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Beyond the Ballot: The Role of Digital Media in Advancing Women's Civil Participation in Southwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

Background: The advent of digital media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has revolutionised social and political engagement globally, yet disparities in access and digital literacy persist. While southwestern Nigeria is a highly educated region, there remains a significant need to understand how women in this area leverage digital platforms for civil participation to overcome socio-cultural norms and institutional barriers.

Objective: This research aimed to investigate the extent to which women use digital media for civil participation in southwest Nigeria and to examine how these platforms have been utilised to enhance and advance women's grassroots activism within the region.

Methodology: The study adopted a mixed-methods approach using a descriptive survey research design. Quantitative data were collected via a structured questionnaire from a sample of 400 women across two randomly selected states: Ekiti and Lagos. Qualitative data were gathered through random interviews with six women leaders from both states. Reliability was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.98, and data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

Results: The findings reveal a high level of awareness regarding digital media for civic use, with 93.8% of respondents acknowledging its role. Actual engagement is similarly high, as 93.1% of participants confirmed that women in their areas utilise digital media for civil participation. Interview results indicate that digital platforms—particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram—have successfully advanced grassroots activism by enabling women to connect, mobilise support for movements like #EndSARS, and directly access political leaders.

Conclusion: The study concludes that digital media serves as a transformative tool that educates and empowers women in southwestern Nigeria to overcome conservative constraints and increase their political visibility. While engagement is high, the research suggests that the potential of these platforms must be further leveraged to promote inclusive governance. The study recommends that gender activists and policymakers develop targeted social media campaigns to further educate and mobilise women toward their political goals.

Keywords: Civil Participation, Digital Media, Women, Social Media, Campaigns

Introduction

The rapid emergence and proliferation of digital media and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have profoundly revolutionised the landscape of social and political engagement, both globally and specifically within the Nigerian context. These technological advancements have offered entirely novel platforms for public discourse, civic participation, and collective action that were previously unavailable to the average citizen (Abosede, 2018; Adekoya, 2017; Ogunlesi, 2018). Primarily, digital media facilitate the instantaneous and broad dissemination of information, effectively breaking down traditional barriers to communication. This shift enables the general public—and most significantly, women—to engage in complex socio-political interactions with a level of activity and agency that was once the sole province of institutional elites (Osatuyi, 2013; Ericson, 2011).

This fundamental technological shift has radically altered traditional power dynamics by empowering previously marginalised voices within society. Specifically, it offers women unprecedented opportunities to participate in civil and political processes that were historically restrictive or outright inaccessible due to entrenched socio-cultural norms and rigid institutional barriers (UNDP, 2020; Leonardi & Treem, 2012). The strategic use of digital media—encompassing social networking sites, mobile communication tools, and various other electronic platforms—enables women to build personal confidence, mobilise grassroots activism, and exert a tangible influence on both public opinion and formal policy-making frameworks.

In this context, socio-political engagement is understood to imply active, intentional involvement in social and political processes with the explicit purpose of shaping the outcomes of social,

political, and public policy. Southwestern Nigeria represents a particularly compelling case study, as it is a region of the country that is highly educated and has historically been actively engaged in various economic and political activities. Despite these advantages, it remains one of the regions where many women find themselves unable to fully participate in digitally mediated civil activities, notwithstanding the vast potential and opportunities inherent in these modern technologies (Adrianna, 2017; Suleiman, 2021).

Furthermore, even as women in this region gain greater individual access to digital media hardware and software, their actual participation in formal socio-political processes does not appear to be proportional to their significant educational and social progress. This disconnect points toward critical underlying disparities, including variations in digital literacy, unequal access to high-speed data, and persistent systemic socio-political barriers that continue to hinder female advancement (Oloyede, 2022). This widening gap highlights the urgent importance of understanding exactly how women utilise digital media to participate in civil activities, as such understanding is required to leverage the full potential of technology for making a broader, more inclusive impact on society.

Extensive academic literature has been produced on this subject, though findings remain diverse and sometimes contradictory. For instance, Nnabuife and Nwolu (2022) observed that while there is a remarkably high rate of social media application usage among women in Anambra State, Nigeria, these women do not typically use such platforms to enhance their efforts towards direct participation in politics. This suggests a consumption-engagement gap. In contrast, a study by Dwityas et al. (2025) conducted in Indonesia revealed that social media serves as a multifaceted tool; it facilitates access to critical information regarding parenting, healthcare, and financial management, while simultaneously enhancing women's participation in digital entrepreneurship and strengthening their engagement in civic advocacy and activism.

