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Trends and Patterns of Social Media Use for the Promotion of Gender Equality by Non-Governmental Organisations in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examined the trends and Patterns of Social media use for the Promotion of Gender Equality by Non-Governmental Organisations in Nigeria. The study was based on two research objectives which were anchored on Connective Action Theory and Uses and Gratification Theories. Using mixed a method, the population of 316,000 digitally active residents in FCT, from which 419 were sampled using constituted questionnaire copy for the survey component of the study. Data were collected using questionnaire copies for the survey. Findings revealed that most NGOs use informational broadcast communication as their main strategy, and little action-oriented or community-building type of content is used. Some of the content formats were infographics, still images, short videos, testimonies of beneficiaries, and blog posts. The study concluded that Nigerian gender equality NGOs have developed a viable social media presence but have not yet used that presence to create strategic impact. It was recommended that Nigerian gender equality NGOs should transition from broadcast-oriented informational communication to strategically framed, action-oriented content strategies.

Keywords: Social Media, Gender Equality, NGOs, Trends, Patterns

Introduction

One of the most endemic in terms of structure and empirically documented challenges to the development architecture in Nigeria is gender inequality. The Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) places Nigeria 154th among 166 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII) which is a composite measure of reproductive health, educational attainment of females, and their participation in the labour market disaggregated by sex. The World Economic Forum's



(WEF, 2023) Global Gender Gap Report assigns Nigeria a gender parity score of 64.5%, placing the country 123rd out of 146 nations across four quantifiable pillars: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU, 2023) further documents that women constituted only 3.6% of the Nigerian National Assembly following the 2023 general elections, a measurable regression from the already inadequate 4.7% recorded in 2019, and among the lowest rates of female parliamentary representation in sub-Saharan Africa. The National Population Commission and ICF International's (2019) Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) established that 31% of Nigerian women aged 15–49 had experienced physical violence in their lifetime, 28% of girls were married before age 18, and female labour force participation lagged male participation by over 20 percentage points. These interlocking indicators establish a multi-dimensional pattern of gender inequality that is empirically verifiable, institutionally reproduced, and resistant to the relatively modest formal policy commitments that Nigeria's revised National Gender Policy (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2021) has produced. This verification and institutional reproduction of formal policy shielding gender equality in recent times in Nigeria, have served a veritable function in awareness creation and promotion of same.

Social media has reconfigured the architecture of public communication and civil society advocacy in ways that create structurally new possibilities for gender equality promotion, particularly for resource-constrained actors operating in environments where traditional broadcast media are financially inaccessible (Umoren, 2020). Aichner, et al. (2021) identify seven basic typologies of social media, which are defined by various communicative affordances, algorithmic architectures, and audience interaction logics, with varying impacts on the production and reception of advocacy content. In Nigeria, DataReportal (2024) estimates an active social media user base of around 37.5 million, with the disproportionately high number of urban youth aged 18–34 years, with Facebook as the most active platform with more than 31 million accounts, Tik Tok at 11.4 million, Instagram at 5.85 million, and X (previously twitter) at around 4 million. The political impact of civil society mobilisation facilitated by social media was most spectacular with the case of the #EndSARS protest movement in October 2020: Ekoh and George (2021) describe it as the most widely digitally organised civic protest in the history of post-independent Nigeria and mobilised demonstrators in 25 states and had more than two billion Twitter impressions in two weeks. The theoretically most robust explanation of this phenomenon and at the same time throws light on the structural potential of social media as an advocacy vehicle to the gender equality, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Nigeria, is the connective action framework by that predominantly utilises social media in the fostering and promotion of gender inequalities through campaigns staging, mobilisation and digital messaging that hampers genders bigotries. It is why Bennett and Segerberg (2013) notes that digital media allows mobilisation on a personalised, networked level without the formal organisational structure of traditional collective action.

