

**LINKING DIGITAL-MEDIA TO YOUTHS' POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT IN
SELECTED LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN CHONGWE DISTRICT**

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<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2022.0359>

ABSTRACT

The study was a descriptive case study design aimed at investigating if digital media literacy can lead to Youths' positive engagement in politics. Two secondary schools, a college of education and a university were sampled. The target population size was 178 respondents. Data analysis showed that youths did not stand in elective positions and that youths were not active in voting. The study however, noted that the older youths (20s to 30s) participated more in voting than the younger youths (below 20). The study found that youths were active participants in campaign activities as well as attendance of political meetings. The study concluded that youths did not engage civic leaders on matters related to their livelihood and welfare. Furthermore, the study also found that youths did not engage in supporting of disability rights such as running for autism day. The study however, found that digital media literacy influences youth engagement in politics. The researcher recommended that there was need to place greater priority on the coordination of opportunities for exploration, expression, and empowerment through digital media with risk prevention efforts; adolescents needed to learn to manage, rather than simply avoid, risks inherent to life online... Lastly the study asserted the need to involve youth themselves (through youth councils) in efforts to set policy and inform practice related to digital media.

Key Words: Digital Media Literacy, Youth Engagement, Politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

There is a sharp contrast between youths' participation with new media and their civic and political participation. When judged by traditional standards, levels of civic and political commitment, capacity, and activity by youths are the lowest of all demographic groups, and until recently, these have also been declining (Jenkins and Boyd, 2016). At the same time, youths are highly engaged with digital media (Allen, 2015).

The question of whether media literacy education could promote and improve youth positive engagement in civic and political life has been eminent. Unfortunately, to date, there have been almost no quantitative assessments of the frequency of media literacy education, neither have there been any possible subsequent impacts. This study drew on a unique panel data set of a diverse group of youths in secondary school, college and university settings. It aimed at finding out if

exposure to media literacy education was related to political demographic variables. In addition, with controls for prior levels of online political activities, for political interest, and for a broad range of demographic variables, this study also tried to find out if digital media literacy education was associated with increased positive online political engagement and increased exposure to diverse perspectives, such as social media, blogging, video games, and smart phones (Martens and Boyd, 2015).

The youth, in fact, are frequently the generation that is closest to innovation (Hodgin, 2016). Engagement with new media has the potential to strengthen young people's participation in civic and political life. Educators, policymakers, foundations, and others are considering ways to develop desirable bridges between these two domains (National Broadband Plan 2010; the Center for Media Literacy, and the National Association for Media Literacy Education).

This study was an effort to assess digital media literacy activities in secondary schools and post-secondary settings, as well as whether such activities can increase the likelihood that the youth will positively engage with digital media in ways that support civic duties and political participation.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Youth participation in decision making of any nation is critical for meaningful development. Young people in Zambia have the chance of standing as Councillors and Members of Parliament and to basically contribute in any way possible in their communities. The National Youth Policy (2006) advocates for youth participation at all levels of public and private sector planning in political decision-making bodies through close cooperation between government and non-governmental organisations. Youths can utilize digital media platforms for political campaigns, movements and rallies. They can also use social media platforms to engage political leaders in dialectics as well as use them to learn what their counterparts in other countries are doing. However, despite the government and other supporting organisation's efforts to put Zambian youths in the limelight of the Zambian political system, youths in Zambia have remained indifferent to the civil and political life of their country as political involvement seems to be weak at all levels of political engagement. Instead, they have relegated themselves to slogan chanting and individual promoting of those with a bit of political clout instead of showing active, positive political culture and social solidarity (Muna Ndulo, 2013). Hence this study was to inform youths on digital media literacy which might lead to the improvement of their participation in political activities of Zambia, Lusaka province, Chongwe. And, ultimately change their attitude towards one another especially during election campaigns.

Research Objectives

To examine the level of youths' engagement in politics.

To assess how digital media literacy could influence youths' engagement in politics.

To suggest measures of enforcing digital media literacy that could improve youths' engagement in politics.

