

Research article

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Digital Influencers as Catalysts of Cultural and Political Change: Examining Nigeria's Digital Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

Digital influencers have become pivotal actors in Nigeria's cultural and political discourse, reshaping traditional narratives and mobilizing new forms of engagement. This article applies Habermas's Public Sphere Theory and employs an interpretive hermeneutic method to explore the role of digital influencers in Nigeria's digital transformation. It examines how influencers construct and mediate cultural meaning, amplify marginalized voices, and influence political processes. It focuses on key events such as the #EndSARS protests and the rise of influencer-driven movements in music, fashion, and social justice. By analysing the symbolic power of influencer narratives, this study reveals their dual role as democratizing agents and potential amplifiers of misinformation or elitism. The findings underscore the potential of digital influencers to reshape Nigeria's public sphere while emphasizing the need for policies and practices that ensure inclusivity and accountability in their operations.

Keywords: Digital Influencers, Public Sphere Theory, Cultural Mediation, #EndSARS Protest, Nigeria's Digital Transformation



Introduction

The proliferation of digital platforms in Nigeria has opened new avenues for communication, self-expression, and collective action. With over 120 million internet users as of 2023, the country's social media ecosystem has become vital for cultural exchange and political engagement (Abdullahi, 2024). Platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok are not merely spaces for entertainment but battlegrounds for narratives shaping national and global perceptions of Nigeria (Uwalaka & Nwala, 2023).

Digital influencers have become critical actors in this transformation. Unlike traditional celebrities, influencers build their audiences through consistent content creation and direct engagement with followers, often bypassing conventional gatekeeping institutions. They act as tastemakers, political commentators, and social mobilizers, usually holding sway over millions of followers. For instance, influencers such as Mr. Macaroni and Falz have used their platforms to amplify calls for justice during the #EndSARS protests (Ekenaite, 2022). In contrast, fashion and lifestyle influencers like Toke Makinwa redefine modern Nigerian aesthetics and identity on the global stage.

However, the rise of digital influencers also introduces challenges. Issues such as misinformation, digital divides, and the commercialization of activism raise questions about the inclusivity and authenticity of the digital public sphere. Understanding the dual potential of influencers as agents of democratization and contributors to new inequalities is critical for navigating this evolving space.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the role of digital influencers in Nigeria's cultural and political discourse, this study employs Habermas's Public Sphere Theory. Habermas conceptualizes the public sphere as a space where private individuals come together to discuss and debate matters of public concern, ideally free from coercion and inequality. While his original theory focused on the bourgeois coffeehouses and print media of 18th-century Europe, it remains a relevant lens for examining contemporary digital spaces (Zhapparaliev, 2023).

In the Nigerian context, social media platforms function as digital public spheres, where influencers mediate conversations and shape public opinion (Okonkwo et al., 2024). However, these platforms are not devoid of power imbalances. Influencers, by their reach and visibility, occupy a privileged position in these spaces, challenging the egalitarian ideals of the public sphere. Through this lens, the study interrogates the extent to which influencers facilitate inclusivity, foster dialogue, or reinforce existing inequalities in Nigerian society.

1.3 Methodological Approach

This study adopts an interpretive hermeneutic method to analyse the symbolic and narrative dimensions of influencer-driven content. Unlike quantitative or qualitative methods that prioritize metrics or experiential data, the interpretive hermeneutic approach focuses on the



construction of meaning within discourse (Bell, 2011) By examining hashtags, memes, visuals, and influencer commentary, this method unpacks the layers of symbolism and cultural resonance embedded in their content.

For instance, the #EndSARS movement provides a rich case for analysis. Influencers employed hashtags, images, and videos to construct a collective identity and mobilize international attention. Through interpretive analysis, this study examines how these digital artifacts created a shared narrative of resistance and empowerment. Similarly, the study explores how influencers in the fashion and music industries use storytelling to promote cultural pride and reshape global perceptions of Nigeria.

1.4 Research Objectives and Structure

This study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

Firstly, it aims to analyse the multifaceted roles of digital influencers in shaping cultural and political discourse within Nigeria. The research investigates how influencers use their platforms to promote cultural pride, redefine social norms, and foster collective political action.

Secondly, the study evaluates the inclusivity and accessibility of the digital public sphere as mediated by influencers, with particular attention to how power imbalances, commercialization, and digital divides affect the authenticity and reach of their narratives.

Thirdly, it seeks to identify the challenges and risks associated with influencer-driven narratives, including the spread of misinformation, the commodification of activism, and the potential for reinforcing elitism in digital spaces.

