

HARNESSING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY AND POLICY CHANGE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND STRATEGIES FOR MAXIMIZING IMPACT.



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Abstract

This study explores the transformative role of social media in advocacy and policy change in developing countries. Social media platforms have become powerful tools for mobilizing public opinion, raising awareness, and influencing policy decisions. Despite challenges such as digital divides, misinformation, and censorship, social media has enabled grassroots movements and amplified marginalized voices. The Diffusion of Innovation Theory provides a framework for understanding how new ideas and practices spread through social media. Successful campaigns like #EndSARS in Nigeria and #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests in Kenya demonstrate the potential of social media to drive policy change and promote civic engagement. The study recommends strategic investments in digital infrastructure, education, and regulatory reforms to maximize the impact of social media advocacy.

Keywords: social media, advocacy, policy change, developing countries, digital divides, misinformation.

Introduction

In recent years, social media has rapidly transformed the way people communicate and share information across the world. Its widespread use has created new opportunities for individuals and organizations to raise awareness about critical issues, advocate for social change, and influence public opinion and policy. In developing countries, where traditional communication channels may be limited or less effective, social media offers an accessible platform to bridge gaps, amplify local voices, and mobilize communities around shared goals. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram have been

instrumental in facilitating grassroots movements, spreading innovative ideas, and holding authorities accountable.

Despite these promising developments, the integration of social media into advocacy efforts in developing countries also presents significant challenges. Limited internet access, digital divides, and low levels of digital literacy can hinder the reach and effectiveness of online campaigns. Additionally, the rapid spread of misinformation, propaganda, and fake news can undermine credible advocacy and erode public trust. There are also concerns about online harassment, censorship, and government surveillance that may discourage marginalized groups from participating freely in digital activism. Furthermore, converting online engagement into tangible policy changes often requires strategic planning and sustained effort, which may be difficult to maintain in resource-constrained environments.

Significantly, the relevance of social media in advocacy lies in its ability to democratize access to information and facilitate public participation in decision-making processes. Unlike traditional media, which is often controlled by governments or elite entities, social media empowers marginalized voices to be heard, particularly in developing countries (Tufekci, 2020). For instance, as of January 2025, Facebook has 2.28 billion active users globally, with a steady growth rate and significant presence in Asia and Latin America across various age groups residing in developing regions, highlighting the platform's potential for mass mobilization. In the realm of advocacy, social media has proven effective in amplifying causes, mobilizing public opinion, and pressuring policymakers. Platforms like Twitter have been instrumental in movements such as #EndSARS in Nigeria, where digital activism led to widespread protests against police brutality, ultimately compelling government intervention (Nwokeoma, 2021). Similarly, Instagram has been pivotal for raising awareness on climate change, leveraging visuals to engage younger audiences in developing regions (Smith et al., 2022).

Also, in developing country like Kenya, the Gen Z has been at the forefront of leveraging social media for advocacy change, particularly during the #RejectFinanceBill2024 protests. This movement showcases the power of digital activism in influencing policy decisions and promoting social justice. Social media platforms like Twitter (now X), TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram enabled swift mobilization of protesters, allowing them to organize rallies and demonstrations effectively. Activists used social media to document police actions and protesters' experiences, providing real-time updates and countering traditional media narratives.

The hashtag campaign #RejectFinanceBill2024 trended on Twitter, unifying the movement and garnering international attention. Social media platforms helped ensure transparency and accountability by broadcasting protests and potential human rights violations, discouraging violence and misconduct by both protesters and law enforcement. The online movement had a significant impact on advocacy, compelling the government to withdraw the Finance Bill 2024 and demonstrating the influence of digital activism on policy decisions. Social media provided a platform for marginalized groups to express their concerns and demands, promoting inclusivity and diversity in the advocacy process. Additionally, social media facilitated coalition building and solidarity among activists, civil society organizations, and the public, amplifying the impact of their advocacy efforts.

