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# Women's Political Participation on Social Media: The Case of Tanzania

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**Abstract.** This short, developmental paper outlines the rationale and design of a future study relating to women's political participation on social media. The impact of social media upon women's political participation is a topic that has gained some momentum. The affordances of social media now potentially enable women to create, access and distribute content relating to political issues and participate in an online space freely. This article highlights the role that social media can play in enabling more balanced participation and also highlights that despite the potential, there is a lack of IS literature exploring women's use of social media for political participation. This article outlines the aim of the study: to explore what types of platforms women prefer to use for political participation and the factors that influence women's participation in political issues on social media. The research focuses on the case of Tanzania and proposes steps going forward.

**Keywords:** Women, Political Participation Social Media, Tanzania

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore women's use of social media, specifically in the context of political participation in Tanzania. This paper aims to provide a brief review of some of the literature pertaining to this topic before advancing onto an outline of the methodology to be adopted in the actual study. For the purpose of this short, developmental paper, data has not been collected yet and we aim to provide a sound base for the proposed empirical study.

As is widely recognised, social media technology is rapidly becoming embedded in society and has been described as 'revolutionary' considering its affordances and rapid levels of adoption by citizens. It has the potential to alter power dynamics in organisations or society (Treem and Leonardi, 2012). This is because social media sites have been widely used for the purpose of information sharing and engaging audiences (Osatuyi, 2013; Erickson, 2011; Lewis, 2010): citizens can now be exposed to – and engage with – information that they may otherwise have not been privy to. Thus, individuals do not need to rely upon information being given to them as they can now seek

it themselves. Furthermore, the interactive capability of social media has enabled it to transform the web towards user-driven technology (Smith 2009). Web 2.0 is a central driver for this transformation as it enables content and applications to be created and published by users in a collaborative and participatory fashion. This transformation, also known as the social media phenomenon, has made the web highly interactive, enabling individuals to determine the nature, extent and context of information exchanged (Hanna et al, 2011), as well as changing the way people work in terms of how they create and disseminate information (Standing and Kiniti, 2011).

It is broadly acknowledged in the literature - and in practice - that Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) can be a catalyst for wide-ranging social and economic transformation. There is a belief in the direct causal relationship between ICTs and the development of a nation (Brown and Grant, 2010). Specifically, social media is viewed as one method by which individuals can become more involved in political participation. 'Political participation' can be defined in different ways: participation in political parties and running for office, signing a petition, political consumerism or donating money, demonstrations or to directly contacting a politician (Coffe and Bolzendahl, 2011). Political participation is acknowledged as being good for democracy. However, all democracies are said to be plagued by systematic inequalities in participation and one of the most persistent has been according to gender: less women participate than men (Ocran, 2014). Subsequently, a large proportion of the population's interests are less represented (Coffe and Bolzendahl, 2011). Thus, the question we aim to explore is: can social media lead to more balanced political participation in relation to gender?

## **2 Can social media lead to more balanced political participation?**

There is agreement amongst scholars that information sharing about a particular topic can influence social behavior (Moussaid et al, 2013). It is acknowledged that social interaction and news-seeking behaviours on social media lead to diverse networks, exposure to non-conforming political opinion and ultimately reconsidering and changing one's political views. Weeks et al (2017) add that: "individuals are becoming increasingly reliant on others in their online social networks for news recommendations and political information and that their knowledge, opinions, and behaviours are affected by the information stream and social dynamics within these sites" (p.214). The tendency for users to build and maintain friend networks subsequently creates a potential space for political persuasion to take place. According to O'Keefe (2008), 'persuasion', in its most basic form, "involves changing persons' mental states, usually as precursors to behavioural change. Of the various mental states that might be implicated in persuasion, attitude (understood as a person's general evaluation of an object) has been the center of research attention" (p.32). Attitude change is therefore an important aspect of persuasion: various decisions are subject to changes in attitudes, including which political candidate/party to support.

It is widely stated that there are gender gaps in political participation. One of the key reasons why there are gender gaps is gender norms (Isaksson, 2014) and that women's access to the political fora, like their access to resources, is limited which calls into question the notion that women are full citizens (Tamale, 2004). Civic education and other mechanisms are needed to encourage more female participation in all aspects of the political process (Amoateng et al, 2014). Overall, there is a very clear need for more women to engage in political participation. Given the rise of social media and the growing use of social media in political movements around the world, this can be regarded as one possible way of encouraging more female engagement in political participation. For instance, much has been written about the Arab Spring in relation to social media and its impact on women. Despite discriminatory behaviours towards women in some Arab countries, it has been stated that there had been considerable gains in terms of women's empowerment due to social media as young women used online platforms to express themselves freely on a global scale; thus, resulting in a personal, social, political and communicative revolution (Radsch and Khamis, 2013). Inclusive communities are key not only for the promotion of democracy, but also for a healthy economy and for enhancing equality and equity for all citizens. Social media is a medium to bring both likeminded people and people with opposing views together on one platform. Social media platforms are free and are therefore widely accessible across socioeconomic classes (Joseph, 2012). From an Information Systems (IS) perspective, there is a lack of literature focusing on the relationship between IT and women and, specifically, on the impact that social media can have when considering the issue of political participation. Walsham (2017), who has written extensively on the role and impact of technology within developing countries, suggests that the topic of women/gender and ICTs is an area for extensive future research. He asserts that such research should not be relegated to the 'gender studies' category "as if that is a special subject to be studied by women and not part of the mainstream" (p.26). With regards to the study of social media and women's political participation, this is actually where the majority of the research is currently found – in gender studies. In IS literature, therefore, gender should be regarded as a central issue in developing an understanding of ICTs in developing nations and not, as it currently is at best, another variable.

