digital Inequalities

Structural obstacles like low internet access in rural regions, inadequate network coverage, expensive devices, and limited digital skills create imbalances in who can engage online. These inequalities indicate that even when social media serves as a means of participation, certain groups often the most disadvantage dare left out, which can reinforce ongoing social and

political disparities. Furthermore, those with better access and expertise might disproportionately influence online narratives, forming digital elite that reflects offline inequalities.

Conditional Effectiveness

Dependent on Governance and Policy Frameworks The ability of social media to impact rural development relies heavily on the willingness of government institutions to genuinely consider citizen input. In the absence of responsive governance structures, digital engagement risks becoming merely symbolic, leading rural communities to hold expectations that may not result in real development achievements. This emphasizes that social media's contribution to rural development is not automatically transformative but must be woven into larger governance reforms, digital inclusion strategies, and mechanisms that connect online discussions to actionable policy changes.

Potential for Enhancing Accountability and Transparency

Digital participation creates opportunities to monitor government actions, report on gaps in service delivery, and hold officials answerable. By sharing and documenting rural experiences online, citizens can apply pressure for better governance and heightened transparency. However, realizing this potential depends on how responsive public institutions are to digital insights and citizen feedback, along with the safeguards established to protect rural users from harassment or political retribution.

Influence on Civic Awareness and Political Engagement

Social media interaction can cultivate civic awareness among rural communities by introducing them to policy discussions, governance topics, and advocacy initiatives. This can enable citizens to take part in local development planning, seek accountability, and question top-down development approaches. Over time, this kind of interaction can transform the balance of power between rural areas and policymakers, making rural development more inclusive and focused on the people.

Recommendations

The following institution-specific and targeted recommendations are made based on the aforementioned empirical data:

1.Official social media monitoring and response units should be established in the federal and state ministries of rural development, with the authority to record, categorize, and give public answers to legitimate grassroots complaints that originate from WhatsApp in rural areas.

2. To guarantee that grassroots digital feedback feeds directly into local planning and budget conversations, local government councils should collaborate with community leaders to establish officially recognized community WhatsApp platforms connected to council offices.

3. The Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) should prioritize expanding rural broadband access and promoting affordable data access schemes, as well as working with NGOs to implement digital literacy projects that help rural users better document and communicate development challenges.

4.Data-driven feedback dashboards that combine social media posts with field evaluations should be developed by policy ministries like Agriculture, Health, and Works in order to lessen reliance on elite-mediated narratives during policy creation.

5. Media regulators and civil society groups should encourage inclusive content moderation and amplification policies that give priority to verified grassroots voices and restrict the power of elite players in shaping the conversation around rural development.

Conclusion

This study shows that although social media has considerable promise as a tool for gathering grassroots public opinion and questioning elite-dominated policy stories, its success in Nigeria's rural development governance is limited by deep-rooted inequalities and poor institutional cooperation. Utilizing digital involvement for inclusive rural development necessitates intentional policy changes, infrastructure improvements, and participatory governance structures that convert digital expressions into tangible policy measures.

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