Finally, the research aims to propose actionable strategies for optimizing the potential of digital influencers as agents of positive societal change. By addressing issues of accountability, inclusivity, and representation, the study offers recommendations for strengthening the role of influencers in fostering democratic discourse and cultural resilience.

2. Methodology

The methodology section outlines the interpretive framework, and the procedures used to examine the symbolic and narrative dimensions of influencer-driven content in Nigeria. This section provides a rationale for employing an interpretive hermeneutic approach and details the data sources, selection criteria, and analytic process.

2.1 Interpretive Hermeneutic Approach

The interpretive hermeneutic approach is rooted in the understanding that meaning is constructed through symbols, narratives, and discourse. This method prioritizes the subjective interpretations



of texts, images, and digital artifacts, enabling an in-depth exploration of how influencers create and disseminate meaning in the digital public sphere (Bell, 2011)

By focusing on the narrative strategies and symbolic representations employed by influencers, this approach reveals the deeper cultural and political resonances of their content. For example, an influencer's use of a hashtag like #EndSARS or a viral video can be analysed as a cultural artifact, reflecting and shaping collective identities and societal values.

2.2 Data Sources

The study draws on diverse data sources to ensure a comprehensive analysis. These include:

Social Media Content: Posts, tweets, videos, and images created by key influencers on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube.

Hashtags and Trends: Analysis of popular hashtags like #EndSARS, #NigeriaDecides, and others to identify patterns of engagement and discourse.

Audience Reactions: User comments, retweets, and engagement metrics to understand public reception and interaction with influencer content.

Media Interviews: Interviews from mainstream media and YouTube channels of news platforms

2.3 Selection Criteria

Influencers included in the study were selected based on the following criteria:

Relevance: The influencer's active participation in cultural or political discourse, such as advocacy for social justice, cultural pride, or political mobilization.

Reach and Engagement: A substantial following and consistent engagement with their audience on digital platforms.

Diversity: Representation of a range of niches, including activism, fashion, music, and entertainment, to capture the multifaceted impact of influencers.

Impact: Demonstrated influence on public opinion or societal trends, particularly in the Nigerian context.

2.4 Analytical Process



The analysis involves several steps to unpack the layers of meaning in influencer content:

Content Analysis: Identifying recurring themes, symbols, and narratives in influencer-driven posts, videos, and campaigns.

Contextual Interpretation: Situating the content within broader cultural and political contexts, such as ongoing social movements, elections, or cultural festivals.

Audience Dynamics: Examining how followers engage with and reinterpret influencer content, contributing to its meaning-making process.

Critical Reflection: Assessing the implications of influencer narratives for inclusivity, authenticity, and the democratization of the public sphere.

This multi-step process ensures a thorough understanding of how digital influencers mediate cultural and political discourse in Nigeria, providing insights into their transformative potential and limitations.

3. The Cultural Impact of Digital Influencers

Digital influencers have become pivotal figures in shaping Nigeria's cultural identity, leveraging their platforms to mediate trends, amplify local narratives, and foster global visibility for Nigerian culture (Adeoba & Yeku, 2024). This section examines their roles as tastemakers, cultural mediators, and storytellers.

3.1 Influencers as Tastemakers

Influencers in the realms of fashion, music, and lifestyle wield considerable influence over what is deemed culturally relevant and aspirational. Through curated content, endorsements, and collaborations, they set trends that resonate with both local and global audiences (Harshika & Nag, 2024). For example, influencers like Toke Makinwa and Denola Grey have redefined contemporary Nigerian fashion, blending traditional elements with modern aesthetics to showcase a uniquely Nigerian yet globally appealing identity.

Moreover, influencers often collaborate with local designers, musicians, and artists to promote Nigerian culture on the world stage. These partnerships not only elevate local talents but also contribute to the global appreciation of Nigerian creativity. By acting as intermediaries between grassroots creators and international audiences, influencers play a crucial role in cultural diplomacy and soft power.