3. THEORY FRAMEWORK

This study was informed by one theory namely the socio-cultural theory by Vygotsky (1978), particularly the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); “The Zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” This theory posits that people learn better through experience and as such it helps in explaining how youths could be better leaders through internships from the experienced current leaders.

Conceptually, Government policies must be directed towards identification of areas that youths should be engaged in political activities of a nation. Therefore, by providing Digital Media Literacy in youths, enhancing youths’ participation levels in political activities, and building capacities through internships into secondary and college students, political leaders and education trainers as more knowledgeable people will determine developmental levels of youths in political activities .It will also enable leaders and educators to identify areas of need or which are lacking thereby enabling youths reach their potential developmental level.

As Bernstein (1971, p.47) argues that: “how a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control”. Therefore, if political leaders and educators want to see the leadership that is well vested with knowledge, skill and dispositions that are valuable, tolerant, able to negotiate and respect other peoples’ rights and opinions tomorrow, they should start preparing such leadership today by giving them a suitable training and internship experiences so as to enable them reach their potential.

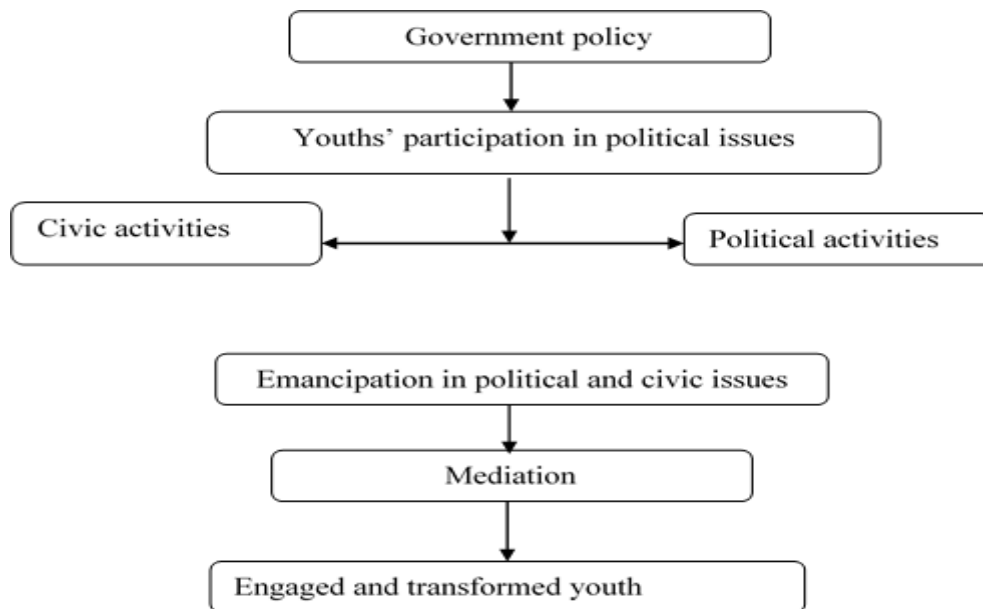


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 above depicts a flow chart which entails that government policies must be directed towards identification of areas that youths should be engaged in political activities of a nation.

Youths' interests are seen when they are given opportunities to showcase their talents during their secondary education or tertiary training. These talents can also be noted when leaders appoint young people into ministerial or ambassadorial positions. Moreover, that also helps leaders to establish youths' capabilities regarding what they can do at that level and where they need help to do what they are expected to. When strengths and weaknesses are noted, leaders can mediate them so that the youths reach their full potential for future leadership positions.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study was a descriptive case study design aimed at investigating if digital media literacy can lead to Youths' positive engagement in politics. A college of education was sampled. The sample size 52 respondents comprising of 50 students and 2 Heads of Departments (HODs). Simple random sampling was used to sample the students and purposive sampling was used to sample the HODs. For the qualitative method, interview guides were administered to H.O.Ds. Questions in the interview guides were open ended so that they could give out as much information as possible, while the questionnaires with closed ended questions were distributed to students (Creswell & Tashakkori, 2007). Therefore, data from semi-structured interviews as well as questionnaires was analysed using thematic analysis (Creswell, 2003).

