



Role of social media in influencing political engagement among St. Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT) students

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Abstract

This study was conducted to measure the role of social media over the political engagement of SAUT students. The study was concerned with the reasons of to what extent the social media play a significant role in influencing the democratic behavior of the students. Data were collected from SAUT students using the questionnaire as a research tool. Data from the field were presented by the use of tables with consideration to different demographic characteristics such as gender, age and other related factors. Basing on the data collected from the field, it was discovered that, social media has been playing the active role in influencing SAUT students to engage in politics through different discussions posed online. Consequently, it was concluded that, social media influences SAUT students to engage in politics. It was recommended to the SAUT students, and relevant authorities to post information which is true and factual by considering norms and tradition of the certain place, reduction of draconic laws enacted by the government, and using social media for academic betterment.

Keywords: Social media, political engagement and SAUT students

1. Introduction

Social media refer to the new form of media that involve interactive participation (Manning, 2014) ^[14]. It is the media in which a number of people can be interacting in one way or another; different from the mainstream media which has the limited cyber space for interaction. Manning (2014) ^[14] also describes social media as being more interactive basing on its nature of operationalization. The interaction of different people from different corners of the world regardless of physical boundaries is enabled by the social media. The effectiveness of Social media depends with the connection of the internet; thus, the absence of internet connection, the operations of social media become at void.

In supplement, Hamid and Rahman (2018) ^[11] propound that social media plays an important role as a platform and application that enable users to create and share the information and knowledge with other people. The presence of social media has played the great role of informing and easing the communication in the society as it ensures that people are sharing information, different from the mainstream media. The mainstream media is limited in sharing the content as those who are in a position to do so are few and its accessibility is too limited. Moreover, social media has been considered as the very active source of news and information in the society. This is because, it has been making it easier for the citizens to share different content without being limited with the physical obstacles (Kim *et al.*, 2012) ^[12]. The situation of sharing different content in the social media has benefited the publics to be well informed on different issues pertaining their society.

Social media use has been making it possible for people from different localities to send messages, share contents, and involve in the discuss issues pertaining the society concern. Sometimes the content which are shared in the social media help the relevant authorities to make the right decisions on something disturbing the society. Furthermore, social media is considered to be the site and application used for social networking in the given society; Meaning that, social media allows the whole process of connecting people from different areas (Manrai, 2013) ^[15]. Social media establish itself as one of the more distinguished communication vehicles in which people communicate in one way or another regardless of the physical boundaries.

However, Political engagement refers to the active participation of the citizens in selecting and approving the leaders who exercise their power in government, by either entering themselves as candidates for leadership, or by influencing anyway the leaders who are in leadership to do as citizens want (Mansuri & Rao, 2013) ^[16]. Political engagement comprises citizen actions as voters, as active or latent challengers for leadership positions in government, and in organized groups that pressure elected politicians and appointed public officials through civil society action and public protests.

Grandvoinnet, *et al.* (2015) ^[19] believes that, the political engagement describes the citizens as being the co-producers of the public good in the society. Citizens try at their best level to make sure that, all the public interests are given the due considerations; rather than the personal interests. The political engagement makes the officials responsible and exact accountable through social pressure created by the society members.

Political engagement is mostly triggered by the citizens' participation in election matters as voters and as competitors for leadership. Not only that, but also it is in the confines of the rise of civil society organizations including activists (Giuliano & Nunn 2013) ^[7]. Rise in political engagement at the local level has the great impact to the changes at the national level. Local levels political engagement is always the training ground for citizens to develop their political beliefs and political behavioral norms at the national and international levels. The local level political engagement can serve to develop a supply of good leaders who have built reputations for responsible management of public resources. In India rise in political engagement take the form of more citizens engaging as contenders for leadership rather than greater participation as voters.

Relationship between social media and political engagement

Media as one among the key players of development in the society, has been with the very great impact in the society. It has been playing the active role of revealing the social evils in the society which influences the government to make decision (McQuail, 2000) ^[17]. Social media reveals the harms done by both people in power and others who are not in power. It is also the source of discussion in a number of issues which are in the society. Apart from media being the source of knowledge, entertainment and education, they have been playing the active role in creating the agendas in the society which influence people discussion (Stadler, 2008) ^[22].