However, social media also presents unique challenges in developing countries. Limited internet penetration, often below 40% in Sub-Saharan Africa, constrains access for large segments of the population (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, digital literacy remains a barrier, with only 50% of internet users in low-income countries possessing the skills necessary for effective engagement online (ITU, 2023). Furthermore, misinformation and cyberbullying exacerbate social tensions, undermining advocacy efforts (Fadairo et al., 2020).

Despite these challenges, the opportunities are immense. The rising affordability of smartphones and expanding broadband infrastructure have led to a rapid increase in social media usage across developing regions (GSMA, 2023). Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) increasingly recognize the strategic value of social media for advocacy, utilizing platforms to engage citizens and promote policy reforms (Nyabola, 2018).

Theoretical perspective

The Diffusion of Innovation Theory, developed by Everett Rogers in 1962, explains how new ideas and practices spread through a community or society. According to Rogers, the diffusion process involves four main elements: the innovation itself, communication channels, time, and a social system. In the context of harnessing social media for advocacy and policy change in developing countries, this theory is particularly relevant.

When advocating for policy change through social media, understanding how innovations (new ideas or practices) diffuse through a population is crucial. Social media platforms can serve as effective communication channels for spreading awareness about a particular issue or cause. For instance, hashtags can help reach a wider audience, while online petitions and campaigns can mobilize

support. The theory also highlights the importance of identifying and engaging with early adopters or opinion leaders who can champion the cause and influence others.

The diffusion of innovation theory categorizes adopters into several groups, including innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. In social media advocacy, targeting early adopters and opinion leaders can be particularly effective in spreading the message and building momentum. By leveraging social media platforms and engaging with influential individuals, advocates can increase the visibility and credibility of their cause, ultimately driving policy change.

The theory is therefore significant to the study because it provides a framework to the understanding of how policy change can spread within developing countries with the sole aim of advocacy change.

The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing Public Opinion

Social media has emerged as a dynamic tool for facilitating public discourse and raising awareness, particularly in developing countries. By providing open platforms for interaction, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp allow individuals and groups to share information, voice concerns, and mobilize collective action (Kapoor et al., 2018). Unlike traditional media channels, which are often restricted by state control, social media enables decentralized communication, empowering citizens to initiate conversations about social and political issues without intermediaries (Tufekci, 2020).

One of the most significant impacts of social media on public opinion lies in its ability to galvanize grassroots movements. In Nigeria, for instance, the #EndSARS movement against police brutality became a global phenomenon in 2020, largely due to the amplification provided by social media platforms. Activists used Twitter and Instagram to share videos of police violence, organize protests, and draw international attention to their cause (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2022). Similarly, in Sudan, the 2019 revolution that ended Omar al-Bashir's 30-year dictatorship was fueled by digital campaigns on platforms such as Facebook, which allowed organizers to coordinate protests and disseminate critical updates (Ahmed, 2021).

The speed and reach of information dissemination on social media are unparalleled. Within minutes, a post can go viral, reaching millions of users across geographical and cultural boundaries. For example, WhatsApp groups in India have been instrumental in spreading political messages, enabling mass mobilization during elections (Mukherjee & Banerjee, 2020). This immediacy

allows social media to outpace traditional communication channels, making it a preferred tool for rapid advocacy and awareness-building. However, while the reach of social media is immense, it also poses challenges. The same speed that facilitates mobilization can amplify misinformation, leading to social unrest and undermining legitimate causes (Raji et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, the role of social media in mobilizing public opinion remains transformative, providing a voice to marginalized communities and fostering civic engagement in developing countries.

Social Media and policy Change Advocacy in Nigeria.

Social media has proven to be a powerful instrument for influencing policy decisions in developing nations, enabling unprecedented levels of civic engagement and accountability. Through online campaigns, activists, influencers, and digital advocacy groups have leveraged platforms like Twitter and Facebook to amplify their voices, raise awareness, and directly pressure policymakers (Tufekci, 2020). These campaigns often rely on viral hashtags and strategic storytelling to highlight systemic issues, rallying public support to effect change.