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research objectives were to examine the level of youths' engagement in politics, to assess how digital media literacy could influence youths' engagement in politics and to suggest measures of enforcing digital media literacy that could improve youths' engagement in politics. Data was presented according to these themes.

Youths' engagement in politics.

Reponses were based on whether youths were actively engaged in politics using average scores on a five-point scale. Responses for this objective were obtained in line with the statements provided figure 1.1 below;

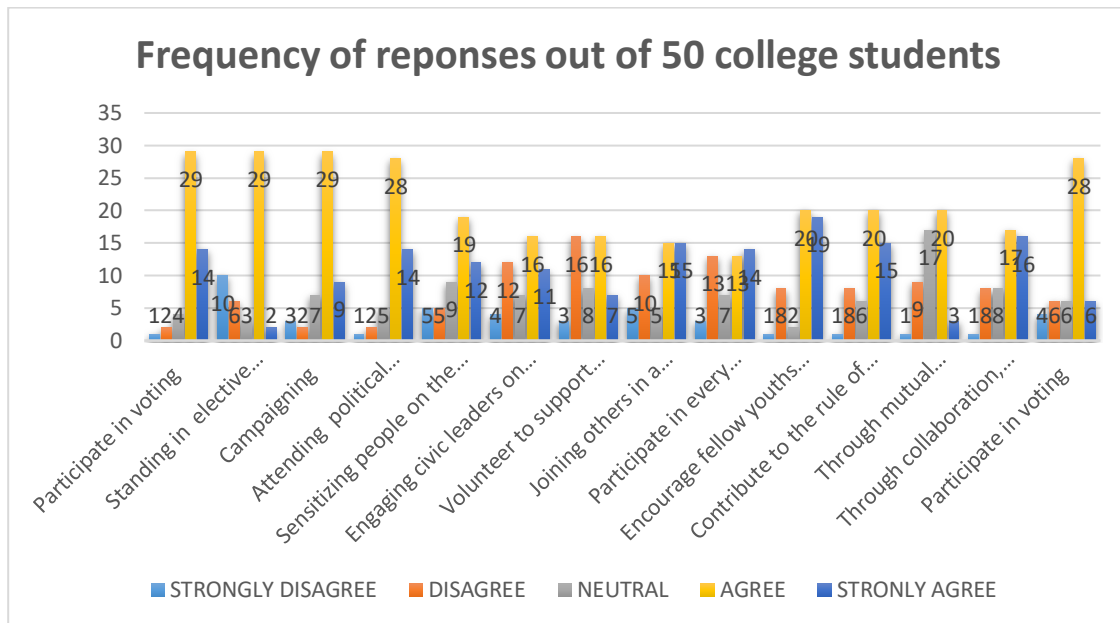


Figure 1.1: Youths’ Engagement in politics

The overall mean of the total responses by the students the average mean score was 3.5 meaning that the majority would have agreed.

In light an HOD added that:

“In relation to political engagement and youth participation our Institution offers Civic Education courses, and we just recently introduced ICT to our curriculum. However, my observation is that youths are not active participants in politics due to fear of intimidation by political cadres”.

In an interview the Head of Department from the College stated that:

“Our college students are non-partisan; therefore, we discourage them from being politically biased”

Digital media literacy and youths’ engagement in politics.