Basing on the Agenda Setting theory developed by McCombs, the media are revealed of being the very vital factor in the democracy of the society through triggering different discussions in the society. What is termed to be the agenda in the media is also an agenda or topic of discussion to the citizens. The topic of discussion in the society creates the agenda in the social media. Social media influence the discussion of political oriented content which requires the relevant authorities to make the certain decisions which are vital for the society wellbeing. On the other hand, media have been a triggering point to the political matters including voting behavior as well as political gatherings (Maasoglu *et al.*, 2012) ^[5]. The presence of social media triggers the political discussion among society members.

Media's association with political engagement in the society can also be traced through three major key models developed by Raeijmaekers and Maesele (2015) ^[19]. Firstly, Liberal

model which advocates that, media act as the representation of the public. Media represent the issues which are in the society through selecting sources under the principle of equality. Media are creating, enhancing and advocating the representativeness to the society members in the given area. Media also act as the intermediary between the democratic institutes and the public by representing their views and different needs which require the due attention from the respective authorities. Social media as one among the media, presents the concerns of the society members. The issues which are disturbing the society are hereby revealed by the social media. In this dimension, social media has been giving the opportunity to citizens to discuss the civil matters which are in a great debate in the society. Social media has been the very critical factor in representing the reality of the society. Moreover, media associate with political engagement through the second model namely deliberative model. The model suggests that, media have to focus more to ordinary people rather than the elitist group. People who are seen being ordinary also have the ideas which can help the transformation of the society. Media should not only focus to people who have but also to people who haven't for views and opinions for the betterment of their society. The principle of exclusion is not suitable for democratic society as it infringes the rights of minority. Social media removes the principle of exclusion. It gives the chance to all society members to debate the issues arising in the society (Courtney, 2003) ^[4]. People with different political contents in all aspects are given the opportunity to share such content. The debates which are run in the social media influences the decisions of the political leaders. The political leaders are getting the information on the ongoing issues in the society through what is discussed in the social media. This is because of its advantages of removing the exclusion principle.

The third is agonistic model. In this model media are assumed of being the center for discussion. It is also considered as the platform of discussing issues arising in the society. Social media is a platform which helps the relevant political leaders and officials to get peoples' views and perceptions on some issues arising in the society. It must be adhered that, media have a great role in enhancing political participation among the public. Media have to make sure the society is fully equipped in engaging in issues like decision making, participation in political issues like voting, political gatherings and debates for the public good. Graber (2003) ^[8], argues that, media have to be the voice of public opinions. The feelings, representativeness and sentiments as the core values of democracy are to be passed out through media to the relevant authorities.

2. Literature review

Kalyango & Adu-Kumi investigated on the Impact of social media on Political Mobilization in East and West Africa. The great aim being to examine whether the online and wireless digital media have aided political mobilization in Africa more than the traditional media in the past five years (by then). The research focused on the way the new media plays the vital role in ensuring the political positioning among the citizens in the western countries, although he also used some data from East African countries (Kenya and Uganda). The study concluded that, social media networks were increasingly becoming a critical component of civic engagement and an ideal mode of communication, as they generated virtual discourse among friends, associates, groups with similar

aspirations, and with whoever shares one's common interests. Moreover, basing on this study, it was learnt that social media networks; specifically, Friendster, Myspace, and Facebook help African citizens to perform a crucial function of keeping in touch with people from different corners of the world. Meaning that, people from different corners of the world were connected with the social media as the way of increasing the freedom of expression and associations in one way or another. Basing on the arguments of the findings obtained, social media play the critical role in ensuring that people who are far from one another get the opportunity to share the information to a large group of people. With such freely dissemination of information (different from mainstream media) has made it possible for people who are in authority to see what ruled group satisfies and which ones not. It increases the freedom of participation and contributing in the process of decision making as one of the elements of democracy.