Similarly, Zahedi and Bayani (2021) identified that digital media plays a transformative role in promoting women's political participation within Iran. Their research revealed that women utilised social media as a safe haven to express political opinions, engage with pressing national issues, and mobilise widespread support for their specific causes. From an economic perspective, Fofana and Abdul-Rahim (2021) demonstrated that digital media has a positive impact on women's economic empowerment by streamlining access to vital business information, emerging market opportunities, and necessary financial resources.

Within the Nigerian digital sphere, Nnabuife et al. (2022) found that women are frequently exposed to social media platforms that actively encourage political involvement, such as the Igboist page. Their research further revealed that women are consistently exposed to political campaign posts on such pages, which serve as a primary mobilising strategy to increase political participation at various levels. Finally, Karim and Mahmud (2019) found that social media use is positively associated with women's cultural participation in Bangladesh, particularly in literature, music, and the visual arts. Their study concluded that social media provides an essential platform for the exchange of cultural knowledge, the creation of resilient cultural networks, and the overarching empowerment of women within cultural spheres (Karim & Mahmud, 2019).

Despite the growing academic recognition of the critical role women play in sustainable societal development, the nuances of digital media-facilitated civic participation among women in

Southwest Nigeria remain largely unexplored. Therefore, this study seeks to analyse the extent to which women use digital media for civic participation, as well as the specific methods they employ, to provide valuable insights for achieving inclusive socio-political development in the region. The primary objectives of this study are to:

1. Evaluate the extent and awareness of digital media adoption for civil participation among women in Southwest Nigeria, categorising engagement levels as high, moderate, or low.
2. Analyse the strategic deployment of digital platforms by women to circumvent traditional socio-cultural barriers and advance grassroots activism within the region.
3. Appraise the impact of digital communication tools—such as WhatsApp and Facebook—on the political inclusion and collective agency of women in Lagos and Ekiti States.

Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a robust mixed-methods research framework, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. By employing a descriptive survey research design, the study is able to systematically map the current landscape of digital media usage among women. The integration of mixed methods is particularly advantageous as it allows for the triangulation of data; specifically, the quantitative component provides broad statistical generalisations through structured questionnaires, while the qualitative component offers deep, nuanced insights through semi-structured interviews. This dual approach ensures that the findings are both statistically significant and contextually rich.

Population and Sampling Procedure

The target population for this research comprises women residing in the southwestern geopolitical zone of Nigeria. For the purposes of this study, two specific states—Ekiti and Lagos—were selected using simple random sampling from the six states that constitute the southwest region. These two states represent a significant demographic contrast, providing a balanced view of both highly urbanised and emerging urban-rural environments.

According to demographic data from the National Population Commission (NPC) and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) for 2016 and 2023, the female population in Ekiti State is estimated at 1,553,770, while that in Lagos State is approximately 5,956,115. For the quantitative phase of the research, a total sample size of 400 participants was established. To ensure fair representation based on the respective population densities of the two states, a proportionate distribution method was applied. Consequently, 317 copies of the questionnaire were administered to women in Lagos State, while 83 copies were distributed to women in Ekiti State.

In the qualitative phase, the study utilised purposive and random sampling to select 6 prominent women leaders for in-depth interviews. This group consisted of three leaders from Lagos State and three from Ekiti State, ensuring that the leadership perspectives from both administrative and grassroots levels were captured.

Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

To ensure the academic integrity of the data collection tools, the instruments underwent rigorous validation processes. The researchers ascertained the validity of the questionnaire through both face and content validity, involving expert reviews to ensure that the items accurately measured the intended constructs of digital media usage and civil participation.

The reliability of the quantitative instrument was evaluated using the Cronbach's alpha method to test for internal consistency. The analysis yielded a remarkably high coefficient of 0.98. In social science research, this figure indicates an exceptional level of internal consistency, confirming that the instrument is highly reliable for collecting the data necessary to address the research objectives.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data gathered through the questionnaires were processed and analysed using descriptive statistics. This included calculating frequencies and percentages to describe the respondents' demographic profile, as well as computing the mean and standard deviation to interpret the central tendency and variability of the responses. These statistical measures were instrumental in providing clear, quantifiable answers to the research questions. The qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and analysed to complement the statistical findings, providing a narrative depth to the quantitative results.