3.2 Amplifying Local Narratives

Digital influencers go beyond aesthetics to function as cultural custodians, using their platforms to highlight and celebrate Nigerian stories, traditions, and values in ways that connect deeply with diverse audiences (Adams, 2024). Through creative storytelling and digital engagement, these influencers tap into personal experiences and historical contexts, constructing narratives



that resonate with local audiences and global viewers. For example, food critics like Opeyemi Famakin leverage social media to document and popularize traditional Nigerian cuisine, effectively bridging generational and cultural gaps. By curating content that showcases dishes such as Jollof rice, Egusi soup, and Suya, Famakin has revitalized interest in Nigerian culinary heritage, making it appealing and accessible to younger Nigerians and international viewers. In a 2024 podcast posted on YouTube, the audience described his views on Nigerian cuisine as ‘audacious’ and ‘unapologetic’ (Echoo Room, 2024). In the music industry, influencers like Don Jazzy have been pivotal in championing Afrobeats, which has now become a global phenomenon. Don Jazzy’s role in fostering talents and promoting Nigerian music through social media platforms has amplified the genre’s reach, elevating artists like Rema, Ayra Starr, and others to international stardom. In a 2021 interview with the Daily Post, he stated that he leveraged social media to discover new talents who could give Afrobeats more global recognition (Olowolagba, 2021).

Through their efforts, Nigerian culture is presented as dynamic and innovative, dispelling monolithic stereotypes and creating new opportunities for cultural export. By emphasizing the vibrancy and richness of Nigerian traditions, these influencers instill a sense of pride and belonging among Nigerians while simultaneously reshaping global perceptions of the country. As Hartley (2023) notes, digital influencers have become key agents in reframing African cultural narratives, proving that storytelling through digital platforms can be a powerful tool for cultural diplomacy.

3.3 Influencers, Cultural Promotion, and Tensions in Nigeria: A Critical Examination (2019-2024)

Digital influencers in Nigeria have become powerful figures in shaping the country’s cultural identity, both within its borders and internationally (Omenugba et al, 2016). As tastemakers, narrators, and mediators of culture, they play a vital role in the way Nigerian culture is perceived and experienced. However, this influence is fraught with complex cultural tensions, especially when it comes to issues like cultural appropriation, the erosion of traditional values, and the commercialization of cultural heritage. Drawing on examples between 2019 and 2024, one can explore how these influencers navigate such challenges while contributing positively to cultural promotion.

A significant challenge for Nigerian influencers is the risk of cultural appropriation, a contentious issue where elements of traditional Nigerian culture are used out of context or for commercial gain, often by individuals who may not fully understand or respect their cultural significance. For example, in 2020, the popular Nigerian influencer and fashion entrepreneur, Chioma Ikokwu, faced backlash after launching a fashion line that incorporated traditional African prints and styles, but without acknowledging the deep cultural significance of these patterns. Many critics argued that this kind of commercialization of African cultural attire was an example of cultural appropriation, particularly because these patterns were being sold at premium prices, often detached from their original cultural contexts (Park & Chun, 2020). For example, Toke Makinwa and Denola Grey have redefined contemporary Nigerian fashion, blending traditional elements with modern aesthetics to showcase a uniquely Nigerian yet globally appealing identity. An interview with Denola Grey highlights his deliberate



approach to blending the old and the new. He sees his platform as a means for preserving Nigerian heritage while making it relatable to younger generations. Nigerian fashion isn't just about the past—it's about how we reinterpret it for the future," he noted in a 2022 podcast (TokeMoments, 2022)

Moreover, the blending of modern trends with traditional elements, while often innovative, has sparked debates about the authenticity of cultural representations (Sood, 2024). For instance, influencers in Nigeria frequently post content that mixes traditional Yoruba attire with contemporary streetwear or popularize food and dance fusions that are seen as creative expressions of Nigerian identity. However, critics argue that such hybridization can sometimes distort cultural heritage, leading to a version of (Nigerian) culture that is less grounded in its historical and social realities (Sood, 2024). For example, influencers like Nancy Isime, who often showcases fashion and beauty trends incorporating traditional Nigerian styles, have been criticized for simplifying or "watering down" these traditions for mass consumption.

Perhaps the most pronounced challenge faced by Nigerian influencers is the commercialization of cultural content. The growing trend of monetizing cultural heritage through branded partnerships, product endorsements, and sponsored content raises important ethical questions about the commodification of Nigeria's rich cultural diversity (Nomishan & Sani, 2023). Nigerian influencers, many of whom have large followings both locally and globally, frequently partner with multinational brands like Pepsi, Nike, Puma, and Amazon, integrating local cultural symbols into global marketing strategies. While this collaboration can help elevate Nigeria's cultural profile, it also comes with a responsibility to preserve cultural authenticity. While these prominent influencers bring global attention to Nigerian culture, the influence of micro-influencers and community-based creators often adds depth to cultural representation. For example, regional influencers collaborating with local artisans can promote sustainable practices and preserve traditional craftsmanship.