Biswas *et al.* (2014) ^[2], made the research with the objective of looking at whether the mushrooming of the social media can help to influence the young generation to participate in the election matters explicitly in voting behavior. The study was guided by the hypothesis that, with the social media increase, the communication platform changed abruptly and has increased the wide range for the information flow in the society. Basing on the data from the field, its analysis and interpretation it was cleared that social media played a significant impact on voting behavior of young voters. Political parties were successful influencing the people of the central cities and semi urban cities through the use of social media. Social media replaced the traditional media but in remote areas traditional media still had significant impact in creating awareness among people. Social media provided platform to the people to get connected to parties they favor. Furthermore, Burford (2012) ^[3], made the study titled social media and political participation: the case of the Muslim council of Britain. The great aim of the study was to look whether the social media can be helping in stimulating the political participation in comparison to the mainstream media which is used by few (limited to only those people who are prominent and have the access to it at any time they are in need of the media). The study was guided by the hypothesis that, it had been suggested by the media and scholars alike that social media might be a potential solution for problems of political participation. With that as the way of testing such hypothesis, the evaluation of Twitter posts for the period of January 1, 2011 – December 31, 2011 was done. The case study of Muslim Council of Britain was used as well as the use of mixed research approach. The findings discovered that; social media play the very crucial position in the participation in political matters as people have direct access to give out their contributions as well as criticism if there happen any decisions which are not sounding in the respective society.

Danju *et al.* (2012) ^[15], presented the thesis after investigating the Impact of social media on the Transformation Process in North Africa and Middle East. Because of the political changes which were happening in these regions for that time, the thesis wanted to explore whether the social media played any part in such transformations which happened. The scholars discovered that; social media played the great role towards such changes in the society. This is because, the social media made it possible for society members to present their objections towards what was done by the state leaders.

With such comments and objections from the society members, the process of transformation became very easy as leaders get the foundations of solving society problems.

Rozumiłowicz & Kužel (2019) ^[21], presented the paper which investigated the level to which social media play in the misinformation in the publics during the election times. The author's comments that from the USA election which was held 2016, the level of misinformation through social media in the time of election in different countries has increased, something which makes the audience fail to get the real information as it is always recommended to media.

With the take, they discovered that basing on the great problems which are happening basing on this situation and it seems to continue being progressive in the states, each country had its own initiatives on making the problem end. The notable example was that of Mexico, in which the National Electoral Institute signed a Memorandum of Understanding and worked during the 2018 elections with Facebook. (Bassante, 2018) ^[1]. The habit extended even in Estonia, in which the State Electoral Office monitors online media in cooperation with other authorities and private companies such as Facebook and Google. Actions available to technology companies include flagging or removing false content, rating content based on the findings of fact-checkers, changing their algorithms to promote truthful information and hide false information, and ad disclosure policies. (Estonia: Parliamentary Elections).

3. Research methodology

This study was conducted at St. Augustine university of Tanzania. The research applied survey research design and it was quantitative in nature. Data were collected from SAUT students (who were targeted) using the cluster sampling technique in accompany with random sampling. Every faculty at SAUT had one cluster with the total number of samples correlating to the total number of students in the given faculty. The total number of 337 students were used as sample in the study. The questionnaire was used as the research tool in collection of data as aforementioned.

This study is quantitative in approach as abovementioned; thus, analysis and presentation of the findings used descriptive statistics such as tables, charts, graphs as well as percentages (statistical presentation). This makes the report to be easily understood as well as being with proof in hand. This is because quantitative research intends to look at the relationship between the variables under investigation and gives out the statistical proof on the issue under investigation. (Neumann *et al.*). The data from the field were collected and put in the software used to analyze quantitative data (SPSS). The software was helpful in the descriptive statistics. The data which were corrected are primary data direct from the field. The software helped the researcher to make the calculations and analysis of what does the data mean. Before data being put in the software, they were ordered and coded in accordance in relationship to the objectives. Ordering the data according to the objective helped the researcher to get the real analysis of the issue in accordance, different from how the data can be mixed. If data were mixed without considering the objectives, could have led to biases.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Findings

To find out if social media provide free and open space for SAUT students to discuss SAUTSO elections

The objective under this study was to find out whether social

media offer free and open space for SAUT students to discuss SAUTSO elections as one among the conventional politics which is done at the campus. The objective needed to directly find out the degree to which SAUT students use social media

(in comparison to other mainstream/traditional/conventional media) to discuss SAUTSO elections, the variety of contents they were able to discuss, the level of freedom they had in discussing SAUTSO elections.