Reponses were based on how digital media literacy could influence youths’ engagement in politics using average scores on a five-point scale. Responses for this objective were obtained in line with the statements provided figure below;

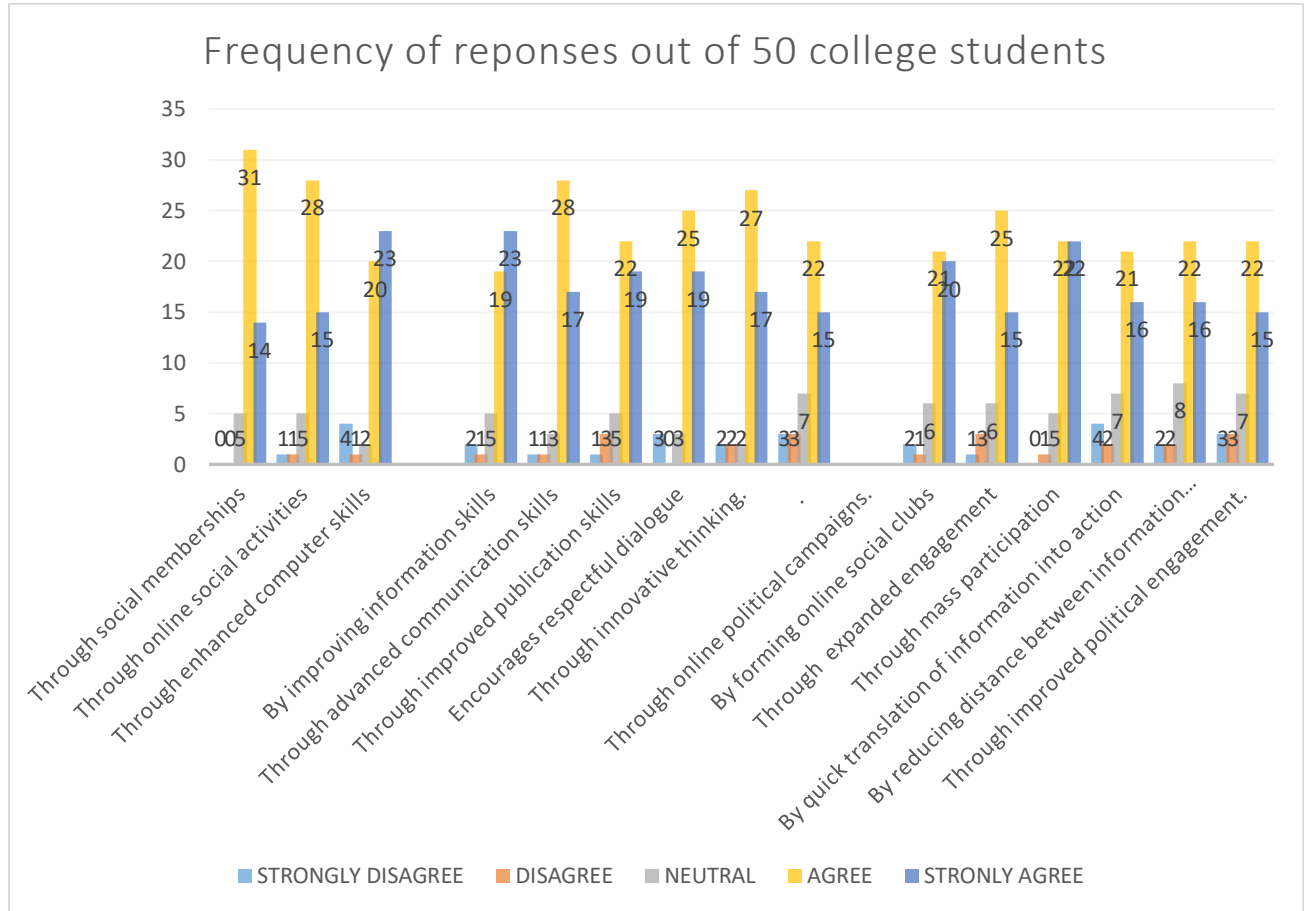


Figure 1.2: Digital media literacy and youths’ engagement in politics.