### **3 Social Media and participation**

Typically, social media technologies are considered to be Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) technologies which are used to create, share and exchange user-generated content, whilst allowing people to connect with each other (Lewis, 2010) and participate in a collaborative fashion (Berthon et al 2012) without, possibly, ever meeting one another (Grover et al, 2019). In addition, social media is different to traditional Information Technology (IT) because it offers visibility to third parties (Leonardi, 2014). Due to such functionalities, the use of social media has soared in a relatively short period of time: today, most of the social media platforms have more than a billion users (Piskorski, 2014) and they facilitate a multitude of interactions across the globe.

Social media provides individuals with easy access to a multitude of communities and discussion, allowing individuals to participate in discussions which are of interest. According to Leong et al (2018), social media has the ability to empower individuals and provides the opportunity to give a voice to the powerless and can sometimes become part of a social movement. Further, in relation to politics, Effing et al (2011) indicated that social media has changed the game both nationally and locally. A relevant example highlighting this is the 2016 US presidential campaign, where communication pathologies presented on various different social media platforms played a major role in how voting decisions were made (Wiggins, 2017)

Participation within social media can take many diverse forms. Carpentier (2011) indicated that participation as a concept is a problematic one as it is often rooted within our political realities and is subject to our ideological struggles and power. Furthermore, Jenkins' (2006) views based on convergence culture also recognizes the importance of new media on the changing nature of participation. The changing nature of participation also brings with it many challenges; challenges related to individuals mainly being consumers of content rather than producers of content. Rebillard & Touboul (2010) highlighted the importance of changing the perspectives on content and the importance of encouraging a culture of prosumers. Currently, only a minor group of users contribute to participation in social media posts and discussions (Flew & Wilson, 2010). Additionally, the digital divide among users is significant: much of the political participation on social media is from individuals who are more politically interested and the younger the users are, the more they are willing to participate. There is a clear need for more political participation on social media.

## **4 The Context of Tanzania**

Tanzania is moving towards general elections in 2020. It is expected, following the trends in other countries and restrictions on physical gathering due to COVID-19, that social media will be increasingly used in Tanzania for campaigning and organizing, for content creation and dissemination by citizens. In Tanzania, with the rising proliferation of mobile phones and access to the internet, people from various classes can potentially all use social media: 81% of the population has access to a phone and 43% have access to the internet. Electoral studies across the world show an increasing use of social media and technology in elections. Social media appears to have enhanced democratic activities: it has increased access to political leaders subsequently making them more accountable, it has facilitated organizing capacity for democratic activists and has provided more access to information and space for political participation. Social media can be regarded as a grassroots form of journalism and a way to shape democracy outside of the conventional party politics (Nardi et al, 2004). Furthermore, it is said to play a pivotal role in impacting the outcomes of national elections (Grover et al, 2019). In Tanzania, political parties have adopted social media.

Tanzania is a low-income country of 54.2 million people with women constituting 27.7 million (51.9%) and men 26.5 million (48.9%). The UNDP 2018 Human Development Report for 2018 ranks Tanzania 154 out of 189 countries in the Human

Development Index while gender development index was at 0.928 in 2017. In particular, the ‘feminisation of poverty’ is a significant challenge in Tanzania where more than half of the female population (60%) live in extreme poverty. Tanzania is still beneath the 50/50 legal representation target of African Union constituents. Due to the lower participation of women, and the social issues that affect females in particular (UN Women, Africa, 2019), the advancement towards women’s political supremacy is still a journey. Women in Tanzania are under-represented as voters, candidates and elected representatives. Nevertheless, there are examples of women who have been/are vocal on social media platforms about political issues. These women have a significant number of followers and, despite the government becoming more authoritative, remain active on social media regarding political issues. By engaging with the accounts and the content posted by such women, citizens’ interest in politics is increasing and their participation, to some degree, is increasing. As there is currently a lack of empirical data to support this behavior, this study aims to *explore factors that influence women’s participation in political issues on social media*.

## 5 Methodology – steps going forward

The study aims to initially identify individual who are using social media to participate in/engage with political content on social media platforms. This study will adopt an exploratory qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews. The procedure will be as follows: female Tanzanian participants will be identified and recruited using purposive sampling, i.e. a sample of females who actively engage in political discussion on social media platforms. A snowball sampling technique will be used to recruit further participants. Interviews will be conducted via Skype. The participants will be given an information sheet which informs the participants of the research aims. Following this, participants will be asked to provide their consent. Questions for the semi-structured interviews will be based on the general themes developed from the literature and further questioning will be based on prompts during the interview: a more extensive literature review will help to identify key themes. All the interviews will be recorded and transcribed (verbatim). The data will be analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach to reflexive thematic analysis. If participants discuss specific posts on their social media account, the researchers will access the source which may be twitter, their online interactions, messages and the impact (in terms of reactions/responses) that they have on the platform. Since social media offers visibility to others beyond one’s own network, this provides the potential to analyse the impact of the content that participants share on the wider online community. This will enable us to examine how the participants engage on social media platforms, e.g. sharing/commenting on content particular content, and (iii) the factors that influence their engagement with political issues online. Potential issues that may arise include the recruitment of participants. In order to manage this risk, the researchers plan to utilize their personal network in Tanzania to generate initial participants. The results of this study can contribute in a number of ways. Practically, considering the under-representation of women in politics, this study aims to explore whether the online social media space encourages

more women to participate in political discussions; thus, providing women with the platforms to express themselves freely. This is particularly pertinent given that in Tanzania, women are under-represented on the political scene. Theoretically, it is suggested that social media can help to shape democracy and encourage more participation by women; however, there is little empirical data to support this, hence the motivation for this research.

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