For instance, in 2022, popular Nigerian singer and influencer, Wizkid, sparked a debate when he collaborated with a high-end fashion brand to launch a line that drew heavily on Afrobeat aesthetics and West African fashion trends. While the collaboration brought global attention to Nigerian culture, Many Nigerians contended that the commercialization of Afrobeat culture, originally rooted in social and political activism, had become more of a marketing tool for international luxury brands. This exemplifies the ethical dilemma faced by influencers in balancing their roles as cultural ambassadors with the demands of profit-driven branding (CJ, 2022)

The issue is not only about fashion but extends to music, cuisine, and other cultural domains. Nigerian food bloggers, such as Ify and Nkiru, who have gained international recognition for sharing Nigerian dishes, often face criticism for how they present traditional recipes in a manner that is tailored to global taste buds, sometimes losing the essence of their original preparation. The commercialization of Nigerian cuisine through partnerships with food delivery services or global food brands raises concerns about whether these influencers are misrepresenting Nigerian food culture for profit, ultimately commodifying what was once a deeply personal and communal tradition (Adegoju, 2024). In light of these challenges, influencers in Nigeria must find a delicate balance between cultural preservation and the pressures of commercial success. While it is



undeniable that digital platforms offer a significant opportunity to promote Nigerian culture to a global audience, the question remains: how can influencers ensure they remain faithful to their roots while engaging in profitable ventures?

One example of an influencer who has managed to balance cultural integrity with commercialization is Teni Apata, a popular Nigerian musician and influencer. Teni has successfully integrated elements of Nigerian folklore and language into her music and public persona while also securing lucrative brand deals with global companies. Her ability to celebrate Nigerian culture through music and storytelling, without diluting its essence, has earned her a reputation as an ambassador for Nigerian culture. Teni has also used her platform to address social issues, particularly around gender and identity, showcasing that influencers can use their power to promote cultural pride and advocacy while still navigating the commercial world.

Similarly, influencers like Folake Kuye Huntoon, a fashion blogger and content creator known for her commitment to showcasing traditional Nigerian fashion, work to strike a balance by creating content that both celebrates and preserves Nigerian culture. By collaborating with local artisans and supporting sustainable fashion initiatives, she uses her platform to advocate for a deeper appreciation of Nigerian craftsmanship while also benefiting from brand partnerships.

Hence, digital influencers in Nigeria play an indispensable role in the evolution of the country's cultural identity. They are central to how Nigerian culture is presented and perceived on the global stage, often serving as the bridge between traditional heritage and contemporary trends (Adams, 2024). However, this influence is not without its challenges. Issues such as cultural appropriation, the erosion of traditional values, and the commercialization of cultural heritage present significant tensions that influencers must navigate.

Through their roles as tastemakers, narrators, and mediators, influencers shape cultural dialogue, bringing Nigerian culture to a global audience while also influencing local trends (Omenugba, 2016). But this process requires a nuanced understanding of the delicate balance between celebrating cultural identity, commercial interests, and ethical considerations. The future of Nigerian influencers will likely depend on how they manage this balance, ensuring that cultural preservation and commercial success can coexist without compromising the authenticity and integrity of Nigerian heritage.

Micro-Influencers and Marginalized Voices

While prominent influencers such as Mr. Macaroni and Falz have played key roles in shaping discourse, it is equally important to recognize the contributions of micro-influencers and regional content creators in diversifying Nigeria's digital public sphere. Unlike their more prominent counterparts, micro-influencers often operate within niche communities, focusing on localized narratives that resonate deeply with underrepresented groups. For instance, northern Nigerian influencers like Aisha Aliyu Tsamiya, a Hausa-language filmmaker, have been pivotal in promoting regional culture and language through content that highlights northern traditions.

Similarly, grassroots culinary bloggers like Fatima Adamu, who documents Fulani food practices, provide a window into cultural identities that might otherwise be overshadowed in



national discourse. By elevating these voices, the analysis better aligns with Habermas' Public Sphere Theory, which emphasizes equal access and participation in public discourse—failing to include such marginalized perspectives risks perpetuating the inequalities the digital public sphere should challenge.

4. The Political Implications of Digital Influencers

4.1 Influencers as Activists and Advocates

Digital influencers in Nigeria have played significant roles in political advocacy and activism, particularly during critical periods such as the #EndSARS protests in 2020 (Oghogho & Osazuwa, 2024). Influencers like Mr. Macaroni and Falz used their platforms to highlight police brutality and mobilize grassroots support for systemic change. Their content—ranging from live-streamed protest footage to emotionally charged commentary—galvanized both local and international attention, transforming social media into a powerful tool for political mobilization. In a televised news report on the live-streamed protest commemorating the second anniversary of the #EndSARS protest, viewers on YouTube described the activism of Falz and Mr. Macaroni as using their celebrity status to say the truth and speak for the masses (Arise News, 2022). The #EndSARS movement exemplifies how influencers act as intermediaries between citizens and global audiences, amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and drawing international scrutiny to local injustices (Oghogho & Osazuwa, 2024). For instance, DJ Switch's live Instagram broadcast of the Lekki Toll Gate shooting brought real-time documentation of state violence to a global audience, challenging official narratives and underscoring the potential of influencers to disrupt state-controlled information channels.