Results

To determine the extent of engagement, the study first assessed awareness before evaluating the actual use of digital tools in civic life. The results are categorised to reflect a spectrum ranging from a high extent to a low extent of participation.

Table 1: Women's Awareness of Digital Media Usage for Civil Participation

Response Category	Scale	Lagos (n=317)	Ekiti (n=83)	Total (n=400)	Percentage
High Extent	Strongly Agree	128	48	176	44.00%
	Agree	179	20	199	49.80%
Low Extent	Disagree	6	8	14	3.50%
	Strongly Disagree	3	6	9	2.30%
Neutral/Other	Not Applicable	1	1	2	0.50%
Total		317	83	400	100.00%

Table 1 illustrates the level of awareness regarding digital media as a vehicle for civil participation. When aggregating the data, a very high extent of awareness is evident, with 93.8% of the total respondents affirming their knowledge of these platforms. In Ekiti, the intensity of this awareness is particularly concentrated, with 57.8% showing a high degree of certainty (Strongly Agree). Lagos displays a more moderate yet still high level of general awareness, at 56.5%.

Conversely, a low extent of awareness was recorded by only a small fraction (5.8%) of the population. This suggests that the digital divide, in terms of mere recognition of technology's role in governance and civil society, is rapidly closing in these southwestern states.

Table 2: The Extent of Women's Usage of Digital Media for Civil Participation

Response Category	Scale	Lagos (n=317)	Ekiti (n=83)	Total (n=400)	Percentage
High Extent	Strongly Agree	129	44	173	43.30%
	Agree	173	26	199	49.80%
Low Extent	Disagree	8	6	14	3.50%
	Strongly Disagree	5	2	7	1.80%
Neutral/Other	Not Applicable	2	1	3	0.80%
Total		317	83	400	100.00%

Table 2 evaluates the practical application of digital media. The findings demonstrate that a high extent of usage prevails among women in the region, with 93.1% of the participants actively employing these tools for civil engagement.

The data further reveals that the extent of usage can be classified as follows:

- High Extent: 43.3% of women are deeply embedded in digital civic participation, showing a firm commitment to using these tools to influence their socio-political environment.
- Moderate Extent: 49.8% of women utilise these platforms regularly, representing a significant majority that finds digital media useful for general engagement.
- Low Extent: Only 5.3% of the respondents reported a low extent of usage, indicating that non-participation is an outlier rather than the norm in Southwest Nigeria.

Regional analysis shows that Ekiti has a higher concentration of women engaging to a high extent (53.0%) compared to Lagos (40.7%). However, when combining the positive categories, both states exhibit a nearly universal adoption of digital media for civil purposes. This high extent of usage underscores the transformative power of ICT in providing women with a platform to bypass traditional gatekeepers and participate directly in the democratic process.

Qualitative Analysis and Findings

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with six women leaders—three representing the urbanised landscape of Lagos State and three representing the burgeoning political environment of Ekiti State. This qualitative approach allowed for a deeper exploration of the lived experiences and strategic methods employed by women at the grassroots level to leverage digital technologies for political advancement.

The Lagos Perspective: Digital Reach and Mobilisation

The participants from Lagos State unanimously affirmed that digital media has fundamentally transformed the nature of grassroots activism. A recurring theme in their responses was the surprising level of smartphone penetration among rural and low-income demographics, which has effectively dismantled traditional barriers to political communication.

The first interviewee (Lagos) emphasised the transition from physical to digital mobilisation, noting the efficiency of virtual engagement:

> I am familiar with using social media platforms to reach our people at the grassroots level. There are times when, instead of rallying them physically, we simply relay the message to them through social media. For me, I can say that our women at the grassroots level are more active and participate well through the easy access and availability of these social media platforms.

This suggests that digital media is not just a secondary tool but is becoming a primary medium for political coordination. The second interviewee from Lagos State expanded on this by highlighting how these platforms facilitate a two-way communication channel between leaders and the community, fostering a sense of accountability and "digital justice":

> Most of the women I know in this community have these phones. We easily reach them with messages, and they easily reach us, too. We call for meetings through these platforms, and people respond. I can say digital media platforms have indeed enhanced and promoted grassroots political activism among our women here. The platforms have helped them to speak out and receive justice, especially when their causes were affected.