Table 1: Degree of using social media to discuss SAUTSO elections, 2021

Response	Number of respondents	Percent (%)
Extremely	81	24%
Somehow	186	55.2%
Rarely	27	8%
Very Rarely	26	7.7%
I Don't Know	17	5%
Total	337	100%

Source: Field Research, 2021

Degree to which SAUT students use social media to discuss SAUTSO election

From the data obtained from the field it has been discovered that, SAUT students do discuss SAUTSO elections using social media at a moderate level. The data from the field show that majority of the respondents which is 186 (55.2% of all respondents), somehow use social media to discuss SAUTSO elections. 81 respondents (24%) extremely use social media to discuss SAUTSO elections.

Moreover, 27 respondents (8%) were rarely using social media to discuss SAUTSO elections, contrary to 26 respondents (7.7%) who were very rarely using social media to discuss SAUTSO elections, and finally 5% don't know the degree to which they use social media to discuss SAUTSO elections. Not only that, but also the mean score under degree of using social media is 2.15. This means that, the score falls under falls under the variable coded as 2. The variable denotes the use of social media to discuss SAUTSO election at moderate (somehow) level. Therefore, the aforementioned statistics give the implication that, SAUT students were somehow free to use social media for discussing SAUTSO elections.

Content discussed by SAUT students using social media about SAUTSO elections

Data from the field as presented (Figure. 4.1 below) have revealed that, a high number of respondents (92) which is equal to 27.3% of all respondents use social media to discuss the Candidates credentials as heading to the SAUTSO elections. Moreover, 79 respondents (23.4%) use social media to discuss about the budget which is allocated by the relevant authorities for such elections. Meanwhile corruption scandals awake 63 respondents, followed by 18.1% of all respondents who use social media to discuss about the way SAUT management interferes the election while others few (12.5) % discuss about the Manifesto presented by the candidates.

Furthermore, basing on the findings under cross tabulation analysis, it was discovered that, a good number of students who discusses candidates' credentials are male who comprises 57.6% contrary to women who covers 42.4% to make a total of all respondents (100%). This implies that, men are more entitled at looking the credentials of the candidates before the election.

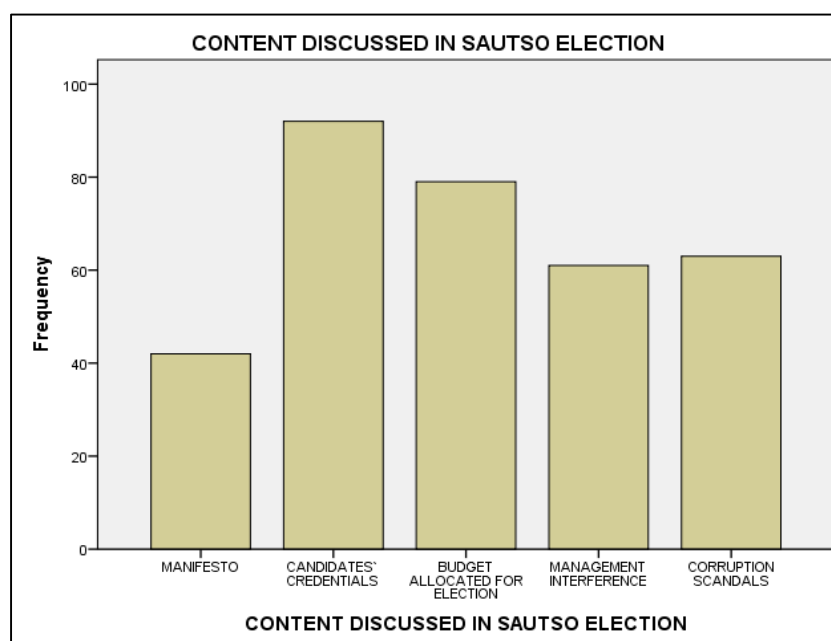


Fig 1: Content discussed by SAUT students about SAUTSO elections, 2021

Table 2: Freedom of SAUT students to discuss different contents about SAUTSO elections using social media, 2021

Response	Number of respondents	Percent (%)
Extremely Free	81	24%
Somehow Free	215	63.8%
Not Free at All	28	8.3%
I Don't Know	13	3.9%
Total	337	100%

Source: Field Research, 2021

The data from the field have revealed that, majority of the respondents (63.8%) are somehow free to discuss different contents about SAUTSO elections conducted at the campus. Moderate number of respondents (81) are extremely free to discuss the content which is stretching during SAUTSO elections. Moreover, 8.3% of all respondents are not free at all to discuss the content which they are interested to discuss about SAUTSO elections. The least number of respondents (3.9%), don't know the level of freedom they have on discussing the content of SAUTSO election.