In addition to the role of prominent digital influencers, that of smaller, regionally focused influencers should not be overlooked. Activists from underserved areas like the Niger Delta used digital platforms to highlight the unique challenges their communities face such as environmental degradation and resource mismanagement. By incorporating micro-influencers from marginalised communities, the digital public sphere becomes more representative. However, the lack of structural support such as limited internet access and the bias of algorithms hinders these voices from gaining equal visibility.

4.2 Influencers in Electoral Politics

During elections, influencers serve as critical players in shaping public opinion and voter behaviour. In the 2023 general elections, influencers like Aisha Yesufu and social media platforms became arenas for electoral discourse, with influencers endorsing candidates, fact-checking claims, and encouraging voter participation. Their ability to break down complex political issues into accessible narratives allowed them to engage younger, digitally-savvy voters who might otherwise disengage from traditional political channels (King et al, 2016)

For example, the widespread use of the hashtag #NigeriaDecides2023 demonstrated how influencers leveraged their networks to provide real-time election updates, expose instances of voter suppression, and counter misinformation. By doing so, they contributed to a more



transparent electoral process, even as challenges like online harassment and misinformation persisted (IseOlorunkanmi et al., 2023)

4.3 Challenges of Misinformation and Polarization

While influencers can facilitate political engagement, their platforms are also susceptible to the spread of misinformation and divisive rhetoric. During the #EndSARS protests, false narratives circulated alongside authentic reports, often amplified unintentionally by influencers with large followings. This underscores the double-edged nature of influencer-driven political discourse, where the rapid spread of information can simultaneously empower and mislead audiences (Velte, 2018)

In the 2023 elections, some influencers were accused of partisan bias and spreading unverified claims, exacerbating existing political tensions. For instance, viral posts alleging electoral fraud often lacked substantiated evidence but gained traction due to the credibility associated with high-profile influencers. Such incidents highlight the need for greater accountability and media literacy among both influencers and their audiences (Abumbe & Owa, 2024). Misinformation remains a significant challenge for influencers, particularly during politically charged events like elections or protests. While prominent influencers are often credited with exposing injustices, regional creators play a crucial role in countering localized misinformation that might escape broader scrutiny. Initiatives that include independent fact-checkers and training programs for influencers, regardless of their following size, are critical for fostering a more informed and equitable digital landscape

Hence, digital influencers play multifaceted roles in Nigeria's political landscape, acting as activists, commentators, and mobilizers. While their platforms offer opportunities for democratic engagement and advocacy, they also present risks related to misinformation, polarization, and ethical accountability. Understanding these dynamics is essential for leveraging the transformative potential of digital influencers in fostering a more equitable political discourse.

5. Challenges Associated with Digital Influencers

The influence of digital personalities on Nigeria's cultural and political landscapes is transformative yet fraught with significant challenges. This section critically examines the risks and limitations of digital influencers, focusing on misinformation, the digital divide, and the commercialization of activism. These challenges highlight the complex dynamics at play and the need for a nuanced approach to engaging with digital influencers in societal discourse (Ghobadi & Sonenshein, 2024)

5.1 Misinformation and the Erosion of Trust

One of the most pressing challenges associated with digital influencers is their potential to spread misinformation, either intentionally or inadvertently. The viral nature of social media amplifies the reach of unverified or misleading content, often with far-reaching consequences.



(Govindankutty & Gopalan, 2023) In Nigeria, this issue was starkly illustrated during the #EndSARS protests in 2020. While many influencers used their platforms to advocate for justice and police reform, some shared unverified claims, such as inflated casualty figures or unsubstantiated allegations against specific individuals. Although these actions were often well-intentioned, they risked undermining the credibility of the broader movement.