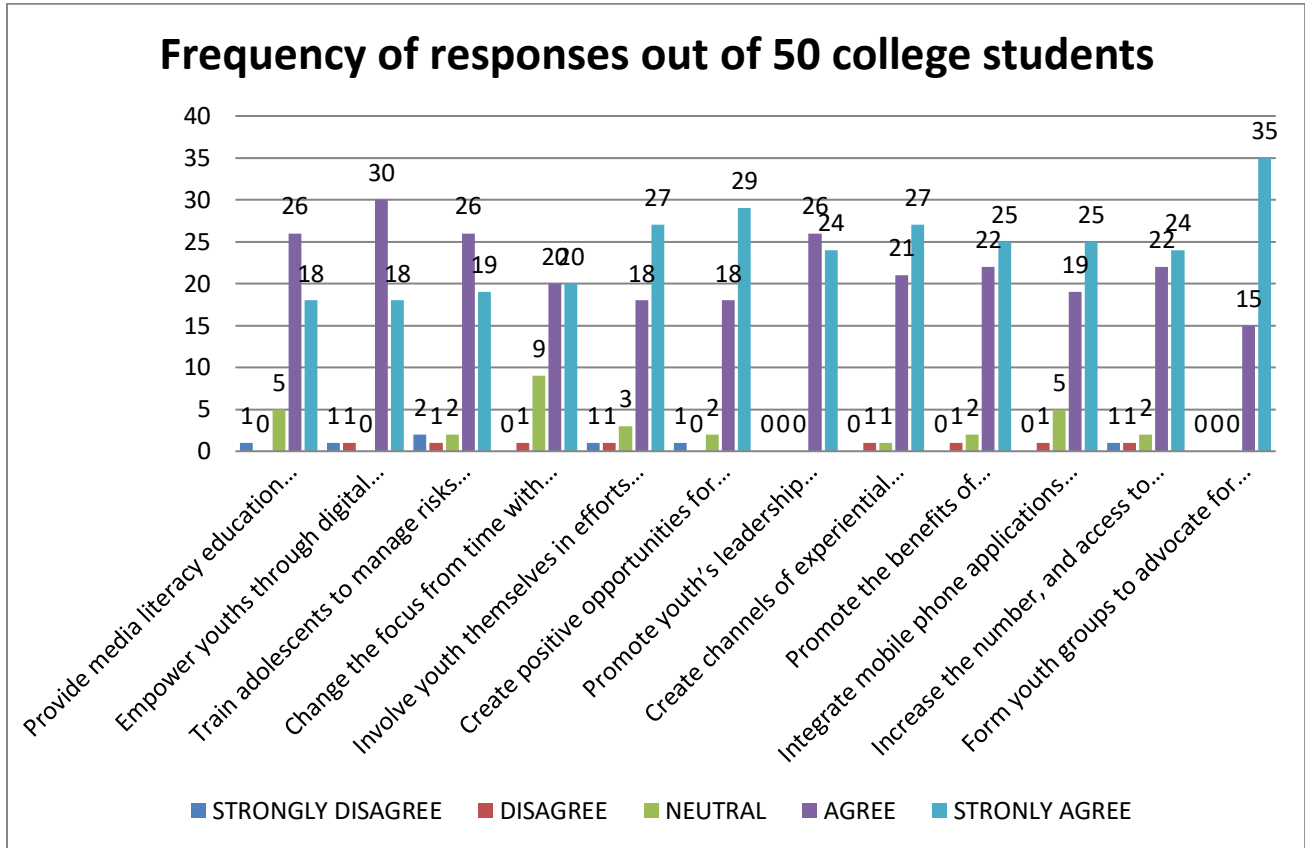
The overall mean of the total responses by college students the average mean score was 3.9 meaning that the majority would have agreed.

The Mathematics Department Head of Department form the College mentioned to say that:

“Digital literacy can improve youth engagement in politics as youths can easily reach out to their leaders through social media groups”.

Measures to enhance youths’ engagement in politics

Reponses were based on measures to enhance youths’ engagement in politics using average scores on a five-point scale. Responses for this objective were obtained in line with the statements provided figure below;



The overall mean of the total responses by students the average mean score was 3.7 meaning that the majority would have agreed.