Social media has become a powerful tool for advocating for policy change in Nigeria. Many Nigerians use platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to share their ideas and voice their opinions about important issues. These platforms help people reach a large audience quickly and easily. When many people talk about a problem or suggest a new idea, it can catch the attention of leaders and policymakers. This, in turn, can lead to changes in laws or policies that benefit the country.

These platforms have become powerful tools for advocacy, changing the way we think about and discuss social issues. It has also created a paradigm shift from the misnomer to normalise culture For example, an influencer in Nigeria , Mr Geh Geh recently employed his platform to talk about relationships and marriage, highlighting issues like emotional manipulation and financial exploitation. The influencer aims to raise awareness and promote healthier relationship dynamics. This demonstrates how social media can be used to challenge harmful norms and promote positive change. On the other hand, using social media for advocacy allows everyday citizens to participate in discussions that were once limited to government officials or big organizations. Nigerians can share stories, post videos, or use hashtags to spread awareness about issues like education, health, corruption, or security. When enough people support a cause online, it creates pressure on leaders to listen and act. Social media makes it easier for everyone to be part of the change they want to see in Nigeria.

However, there are also challenges. Sometimes false information spreads quickly, which can create confusion. Not everyone has access to the internet or knows how to use social media well. Despite these challenges, social media remains a vital tool for normal Nigerians to advocate for better policies and a brighter future for their country.

Challenges of Using Social Media for Advocacy in Developing Countries

Despite its potential, using social media for advocacy in developing countries faces significant challenges, including technological, economic, and political barriers. One of the primary obstacles is the digital divide, as internet penetration in many developing nations remains low, averaging 40% in Sub-Saharan Africa compared to the global average of 66% (World Bank, 2022). Limited internet access restricts the reach and inclusivity of social media campaigns, particularly in rural and low-income areas.

Digital literacy is another critical issue. While more people are gaining access to smartphones and the internet, many lack the skills to effectively use social media for advocacy. A 2023 report by the International Telecommunication Union found that only 28% of individuals in low-income countries possess basic digital literacy skills (ITU, 2023). This lack of proficiency hampers the ability to engage meaningfully in online advocacy efforts.

Misinformation and censorship also pose significant threats. False information spreads rapidly on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, often undermining legitimate advocacy campaigns. For instance, during Nigeria's #EndSARS protests, misinformation was used to discredit the movement, creating public confusion (Nwokeoma, 2021). Additionally, governments in some developing countries implement internet shutdowns or censor online content to suppress dissent, further stifling digital advocacy (Freedom House, 2023).

Economic and infrastructural limitations exacerbate these challenges. High costs of data and inadequate network coverage deter effective social media use. For example, mobile internet in sub-Saharan Africa costs nearly 10% of average monthly income, compared to the UN-recommended maximum of 2% (GSMA, 2023). These economic barriers make sustained online advocacy campaigns difficult to maintain.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including investments in digital infrastructure, public education on digital literacy, and policy frameworks that protect freedom of expression online. By overcoming these barriers, developing countries can harness the full potential of social media for advocacy and policy reform.

Ethical and Regulatory Considerations in Social Media Advocacy

The use of social media for advocacy presents ethical and regulatory challenges that require careful navigation. Key ethical dilemmas include data privacy, surveillance, and online harassment. Social media platforms collect vast amounts of user data, which is often exploited for targeted advertising or, worse, surveillance by governments or malicious actors. A 2022 report by the United Nations noted that approximately 50% of internet users in developing countries are concerned about the misuse of their personal information (UNCTAD, 2022). Moreover, activists are frequently targeted with harassment or cyberattacks, which discourage participation in digital advocacy efforts (Freedom House, 2023).