Misinformation propagated by influencers extends beyond activism, affecting cultural representation and the preservation of heritage. In their pursuit of engaging content or bolstering their brand, some influencers often oversimplify or distort Nigerian traditions, cultural practices, and historical events. (Adams, 2024) This distortion is sometimes unintentional, driven by a lack of deep understanding, but it can also be deliberate, aimed at creating dramatic narratives that appeal to a wider audience. For instance, in the case of the Osun-Osogbo Festival—a UNESCO-recognized cultural event—misrepresentations by influencers have included exaggerated depictions of rituals or erroneous claims about the festival's origins. Such inaccuracies have sparked a backlash from cultural custodians, who view these portrayals as disrespectful and harmful to the authenticity of Nigeria's rich heritage (Mackay et al., 2017)

These actions risk not only eroding the cultural significance of such traditions but also alienating the communities that sustain them. Additionally, the widespread reach of social media amplifies these inaccuracies, potentially leading global audiences to form misinformed perceptions of Nigerian culture. This trend underscores the need for influencers to engage with cultural custodians and historians to ensure their content is both accurate and respectful. By doing so, influencers can play a positive role in preserving and promoting Nigeria's cultural heritage rather than inadvertently contributing to its misrepresentation

The erosion of trust in digital platforms due to misinformation also affects audience engagement. As followers grow increasingly sceptical of the authenticity of influencer content, the perceived reliability of influencers as cultural or political mediators diminishes. Addressing this challenge requires greater accountability mechanisms, such as fact-checking initiatives and digital literacy campaigns tailored to influencers and their audiences (Peter & Muth, 2023)

5.2 The Digital Divide and Unequal Representation

The digital divide—disparities in access to internet infrastructure, digital tools, and literacy—poses a significant barrier to inclusive cultural and political discourse mediated by influencers. (Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010) While Nigeria has witnessed exponential growth in internet usage, with over 122 million active users as of 2023, rural communities and economically disadvantaged groups remain underrepresented in digital spaces. (Kemp, 2023) This gap in access is not merely technological but also intersects with issues of economic inequality, education, and language barriers.

In rural areas, internet connectivity remains sporadic, and high costs associated with data and devices further restrict access for economically disadvantaged populations. A 2022 report by the Nigerian Communications Commission found that broadband penetration in rural areas was below 50%, despite urban centres boasting significantly higher figures. As a result, rural



communities face limited opportunities to engage with or contribute to the influencer-led digital public sphere.

This exclusion creates a significant gap in representation, as the concerns, traditions, and voices of rural Nigerians are often missing from the narratives constructed online. For instance, during the 2023 general elections, political influencers primarily focused on urban voters, using platforms like Twitter and Instagram to promote hashtags such as #NigeriaDecides2023. (H et al., 2023) However, the reliance on such platforms inadvertently sidelined rural voters, who often lack both the infrastructure and digital literacy to participate meaningfully. Consequently, the concerns of these communities, including access to basic amenities, healthcare, and education, received less attention in the influencer-driven discourse.

In the realm of cultural discourse, similar dynamics unfold. Indigenous communities, often located in remote areas, possess a wealth of cultural knowledge and practices that could enrich Nigeria's digital public sphere. Yet, these perspectives are frequently overshadowed by high-profile influencers who prioritize narratives with greater commercial appeal. (Cheng, 2015) For example, while influencers might showcase elements of traditional fashion, music, or festivals, the content is typically curated for urban or international audiences, often reducing cultural practices to simplified or commodified versions.

This marginalization is further exacerbated by the predominance of English and Pidgin as the primary languages of digital communication. Indigenous languages, which are integral to many rural communities, rarely feature in influencer content, creating a linguistic barrier that excludes significant portions of the population.

The digital divide also magnifies power imbalances within the influencer economy. High-profile influencers with access to cutting-edge technology, production teams, and robust sponsorships dominate online conversations, crowding out emerging voices from marginalized communities. Micro-influencers, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, often struggle to gain visibility due to limited resources and the algorithmic biases of social media platforms that prioritize popular content.

To address these disparities, deliberate efforts must be made to democratize access to digital platforms. Government and private sector partnerships, such as those outlined in Nigeria's National Broadband Plan, must prioritize expanding affordable and reliable internet access to rural areas. Beyond infrastructure, digital literacy programs tailored to rural communities can empower individuals to engage more effectively in the digital public sphere.

Promoting local content creators from underrepresented groups is equally crucial. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, funding for grassroots creators, and collaborations between high-profile influencers and regional voices can amplify diverse perspectives. Influencers themselves can play a proactive role by engaging with marginalized communities, incorporating their narratives into mainstream discourse, and using their platforms to highlight issues affecting rural and economically disadvantaged Nigerians.



By bridging the digital divide, Nigeria's digital public sphere can move closer to inclusivity, ensuring that the voices of rural and economically marginalized groups contribute to shaping the country's cultural and political identity. This effort would not only enrich the diversity of digital discourse but also foster a more equitable representation of Nigeria's multifaceted society.