The study revealed the digital media channels are an important tool for experiential leadership training for the youth. In line with this view an ICT lecturer from the College mentioned to say that:

“Internet service providers should look into revising their service charges and rates to enhance more youths to participate on social media”. He also added to say that:

“Current political leaders should employ the use of seminars to encourage youths to actively participate in politics”.

With regard to risks associated with digital media usage, the Head of Department further stated that;

‘It is important to utilize digital media avenues in the right ways. The trend by Zambian political parties has been to utilize them to throw shots at the opposition, rather than just campaigning and bringing out their agenda which is wrong. They should not be an avenue for communicating hate-messages and as such there needs to be a change in this area, both from individuals as well as political parties and their leaders.’

6. DISCUSSIONS

Youths' engagement in politics

From the findings it can be deduced that the older youths (especially those in their 30s) aver that younger youths (especially teenagers) are not active in the voting and standing in elective positions. They also asserted that youths rarely stood in electoral positions at national level. Thus, this means that the older youths (those in their late 20s to 30s) participated more in voting than their younger counterparts.

The findings of this study are concurrent with those from Hodgkin (2016) study which revealed that people under the age of 35 are rarely found in formal political leadership positions. In a third of democratic countries, eligibility for the national parliament starts at 25 years or higher and it is common practice to refer to politicians as 'young' if they are below 35-40 years of age. Youth is not represented adequately in formal political institutions and processes such as Parliaments, political parties, elections, and public administrations. The situation is even more difficult for both young women as well as women at mid-level and decision-making/leadership positions.

With regards to campaigning and attendance of political meetings, FGDs from the tertiary institutions revealed that youths were very active in the aforementioned political activities. They asserted that youths engaged in these activities for the wrong reasons. They asserted that youths engaged in these activities for financial incentives that were offered to them by political leaders. They also revealed that youths were also given alcohol and this was a huge factor in their participation. Rather than being built, they were being destroyed because they were given a platform to intoxicate themselves and it is because of this that violence was so rampant during campaigns and political rallies.

A study by Ashley et al (2017) suggests that there is strong evidence that the participation of young people in formal, institutional political processes is relatively low when compared to older citizens across the globe. This challenges the representativeness of the political system and leads to the disenfranchisement of young people. Respondents indicated that youths today are very literate when it comes to usage of digital media which means they have vast information at their disposal. With many platforms at their disposal such as WhatsApp, Twitter, and YouTube, youths have a lot of information at their disposal and they also have a great opportunity to disseminate information (Jenkins and Boyd, 2016). However, the study found that rather than using these platforms to disseminate information, they are being used for wrong reasons. They basically utilize them for entertainment and to a greater extent they misuse them.

Digital media literacy and youths' engagement in politics.

The majority (mean score 3.9% combined) of all the respondents from the study revealed that digital media can help aid participation through social memberships on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook by using WhatsApp groups and Facebook groups. On these platforms youths can be engaged by sharing political ideas as well as aiding in political campaigns and as such reducing gathering during campaigns hence reducing acts of violence.

These findings are concurrent with findings from the study by Ashley et al (2017) asserting that political participation is a multifaceted concept that involves diverse activities ranging from attending political rallies, political meetings, participating in political debates to voting. It involves the various means through which citizens of a given social group articulate their political ideologies and make their contributions to the whole political system. Therefore, when the citizens are empowered to be exposed to the mass media and interpret the media messages appropriately, their level of political participation is believed to be enhanced. They would be able to exchange information about political parties and their political agenda, know more about the political actors, and learn new political behaviors that would enable them to take appropriate decisions especially during elections.

Furthermore, with emergence of COVID 19 pandemic social gathering has become a health hazard and a danger to society and in this respect, it can be seen that digital media engagement can be a means through which such gatherings can be prevented. Furthermore, the majority of respondents in the study revealed that digital media tools and digital media literacy can aid into the quick translation of information into action.

Ashley et al (2017) has highlighted that as digital media have become increasingly ubiquitous. Educational institutions, non-for-profit organizations, and governmental institutions have responded by initiating various programs and research activities that indicate a concern over how, and to what social and political ends, youths engage with media. Within mediated spaces, participatory language has been used to celebrate young people's engagement in social networks and online environments, including platforms like YouTube and Facebook, and other digital technologies such as mobile apps and video games.