The mean score under this category is 1.92. This means that, the score is approaching at the variable coded number 2, although with an implication that even variable number 1 has high probability of respondents. The variable number 2 denoted the somehow (moderate) degree for SAUT students to discuss a number of contents related to SAUTSO elections. On that take, the findings establish that many respondents are somehow free to discuss different contents about SAUTSO election.

Furthermore, basing on the cross tabulation calculation, it has been discovered that, the good number of respondents (35.8%) among all respondents who are somehow free to discuss a number of contents related to SAUTSO elections uses Instagram followed by the users of both Facebook and Twitter (20%). Meanwhile, the good number of respondents (29.6%) who are extremely free also uses Instagram followed by 24.7% of Facebook users. In gender bases, 57.2% of all respondents who are somehow free to discuss matters related to SAUTSO elections in the social media are female, contrary to 42.8% who are male. This implies that, most women are somehow free to discuss the SAUTSO election matters more than men.

Table 3: The liberty social media provides to SAUT students, 2021

Response	Number of respondents	Percent (%)
YES	232	68.8%
NO	105	31.2%
Total	337	100%

Source: Field Research, 2021

The liberty social media provides to SAUT students

From table 3 above, the great number of respondents (68.8%) responded that social media provide the liberty to discuss elections, while 105 respondents equivalent to 31.2 % responded that, social media is totally not giving them the right to discuss SAUTSO elections. Therefore, the findings inaugurate that social media is giving the authorization to the SAUT students to discuss SAUTSO election.

In supporting that, Table 4 below shows the extent to which social media has been providing the liberty to SAUT students to discuss SAUTSO elections. Most of the respondents (52.2%) are moderately (somehow) getting such liberty; while 22% percent getting liberty at extreme level.

Table 4: Degree of Liberty social media provides to SAUT students, 2021

Level	Number of respondents	Percent (%)
Extremely	74	22%
Somehow	176	52.2%
Rarely	48	14.2%
Very Rarely	10	3%
I Don't Know	29	8.6%
Total	337	100%

Source: Field Research, 2021

4.2. Discussion

The objective under this study was to look whether social media provide free and open space for SAUT students to discuss SAUTSO elections. The findings reveal that, social media has been playing the very active role of allowing SAUT students to discuss about the SAUTSO election. Meanwhile, the findings have disclosed that, with the presence of social media, students are free to discuss the very crucial information about the SAUTSO elections. Moreover; basing on the findings, the candidates' credentials awakes a number of students to discuss through the social media. Although there are other issues but the credentials of candidates are given the due consideration. This means that, regardless of other issues which are associated with election matters, the social media provide the free and open space to discuss the credentials of the candidate in deep. However, the respondents are somehow free to discuss the issue openly without being bounded by a number of factors. Such freedom makes it possible for the interaction of different people on discussing the number of issues arising in the society, regardless of physical barriers and proximity as it is in mainstream media.

The findings have proved what Manning (2014) ^[14] commented that, social media enables different citizens to interact and the discuss different issues which arise in the society; even if they are far apart from one another. The presence of open and free space for SAUT students to discuss SAUTSO elections, differentiates social media from mainstream media which doesn't do so as claimed by Drahošovaa and Balcob (2017) ^[6], as well as Rostam (2020) ^[20]. Meanwhile, the act of social media to provide free and open space for SAUT students to discuss the SAUTSO elections without any hesitations, allows the students to give out their grievances, their ideas, their opinions, objections and other related issues on the elections.