Therefore, non-governmental organisations form an important institutional layer in the gender equality architecture of Nigeria that fills the structural gaps created by the ineffective state implementation of gender equality laws, the institutional capture of all tiers of governance by patriarchy, and the structural under-investment in women empowerment programmes across successive federal budgets. The Special Control Unit Against Money Laundering (SCUML, 2021) approximated the number of registered NGOs in Nigeria to be about 14,000, with a large percentage of them having mandates related to gender-based violence prevention, economic empowerment of women, advocacy of female education, and reproductive health rights. Nah and Saxton (2013) affirm that the NGOs embrace the use of social media as a way of offsetting the resources limitations that make the traditional broadcast media unaffordable to them and use the zero-cost platform architecture to magnify their advocacy reach in a way that their operational budgets otherwise would not have allowed. Guo and Saxton (2020) empirically show that NGOs that use diagnostic-prognostic-motivational framing on social media, explicitly stating that there is an inequality problem, that the institutional responsibility is attributed to it, and that a remedy is provided that is



accessible to the audience, achieve statistically significantly greater audience engagement and action response than organisations that use only informational content. Independently, Adegbola and Gearhart (2019), Obi-Ani, et al. (2023), and Saxton and Waters (2019) find that the lack of African-specific evidence is a significant gap in the global literature on digital advocacy effectiveness: studies in this area are overwhelmingly based on North American and European institutional settings with high Such a disjunction, in the digital infrastructure, cultural gender norms, political economy of NGO funding, and civil society-state relations, makes the uncritical application of the existing models to the Nigerian context methodologically unsound and potentially misleading to the practitioners and policymakers. The systematic, contextualised empirical research into the Nigerian gender equality NGOs utilisation of social media in this unique setting is the core scholarly, policy need to which this study reacts.

The social media user base in Nigeria is growing at a highly accelerated rate (estimated at 17.1 million active users in 2018, and 37.5 million in 2024, respectively; DataReportal, 2024; Statista, 2023), and the use of social media by gender equality NGOs in Nigeria is becoming more visible, no peer-reviewed study The literature that is closest to this terrain such as Liang (2022) about social media and gender discourse, and Nonikashvili (2022) about digital gender narratives are located in non-African institutional settings and do not address the operation-specifics of the Nigerian NGO practice or the aspects of gender inequality that are specific to the ethnic, religious, and political context of Nigeria. It is a cycle of under-invested, under-assessed advocacy which continues to hinder the development of evidence-based strategies, rational donor distribution, and successful civil society input to SDG 5 (UNDP, 2023; UN Women, 2022).

This study has two ongoing academic arguments that directly frame the problematic. First, the discussion of the social media as a democratiser of advocacy or a reproducer of power imbalances: Morozov (2011) maintains that online platforms encourage slacktivism the act of civic engagement rather than its systematic practice systematically undermining the incentive to engage in collective action on a sustained basis to create structural change. Halupka (2014) builds on this by the idea of clicktivism, showing that high platform engagement indicators can seldom translate into institutional policy change without the underlying organisational infrastructure. In contrast, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) argue that the connective action made possible by digital media is a qualitatively new type of mobilisation that can lead to quicker coalition building and more responsive advocacy actions. The question of whether the social media activity of Nigerian gender equality NGOs is a substantive or a performative advocacy is still empirically unanswered. Second, the effectiveness of NGO content strategy: Guo and Saxton (2020) and Saxton and Waters (2019) have determined that action-oriented content strategically framed and posted on social media produces much more measurable audience engagement than informational content; however, whether this applies to the structural conditions of Nigeria, which are characterised by digital access disparities, culturally specific gender normative frameworks, and a politically volatile public sphere remain untested.

The gap in knowledge that this research aims to fill is analytically at three levels. Descriptively, there is no record of the social media presence, content typology, posting frequency, and engagement measures of gender equality NGOs in Nigeria over 2018-2023, a methodological vacuum that makes it impossible to evaluate or compare. Explanatorily, there is no empirically based coverage of the strategic frameworks and organisational capacity variables that inform the decisions of these NGOs in social media, which prevents determining the circumstances in which digital advocacy is best implemented. At the impact level, there is no systematic data on the relationship between NGO social media action and any apparent changes in audience awareness or attitudinal dispositions to gender equality in Nigeria. This research aims to systematically intervene at all three levels using rigorous, mixed-method empirical research.



Research Objectives

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine the usage pattern of social media platforms by the Nigerian NGOs to promote gender equality programmes;
2. Evaluate the NGOs' strategies in the promotion of gender equality on social media;

Theoretical Framework

Connective Action Theory (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013)

Classical collective action theory, in Olson's formulation, understood political mobilisation as fundamentally a problem of coordination and incentive structure. Rational self-interested actors will not contribute to the production of collective goods including political change unless selective incentives are provided that make participation individually rational, or unless coercive mechanisms compel participation. This logic implies that effective political mobilisation requires formal organisational structures capable of providing selective incentives, establishing shared ideological frameworks that bind participants together, and directing collective effort toward defined strategic objectives.