The third interviewee from Lagos State provided a broader socio-political context, citing specific national movements as evidence of digital activism's power. She noted that the use of local languages on these platforms is a key strategy for ensuring inclusivity:

> Women in Southwestern Nigeria are increasingly using social media to speak out on important issues, organise movements, and participate in politics. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, X, Instagram, and WhatsApp, have made it easy for women to connect, share their opinions, and mobilise support for causes. Campaigns such as #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS show how digital activism can drive real social changes. Women's grassroots participation is also enhanced and advanced as more women engage in online discussions, join advocacy groups, and use local languages to reach people at the grassroots level.

The Ekiti Perspective: Accessibility and Political Inclusion

In Ekiti State, the interviewees similarly acknowledged that digital media has significantly enhanced grassroots participation, particularly through the rapid dissemination of information and the creation of direct links to political leadership.The first interviewee (Ekiti) highlighted the

logistical advantages, specifically the use of WhatsApp to bridge the gap between grassroots followers and high-level political figures:

> Digital media makes things easier for us here at the grassroots. We easily call our political followers to town hall meetings. Besides, we use WhatsApp to call on the political leaders that we are looking up to.

This indicates a flattening of the political hierarchy, where rural women can now directly engage with leaders who were previously inaccessible. The second interviewee from Ekiti State observed that the visual nature of digital media—specifically video content—has fostered a greater sense of political belonging among rural women:

> Our women are becoming more interested in politics, and this is due to these social media platforms. They can watch videos and send messages to politicians and women leaders, which gives them a sense of belonging. I can say that we are active here when it comes to political issues, especially as it concerns our rights.

Finally, the third interviewee from Ekiti State noted the intersection between economic activities and political communication, suggesting that digital media usage is integrated into the daily lives of women, including their business interactions:

> Women use digital media to communicate with their customers and pass information. Digital media has done well for us in Southwestern Nigeria because it has enabled us to do things that we could not do before. These days, we get many of them done through Facebook.

Synthesis of Qualitative Findings

The collective responses from both Lagos and Ekiti States suggest that digital media serves as a potent catalyst for advancing women's grassroots activism in Southwestern Nigeria. Several key themes emerged from these interviews:

1. *Technological Ubiquity:* The widespread ownership of Android devices among grassroots women has created a ready-made infrastructure for political engagement.
2. *Efficiency in Mobilisation:* Digital platforms have partially replaced the need for expensive and logistically challenging physical rallies, allowing for more frequent and rapid coordination.
3. *Enhanced Agency and Justice:* Women are utilising these platforms not just for information, but as a tool for advocacy and seeking redress for social injustices.
4. *Inclusivity through Language:* The ability to use local languages and visual media has ensured that even those with lower formal literacy can remain active in the political discourse.

Overall, the interviewees agree that the strategic use of digital media maximises women's involvement in the political process, transforming them from passive observers into active participants in the democratic landscape of Southwestern Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that women in Southwestern Nigeria, specifically in Lagos and Ekiti States, utilise digital media extensively to facilitate their involvement in civil and political processes. The empirical data suggest that the transition from traditional to digital-mediated engagement is not merely a theoretical shift but a practical revolution in how women interact with the state and their communities.

A fundamental takeaway from the study is the nearly universal awareness of digital platforms' civic potential. With 93.8% of respondents acknowledging a high extent of awareness, it is evident that digital literacy regarding the *purpose* of these tools is no longer a primary barrier in the southwest. Interestingly, the data revealed a higher intensity of "Strong Agreement" in Ekiti State compared to Lagos. This suggests that in regions where physical political infrastructure might be less dense than in a megacity like Lagos, digital media is perceived with a greater sense of necessity and certainty as a primary bridge to civil life.

Furthermore, the actual extent of usage mirrors this high level of awareness. Over 90% of the surveyed women affirmed that they actively employ platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X (formerly Twitter) for civic purposes. The study categorises this engagement as being to a great extent, as it transcends mere social interaction to include deliberate political information seeking and community advocacy. This quantitative reality was reinforced by the qualitative interviews with women leaders, who confirmed that digital media has democratised the ability to communicate, mobilise, and advocate at the grassroots level.