Furthermore, the findings have also proved the study made by Burford (2012) ^[3] on the way social media made Muslim University students in Britain participate in election matters. He discovered that, due to the presence of the open space for them to discuss, influence one another and share ideas, it was very easy for them to engage directly in election matters. Again, this study has disclosed such role which social media play towards SAUT students' discussions on SAUTSO elections. On the other hand, the findings have supported the

study by Biswas *et al.* (2014) ^[2] which aimed at looking whether social media have any influence to the voting behavior of the youth. His findings revealed that, social media plays the vital role for the online discussions and mobilization processes during election times. The findings of this study specifically in this objective, that social media gives freedom and open space for SAUT students to discuss SAUTSO elections, supports his findings and adds the theoretical arguments on the body of knowledge in this field. Although the findings show that, social media provide the free and open space to the SAUT students to discuss about SAUTSO elections, but such freedom degree is still in question. Basing on the findings, the level is not extreme rather at somehow level. This gives the implication that, there is something behind such freedom. It can be either the authorities restrict such discussions or the SAUT by-laws, plays a role to make the SAUTSO election discussions persist at a meagre level. It must be adhered that, the social media's provision of open space for the SAUT students to share, comment and debate on the SAUTSO elections, gives the room for the assurance of getting the required leaders after election. This is because, if the students use social media and reveal the corruption scandals which are made or likely to happen, it will be a chance for the voters to vote for the person who is not corrupt. The liberty level SAUT students have on the discussion of the election at their localities, acts as the good foundation for them to discuss even about the national general elections hence giving out their aptitudes about such elections (Giuliano & Nunn, 2013, Myerson, 2012) ^[7, 18]. Not only that, but also the findings under this objective have proved the element of the public sphere theory. One among the element of public sphere theory is free and open discussion. This element gives the remark that, for something to be the public sphere, it must be allowing the free majority discussions without any restrictions, and allowing all people to give out their views and arguments openly (Habermas, 2006) ^[10]. Moreover, in this element, the provision of ideas in the discussion must be free and open to all to see, judge and comment without any barriers. The findings under this study, continue to give the credit to the social media to be the public sphere as it was propounded by Habermas (2006) ^[10]. Social media is giving the liberty to SAUT students to discuss the SAUTSO elections, on the number of issues like corruption scandals, credentials of candidates, the allocated budget, management interference just to mention few, openly for all and freely for all to share, comment, advice and other related issues.

Therefore, the data obtained from the field gives the implication that, the role social media play in SAUTSO elections is very vital. It plays the role of facilitating debates on the issues arising during the elections. Such discussions trigger the informed decisions at the moment the students get the secret ballot. With the social media's role of creating the open and free space for SAUT students to debate in the elections, prepares the future leaders who will be able to question, analyze as well as who can be providing the relevant and sounding decisions basing on the advice and recommendations raised in the social media from different citizens.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

Media has penetrated deep into our society through several channels but the only constraints that restrict its full potential

is inaccessibility and lack of trust. The majority of the students in urban areas uses media as the primary source of information and has high levels of consumption patterns or at least average for those even without having a keen interest in politics. As revealed through this study the majority of SAUT students at campus engage in voting process by the influence of the social media. Not only that, but also they believe that social media does influence over student's democratic behavior and do agree with the stance of media over many of the matters.

The aforementioned scenario shows that there exists a positive relationship between the two as the more SAUT students are exposed to social media. The more they are politically aware and updated the more they tend to vote rationally. Basing on the data from the field, social media provides the free and open space for the SAUT students to discuss the SAUTSO elections as one among the conventional politics they engage in. The freedom level SAUT students have to discuss SAUTSO election through social media is satisfactory.

5.2. Recommendations

1. Students must ensure that, what they are posting in the social media doesn't infringe the students' by-laws and University Act (2005).
2. For the students, as they share, communicate or discuss anything in the social media about a specific content, must make sure that are using the formal language which is free from abusive words to the society members especially leaders.
3. The government must regulate the laws which are draconic to the citizens. For instance, laws which are curbing the person to address the reality and the facts, the reason being that those facts are tendering the interest of the rulers. Such kind of laws will be curb freedom to different social media users.
4. Relevant authorities should let people be free to discuss the issues arising in their society which are of public interest, and taking people's comments as challenges but not the threat to the rulers.
5. University management should find a way to train their students on the ICT uses as it runs their daily operations at campus.

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