5.3 The Commercialization of Activism

The monetization of digital platforms has given rise to the commercialization of activism, where influencers engage in social or political causes primarily for personal or financial gain (Hutchinson, 2021). While influencer activism can bring critical issues to the forefront, the blurring of ethical lines between genuine advocacy and profit-driven engagement undermines the authenticity of their contributions.

During the #EndSARS protests, for example, some influencers were criticized for using the movement to boost their brand visibility, with allegations of staged photo opportunities and selective participation. Similarly, cultural influencers have been accused of exploiting traditional themes for lucrative brand endorsements without meaningful engagement with the communities they claim to represent.

The commercialization of activism poses long-term risks to societal trust in influencer-led initiatives. Audiences may grow cynical about the motives behind influencer campaigns, diminishing their impact and effectiveness. To mitigate these risks, influencers must adopt transparent practices, such as declaring sponsored content and ensuring that advocacy efforts are grounded in genuine community engagement. Additionally, platforms and regulatory bodies should encourage ethical guidelines for influencer activities, balancing profitability with social responsibility. By tackling these issues, Nigeria's digital ecosystem can evolve into a more inclusive and credible space for societal engagement.

6. Strategies for Optimizing the Role of Digital Influencers

To address the challenges associated with digital influencers and enhance their contributions to Nigeria's cultural and political discourse, it is essential to implement targeted strategies. This section proposes actionable measures to combat misinformation, bridge the digital divide, and mitigate the commercialization of activism. These strategies aim to foster a more inclusive, credible, and socially responsible digital ecosystem.

6.1 Combating Misinformation Through Education and Regulation

Misinformation poses a significant threat to the credibility of digital influencers and the public sphere (Osimen & Adeyefa, 2024). Tackling this challenge requires a multifaceted approach involving education, regulatory frameworks, and platform accountability.

Promoting digital literacy is essential to mitigate the spread of false information. By providing workshops and online courses, influencers can learn to verify sources, fact-check claims, and communicate responsibly (Shuni & Mukoshy, 2024). For example, campaigns in Nigeria



launched by NGOs and platforms like Facebook and Twitter have aimed to improve information accuracy during elections.

Social media platforms must also enhance their accountability mechanisms. Algorithms should prioritize credible sources, and influencers should be required to disclose their sources when sharing news (Lanius et al., 2021). During the 2023 elections, Twitter introduced tags for misleading posts, a feature that could be extended to influencer content.

Establishing collaborative fact-checking networks with independent organizations can further enhance credibility. These networks would provide influencers with verified information, debunking false claims before they are shared (Jones et al., 2022). Incentives such as recognition programs or financial support could encourage influencers to participate in these networks, helping to build public trust and ensuring content integrity.

6.2 Bridging the Digital Divide Through Infrastructure and Inclusion

The digital divide exacerbates social and economic inequalities, particularly for marginalized groups with limited access to digital tools, hindering their representation in Nigeria's digital public sphere (Fuchs & Horak, 2008). Bridging this gap requires infrastructure investments, such as expanding broadband coverage to rural areas and ensuring affordable internet access for all. Inclusive policies must prioritize equitable participation to foster diverse narratives and cultural representation online. Empowering underrepresented voices, including women, youth, and indigenous communities, is essential through targeted initiatives like training, grants, and support for local influencers.

Government and private sector collaborations are key to expanding affordable internet, particularly in underserved regions. Efforts like Nigeria's National Broadband Plan, aiming for 90% internet penetration by 2025, are steps towards addressing these disparities (Nigeria National Broadband Plan, n.d.).

To empower local content creators, platforms and sponsors should provide grants, mentorship, and visibility initiatives for marginalized influencers (Blanchet-Cohen & Cook, 2014). Highlighting indigenous creators and promoting their narratives can diversify perspectives.

Additionally, establishing community digital hubs equipped with internet access and training programs can empower rural communities to engage in the digital public sphere (Ashmore & Price, 2018). These hubs can foster local influencers, helping them reach wider audiences and contribute to a more inclusive digital ecosystem.

6.3 Promoting Ethical Practices to Mitigate Commercialization of Activism

The commercialization of activism occurs when influencers prioritize financial gain over genuine advocacy, often resulting in superficial or insincere campaigns. (Scharff, 2023) This undermines the authenticity of their efforts, causing audiences to question their motives and eroding trust in their messages.