Governments and social media platforms play crucial roles in regulating activities to address these issues. Governments must ensure laws protect individuals from online abuse while also preventing overreach that could stifle freedom of expression. For instance, Uganda's 2018 social media tax was criticized for disproportionately affecting marginalized groups and curbing digital activism (Mwesige & Tabaire, 2020). Similarly, platforms like Twitter and Facebook are tasked with moderating content to prevent misinformation and hate speech, yet their policies often lack consistency or transparency (Kaye & Quinn, 2021).

Balancing freedom of expression with maintaining social harmony remains a significant challenge. While social media amplifies voices, unchecked expression can exacerbate divisions, spread harmful content, or incite violence. Striking this balance requires robust regulations, platform accountability, and an emphasis on digital literacy to foster responsible use.

The Future of Social Media in Advocacy and Policy Change

The future of social media in advocacy will likely be shaped by emerging technologies and evolving platform dynamics. Artificial intelligence (AI) and big data analytics are expected to play transformative roles in crafting targeted advocacy campaigns. For example, machine learning algorithms can analyze user sentiment to tailor messages and predict campaign outcomes, enabling more efficient resource allocation (Tufekci, 2020).

Platform usage trends are also shifting. Short-form video platforms like TikTok are increasingly favored for advocacy, particularly among younger demographics. This trend highlights the importance of visual storytelling and creative content in engaging diverse audiences (Smith et al., 2023). Additionally, decentralized platforms and blockchain technology may offer activists greater security and privacy, addressing concerns around surveillance and censorship (Nakamoto, 2023).

In the long term, social media will continue to influence governance and civic participation. Digital activism is expected to expand beyond national borders, fostering transnational solidarity on issues such as climate change and human rights. However, this potential also depends on addressing persistent challenges like misinformation, digital divides, and authoritarian crackdowns. With appropriate investments in digital infrastructure and education, developing nations can fully leverage social media to enhance advocacy and policy change.

Literature Review

Nicolas Hamelin (2024) " Harnessing Social Media for Climate Action in Developing Countries: A Case Study of Egypt"

The researcher explores the potential of social media to promote climate action in developing countries, with a focus on Egypt. The study highlights the challenges Egypt faces due to climate change, particularly in its agricultural sector and the vulnerable Nile Delta region. Hamelin's research shows that social media can be a powerful tool for raising awareness and mobilizing public opinion on climate issues.

The study's findings suggest that rational posts resonate best with audiences, encouraging engagement and climate action, while fear appeals have minimal impact. This insight can help NGOs and advocacy groups develop effective social media strategies to promote climate action in Egypt and other developing countries. Overall, Hamelin's article demonstrates the importance of social media in addressing climate change and promoting sustainable development in vulnerable regions.

However, the review work and current discourse are related in terms of content (social media for advocacy change) , despite the difference in the various areas of the platform for advocacy changes. This particularly emphasises how important social media plays significant role in our today's society.

Recommendation

To maximize the potential of social media for advocacy and policy change in developing countries, governments, NGOs, and stakeholders should strategically invest in digital infrastructure, education, and regulatory reforms. This includes promoting digital literacy, addressing digital divides, and implementing effective content moderation and data privacy policies. Additionally, leveraging emerging trends like AI-driven advocacy and blockchain technology can enhance the impact of social media campaigns, ultimately driving societal change and promoting inclusive governance.

Conclusion

Social media has emerged as a transformative tool for advocacy and policy change in developing countries, bridging gaps in communication and amplifying marginalized voices. By enabling grassroots mobilization, fostering public discourse, and influencing policy decisions, it has reshaped traditional advocacy strategies. However, the challenges of digital divides, misinformation, censorship, and ethical dilemmas underscore the need for balanced regulatory frameworks and improved digital literacy. Despite these challenges, the successes of movements such as #EndSARS and #MyDressMyChoice illustrate the immense potential of social media to catalyze change. The future of social media advocacy lies in leveraging emerging technologies like AI and blockchain while addressing infrastructural and regulatory hurdles. With strategic investments and responsible use, social media can continue to empower citizens and foster inclusive policy development in developing nations.

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