Bennett and Segerberg (2013) identify three modal forms of collective and connective action that are directly relevant to understanding the diverse social media practices of the Nigerian NGOs examined in this study. Traditional organisational brokerage describes the classical social movement model of formal organisations providing selective incentives and ideological leadership to mobilise collective action.

Connective Action Theory has many-faceted and direct theoretical applicability to the study. The theory offers a solid conceptual framework to explain why social media has become the medium of choice to advocate gender equality NGOs in Nigeria: the personalised, networked and horizontally distributed nature of social media communication directly facilitates the connective action logic to scale in a manner that traditional media channels, with their broadcasting architecture and institutional gatekeeping roles, cannot emulate. It provides the means of analysis that help to differentiate between various forms of NGO social media participation and the broadcasting of informational messages and the establishment of participatory campaign frameworks that proactively welcome and incorporate personalised audience interaction. And it offers a normative evaluative scheme: effective NGO social media communication in the light of the Connective Action Theory is the communication that manages to generate personalised amplification that creates content resonant enough to the identities, experiences and values of individual audience members that they share it, and that the communication has a wider reach through their own networks and adds their own personalised articulation to the formation of collective advocacy.

Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz & Blumler, 1979)

The Uses and Gratification Theory forms part of some of the most longstanding, generative and empirically fruitful traditions in communication scholarship, tracing back to the earliest radio audience research of Paul Lazarsfeld in the 1940s, through the theoretical elucidation of Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970s, to a massively active and expanding contemporary literature of The active, purposive, and selective nature of media consumption is the key point of departure of the theory as compared to the previous mass communication theories that had conceptualised the audience as passive consumers of media messages whose attitudes and behaviours were determined mostly by the content to which they were exposed.

The Uses and Gratification Theory has an intellectual lineage of studies and theoretical formulations that have continually narrowed and broadened its analysis. The initial studies of the radio audience motivation by Lazarsfeld and Stanton (1944) laid the groundwork of understanding that audiences do not passively



receive the impacts of the media but instead utilise it to fulfill certain needs. The theoretical statement of two step flow and the active audience tradition by Katz (1959) identified the scholarly shift in the direct effects models to the audience-centred approaches. The Uses of Mass Communications: Current Perspectives on Gratifications Research, a collection of works edited by Blumler and Katz (1974) gathered the most important empirical and theoretical works of the new tradition, establishing its basic categories of needs and gratifications of media.

Quan-Haase and Young (2010) contribute an important distinction between the gratifications that social media use satisfies outcomes that users actually experience from media engagement and the gratifications that users seek from that engagement motivations that drive media selection. This "obtained gratification" versus "sought gratification" distinction is of considerable practical relevance for NGO social media strategy: organisations that produce content specifically aligned with the gratifications that their target audiences seek from social media engagement will achieve higher rates of active engagement and sharing than those that produce content optimised for broadcast reach without regard to audience motivational profiles.

The conceptual combination of the Connective Action Theory and Uses and Gratification Theory, which underlies this study, creates a specifically fruitful analytical framework to comprehend the intricate processes of NGO social media gender equality advocacy. Connective Action Theory provides the macro and meso-level framework for understanding how NGOs produce and circulate personalised action frames through networked digital spaces, how those frames generate collective communicative action around gender equality issues, and how platform affordances shape the forms of connective action that are possible.

Methods

The research design used in this study is a mixed-methods research design, which combines two methodological approaches that are complementary, which include in-depth interview and survey. The population for the study was conservatively estimated to account for approximately 316,000 of these digitally active residents in FCT. Ascertaining the sample size from the survey component, Taro Yamane formula was applied with a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of 5% ($e = 0.05$) to this population of 316,000 that yields the sample size calculation of 399 respondents. The researcher added 20 to the sample size to account for degree of error in the distribution and retrieval of questionnaire copy summing a total of 419. This sample size of 419 constitutes the questionnaire respondent population for the survey component of this study.

On sampling techniques, a systematic sampling strategy for the content analysis component was applied to the social media archives of the twenty NGOs across both platforms. The twenty-four calendar quarters are the study period of January 2018 to December 2023. A purposively chosen 3 months of every calendar year one per quarter were chosen to provide a temporal coverage with an analytical manageability: January (Q1), May (Q2), September (Q3), and December (Q4). Each month that was selected, all third posts posted by each NGO on each platform were sampled with a systematic interval sampling to produce a sampling frame that allows each NGO to be proportionately represented in the communication activity, and avoids the selection bias inherent in researcher judgement in the selection of posts.