Several high-profile cases illustrate the ethical dilemmas associated with the commercialization of activism. During the #EndSARS protests in 2020, some influencers faced backlash for monetizing their involvement in the movement. Critics accused them of using branded hashtags or partnering with commercial entities under the guise of activism. For instance, influencers promoting protest-related merchandise, such as T-shirts or wristbands, without contributing proceeds to the movement or affected communities were accused of exploiting the cause for personal gain. These actions sparked debates about the fine line between raising awareness and profiting from advocacy.

Another case involved an influencer who collaborated with a global NGO to promote a campaign against child labour. While the campaign garnered significant attention, investigative reports later revealed that the influencer had minimal interaction with the affected communities. This raised questions about the campaign's legitimacy and whether the partnership prioritized optics over substantive impact. Critics highlighted the absence of community engagement and the failure to address systemic issues, framing the initiative as a missed opportunity for genuine advocacy.

To ensure the credibility of digital influencers, ethical practices must be promoted through transparency and accountability. Influencers should disclose any sponsorships linked to their activism, with regulatory bodies like Nigeria's Advertising Regulatory Council enforcing these guidelines. Introducing certification programs for influencers that reward responsible practices, such as transparency and community engagement, can create benchmarks for authenticity in the digital space.

Influencers should also partner with grassroots organizations to ensure their advocacy aligns with community needs (Farid, 2019). For example, during the #EndSARS movement, influencers collaborating with local NGOs were more effective in building trust and driving impact than those relying solely on social media visibility.

These strategies will help influencers navigate misinformation, inequality, and commercialization while reinforcing their role in driving positive cultural and political change.

7.1 Leveraging Technological Innovation

Future research and policy should focus on leveraging innovative technologies to enhance influencer engagement and accountability. AI tools can help influencers fact-check content and identify underrepresented voices, promoting inclusivity. Blockchain can ensure transparency in influencer-led activism by verifying the deployment of raised funds. Additionally, augmented reality (AR) can create immersive experiences that showcase Nigeria's cultural heritage, blending cultural preservation with digital engagement. These technologies will enable influencers to be more accountable and impactful in their roles.

7.2 Promoting Participatory Governance



Digital influencers play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing policymaking. To fully harness their potential, strategies should focus on integrating them into participatory governance frameworks, enabling them to act as intermediaries between policymakers and the public while fostering inclusive governance.

One approach is engaging influencers in policy co-creation, particularly on digital rights and cultural preservation issues. Their ability to communicate with diverse audiences makes them ideal collaborators for ensuring governance processes incorporate various perspectives. Additionally, influencers can amplify civic education by partnering with government agencies, such as INEC, to boost voter turnout and public engagement in elections.

To maximize impact, grassroots engagement is vital. Collaborating with community leaders and NGOs allows influencers to create localized campaigns tailored to specific cultural contexts. Initiatives like workshops and town halls enable direct community interaction, ensuring their voices inform broader advocacy efforts, as demonstrated during the #EndSARS movement. Moreover, influencers can address digital divides by partnering with NGOs to provide resources like smartphones, internet access, and digital literacy training, empowering underserved communities to engage in governance.

By leveraging their broad reach and adopting community-focused approaches, digital influencers can transform participatory governance, promoting inclusive policymaking and societal equity.

7.3 Fostering Ethical Digital Ecosystems

Building an ethical digital ecosystem is essential for maintaining the credibility and effectiveness of digital influencers. Ethics training programs and certification schemes endorsed by regulatory bodies can instil principles like transparency, accountability, and social responsibility, providing influencers with clear ethical guidelines. Social media platforms should collaborate with local stakeholders to create accountability mechanisms, such as independent audits, to address challenges like fake news and exploitative content monetization. Additionally, community-driven regulations, developed in consultation with influencer communities and civil society, ensure that policies are both effective and equitable, balancing innovation with ethical considerations.

Conclusion

Digital influencers have become indispensable actors in Nigeria's cultural and political discourse, wielding the power to inspire change, shape narratives, and bridge divides. However, their influence comes with significant challenges that require collective action from policymakers, platforms, and society. By leveraging technological innovations, fostering participatory governance, and building ethical digital ecosystems, Nigeria can harness the transformative potential of digital influencers while addressing their limitations.



As the popular Nigerian Pidgin English proverb says, "If person waka fast, e go waka alone; but if person waka well, dem go waka together." (If you walk fast, you will walk alone; but if you walk well, you will walk together.) The journey toward a more inclusive, credible, and impactful digital landscape requires collaboration, patience, and shared responsibility. Through these efforts, digital influencers can truly become champions of cultural heritage and agents of political progress in Nigeria's dynamic digital age.

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