The qualitative findings established that digital media has acted as a transformative agent for grassroots activism. By allowing women to bypass traditional patriarchal or institutional gatekeepers, platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook have empowered them to hold virtual meetings and access political leaders directly. As noted in the interviews, the availability of affordable Android devices has created a "digital town hall" where voices on the periphery can be elevated to the mainstream. This has led to a demonstrable increase in socio-political inclusion, as women who were previously marginalised by socio-cultural norms now find a sense of belonging in digital political spaces.

These findings make a significant contribution to the current academic discourse, particularly compared with previous Nigerian studies. For instance, while Nnabuife and Nwolu (2022) identified a high rate of social media access in Anambra State, they noted a disconnect where this access did not translate into active political participation. In contrast, the current findings from Southwestern Nigeria suggest a more advanced stage of digital maturity, where access has successfully translated into a high extent of active engagement. This indicates that Southwestern Nigeria may be leading a trend where digital tools are being more strategically harnessed for political ends than in other regions.

Furthermore, the results align with international perspectives, such as those by Zahedi and Bayani (2021), who identified the pivotal role of social media in fostering female political expression and mobilisation in Iran. Similarly, the study supports the assertions of Fofana and Abdul-Rahim (2021) regarding the empowering nature of digital media across Africa. By facilitating not only political but also economic agency, digital platforms are proven to be multifaceted tools for empowerment.

In conclusion, while the study confirms that digital media is a critical facilitator of civil participation, the high extent of usage observed in Lagos and Ekiti States highlights a shifting paradigm. Women are no longer just "aware" of digital tools; they are strategically deploying them to redefine their roles in the Nigerian socio-political landscape. However, the small percentage of women reporting a low extent of usage reminds us that strategic interventions are still required to ensure that the digital revolution remains inclusive of all socio-economic strata.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

The findings of this research lead to the definitive conclusion that digital media serves as a potent and transformative instrument for the education and empowerment of women in Southwestern Nigeria. By providing a virtual space that transcends traditional physical and socio-cultural boundaries, these technologies enable women to navigate and overcome conservative barriers that have historically hindered their active involvement in the political sphere. The study demonstrates that digital media not only increases women's visibility but also fosters a burgeoning culture of digital resistance to exclusionary political practices.

Ultimately, the transition from a moderate to a high extent of digital engagement signals a paradigm shift in the Nigerian democratic process. As digital media platforms become increasingly ubiquitous, they offer a sustainable mechanism for promoting inclusive governance. However, the study also concludes that while the potential for empowerment is immense, its full realisation is contingent upon addressing the systemic disparities in digital literacy and the socio-technical barriers that remain for a minority of women in the region.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical evidence gathered throughout this study, the following recommendations are proposed to capitalise on the empowering potential of digital media for women in Southwestern Nigeria:

1. Governmental bodies, in collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), should design and implement specialised digital literacy programmes tailored for women at the grassroots level. These initiatives should move beyond basic technical skills and focus on digital political agency, teaching women how to use encrypted platforms for safe mobilisation, fact-check political information, and effectively utilise visual media to amplify their voices.
2. Gender activists, policymakers, and women-led organisations should develop sophisticated, multi-platform social media campaigns specifically designed to mobilise

women for political participation. These campaigns must focus on highlighting positive female leadership roles and creating mentorship networks where experienced female politicians can support and guide emerging activists in the southwest.

3. There is an urgent need for policy interventions that ensure affordable and stable internet access, particularly in emerging urban-rural areas like parts of Ekiti State. Furthermore, media reforms should be encouraged to protect women from online harassment and gender-based cyberbullying, ensuring that digital spaces remain safe and conducive environments for civil discourse and political activism.

4. To ensure that the coverage of digital activism is truly inclusive, campaigns and political communications should increasingly utilise local languages. Leveraging the high extent of engagement with video-based content—as identified in the interviews—will ensure that political messages resonate with women across different educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

5. Women's organisations should prioritise the creation of digital cooperatives or hubs that allow women to share resources and information. By maintaining constant connectivity through diverse social media tools, women in Southwestern Nigeria can build a unified political front, ultimately making them more authoritative and influential stakeholders in the national political landscape.

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