Purposive sampling was the primary technique governing the selection of the twenty NGOs for the institutional dimension of the study. In the survey element, the purposive and systematic methods were used in the distribution of the 419 questionnaires in eight districts of the Abuja Municipal Area Council. In the content analysis part, a systematic sampling process was used in the purposely defined sampling



frame of Facebook and Instagram posts by the twenty NGOs in the 2018-2023 period of study. One data collection tool were created and implemented a self-administered, structured questionnaire for the survey.

Findings

This section presents, analyses, and discusses the empirical data generated by the three methodological components of this study: the survey administered to 399 social media users in the Abuja Municipal Area Council (AMAC); the in-depth interviews conducted with communication officers and senior staff of ten of the twenty selected Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Research Question One: Social Media Usage Patterns

Interview questions related to the frequency of posting, the choice of the platform, and the regularity of the digital communication strategy answered the first research question about the patterns of the usage of social media platforms by the selected NGOs to promote gender equality. The responses showed that the rate of posting was quite different in different organisations due to the difference in the resources available, staffing, and strategic orientation on digital communication.

The frequency of gender equality content on GGAC (P1) is high, with the posting schedule being almost daily, as a planned measure to keep the audience informed. AWEF (P2) is weekly (every Monday) in a regular pattern that demonstrates a more resource-constrained communication model. Mirabel Centre (P4) publishes twice a week, which has a regular rhythm and does not overwhelm the resources of the content creation. W-TEC (P3) explained that it was important to post consistently and regularly without strict schedules, changing the frequency according to the content. She Leads Africa (P8) has a daily posting schedule. Boon Foundation (P7) makes a post every two days and WIMBIZ (P6) make a post every day except during weekends and on public holidays. Daily posting is the norm as defined by WAAW Foundation (P5a and P5b).

Some respondents mentioned the strategic reason of their platform decisions. Every one of the ten organisations has a presence on at least Facebook or Instagram, with some being present on both and X (previously Twitter) and LinkedIn. This platform-specific strategic rationale is quite straightforwardly aligned with the theoretical anticipations of the Connective Action Theory (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), which prefigures the influence of platform affordances on the forms of connective action that organisations can take.

Research Question Two: Content Strategies and Messaging Formats

SMYF (P9) utilises powerful pictures, graphics, and short stories; WAAW Foundation (P5a, P5b) utilises blogs, infographics, videos, newsletters, and email; W-TEC (P3) utilises mainly pictures, videos and blog posts; Mirabel Rape Crisis Centre (P4) utilizes photographs, infographics, and videos; AWEF (P2) util She Leads Africa (P8) works with audio, audio-visual, slides, and infographics; WIMBIZ (P6) employs flyers, infographics, visuals, and audio-visual; Boon Foundation (P7) mostly works with audio-visual content; GGAC (P1) works with infographics. One participant (P3, W-TEC) provided analytically significant information: We use primarily pictures to narrate our gender activity stories and exchange information about our programmes that the population can benefit. We adore videos, but the manpower that it requires to accomplish each task of creating a video is very high. This assertion marks the difference between strategic vision and operational ability that defines most of smaller NGOs in the sample. P6 (WIMBIZ) observation offers a very valuable insight into the strategic flexibility of sophisticated NGO communication: "We have no strict structure; the medium is predetermined by the



message we want to deliver to our social media audience: pictures, videos, snippets, infographics, newsletters, storytelling, call-in programmes.

Table 1: Five-Point Likert Scale: Benefits of Publicising Gender Equality Programmes on Social Media

Variables	N	Construct	Max	Min	Mean	SD	Decision
Social media platforms are an effective way to raise awareness about gender equality programmes.	399	Positive	5	1	4.45	0.79	Favourable
Publicising gender equality programmes on social media contributes to greater public knowledge of gender issues.	399	Positive	5	1	4.43	0.77	Favourable
Social media has a broad reach that allows gender equality programmes to connect with diverse audiences.	399	Positive	5	1	4.36	0.78	Favourable
Gender equality programmes publicised on social media are more likely to engage young people in the cause.	399	Positive	5	1	4.44	0.74	Favourable
Social media campaigns are effective in mobilising people to take action in support of gender equality.	399	Positive	5	1	4.15	0.78	Favourable
Gender equality programmes promoted on social media positively influence the public's understanding of gender equality.	399	Positive	5	1	4.06	0.81	Favourable