Other studies reveal that there is particular interest in understanding how participation in mediated environments fosters civic engagement, knowledge, and civic participation (Hodgin, 2016). Yet many scholars have problematized the possibility that participation in digital media might foster new forms of civic engagement or political action for youth, since digital spaces often replicate existing structures of exclusivity and inequity (Mihaidis, 2018).

As demonstrated by other scholars, the study found that time measurements of adolescents' Internet usage give at best a partial insight into the complex behaviors at work in the development of citizenship skills. The intent to engage in civic participation seems to be most strongly associated with both the motivational drive to seek out information and the ability to understand and analyze news media. This does not imply complete disagreement with Putnam's argument that electronic entertainment might be partly responsible for the erosion of civic life. The study found that time spent online is negatively associated with civic participation.

Measures to enhance youths' engagement in politics

The findings suggest that the digital media platforms can be utilized to engage the youth in debates regarding policy formulation as well as agenda setting. The study revealed the digital media channels are an important tool for experiential leadership training for the youth.

The study also found that the majority of respondents asserted that it would be very helpful to introduce volunteer programs in schools and tertiary institutions in order to reap the benefits of volunteerism among youths and that the Zambia Information and Communications Technology Agency (ZICTA) could be engaged in the formulation of mobile phone applications as well as social media platforms to aid this volunteerism. 78% of the respondents from the study asserted that it is important to introduce and formulate youth groups to advocate for the rights of young people at national level as this could further aid in the promotion of youth leadership skills among the youths and in the long run there could be more youths standing in elective positions as opposed to findings of this study which revealed that the majority of the youths did not take up or stand in elective positions.

Findings of this research are concurrent with findings from the studies undertaken by Hobbs (2017) who found that for young people, both formal and informal educational experiences may contribute to building the knowledge, skills and attitudes associated with civic engagement. Citizens not only need access to information; they also need the means and motives to process that information effectively. In particular, media literacy programs in American high schools can support the development of young people's ability to use, analyze and create media messages.

7. SUMMARY

In summary the study examined the role of digital media in fostering youth political engagement, the supports needed for youth to use digital media for informed and effective political engagement, and the benefits and risks of such engagement. Data analysis showed that youths did not stand in elective positions and that youths were not active in voting. The study however, noted that the older youths (20s to 30s) participated more in voting than the younger youths (below 20). The study found that youths were active participants in campaign activities as well as attendance of political meetings. The study concluded that youths did not engage civic leaders on matters related to their livelihood and welfare. Furthermore, the study also found that youths did not engage in supporting of disability rights such as running for autism day. The study however, found that digital media literacy influences youth engagement in politics. The researcher recommended that there was need to place greater priority on the coordination of opportunities for exploration, expression, and empowerment through digital media with risk prevention efforts; adolescents needed to learn to manage, rather than simply avoid, risks inherent to life online... Lastly the study asserted the need to involve youth themselves (through youth councils) in efforts to set policy and inform practice related to digital media.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. With regard to improving youth engagement, there is need to engage more youths in political matters in order to have more of them standing in elective positions; furthermore, there is need for awareness raising among younger youths (below 20 years) on the importance of civic engagement and voting;
2. On ways of improving youth engagement in politics the study recommends that there is need to empower youths with skills to earn a livelihood in order to deter them from engaging in campaigns based on bribes and monetary incentives; furthermore, there is need

to educate youths on the importance of engagement of civic leaders on matters related to their welfare and livelihood;

3. Lastly on measures of enforcing digital media literacy to improve youth engagement in politics the study recommends that Computer Lessons should be taught from as early as Pre-school to improve digital media literacy. It is also recommended that youths need to be educated on proper usage of digital media tools and the dangers of wrongful usage and; furthermore, there is need for introduction of volunteer programs in schools and tertiary institutions with the sole basis of political youth engagement

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