Field Survey, 2024. Positively structured construct with mean > 2.5 = Favourable; mean < 2.5 = Unfavourable

All six variables measuring audience perceptions of the benefits of publicising gender equality programmes on social media yielded mean scores ranging from 4.06 to 4.45, well above the 3.0 threshold, indicating consistently Favourable responses across the entire instrument. The best mean score was obtained in the item that recognised social media as an effective tool of awareness-raising (mean = 4.45, SD = 0.79), closely followed by the item that recognised social media publicisation as an effective tool of making people more aware of gender issues (mean = 4.43, SD = 0.77) and the item that addressed youth engagement (mean = 4.44, SD = 0.74). The relatively lower but still strongly favourable mean for the mobilisation item (mean = 4.15, SD = 0.78) and the understanding item (mean = 4.06, SD = 0.81) suggests some qualification in audience confidence that social media exposure translates reliably into behavioural mobilisation and deep conceptual understanding a nuance consistent with the empirical



literature, which distinguishes between awareness generation, attitudinal change, and behavioural mobilisation as distinct and sequentially demanding advocacy outcomes (Casad et al., 2021; Cullen & Murphy, 2021).

Discussion

This section presents an integrated discussion of the findings from all three methodological components in relation to each of the five research questions.

These findings are directly interpretable through the framework of Connective Action Theory (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013), which distinguishes between organisationally enabled connective action in which NGOs provide the platform infrastructure and content that followers personalise and amplify and crowd-enabled connective action, in which individuals self-organise around shared concerns without significant organisational intermediation. The majority of the selected NGOs are attempting organisationally enabled connective action but are not successfully generating the personalised amplification that the theory posits as the mechanism of scale. The low sharing and retweet rates documented in the content analysis indicate that followers are not sufficiently motivated to extend the NGOs' messages through their own networks a failure of the personalised action frame mechanism that Bennett and Segerberg (2013) identify as the engine of connective action. This finding is supported by Oriji et al. (2023), who investigate the rights organisations of women in Lagos, showing that organisations that do not have consistent, visually rich, and audience-responsive content strategies fail to systematically activate the audience in a way that their resources and mandates should facilitate.

Interview data reveal that the twenty selected NGOs deploy a diverse range of content formats including infographics, static images, short-form video, audio-visual snippets, blog posts, newsletters, and beneficiary testimony but that the specific format employed is frequently determined by operational capacity rather than strategic audience analysis. The majority of organisations prioritise visual and audio-visual content on the basis of its demonstrable ability to convey complex information concisely and generate emotional audience engagement. The content analysis findings confirm that visual content is near-universal, and that formal tone dominates despite evidence particularly from the FIN case that informal, conversational register generates substantially stronger engagement. A number of interviewees directly cited resource limitation as the constraining factor on the sophistication of the strategy: the inability to have in-house graphic design resources, the affordability of video creation, and the unavailability of social media communication specialists all limit strategic ambition.

These results overlap with the theoretical frameworks presented in this study. From the perspective of Uses and Gratification Theory (Katz & Blumler, 1979), the most effective content strategies are those that successfully align content format and register with the specific gratification profiles of target audience segments. Whiting and Williams (2013) demonstrate that different social media features satisfy different gratifications, and that successful NGO communication must therefore calibrate content type to the specific informational, emotional, and social integration needs of the audiences it seeks to engage. The organisations that report using beneficiary testimony audio-visual snippets of survivors sharing their experiences are implicitly exploiting the affective and social integrative gratification mechanisms that Sundar and Limperos (2013) identify as particularly powerful drivers of deep audience engagement in social media environments.



Conclusion and Recommendations

The results produced by this research lead to four definite conclusions regarding the current state of the gender equality advocacy via social media by Nigerian NGOs and under what circumstances it can be more efficient.

Nigerian gender equality NGOs have developed a viable social media presence but have not yet used that presence to create strategic impact. The sheer preponderance of informational broadcast communication messages that educate the audiences about gender inequality without necessarily seeking to involve them actively or community-building strategies implies that most organisations are functioning far short of their communicative potential. The platforms are utilised, yet not in a strategic manner. The finding of the content analysis that nineteen out of twenty NGOs registered low engagement scores, even though they had active accounts during a five-year period, is the empirical manifestation of this gap the most direct.

More so, Female IN Nigeria is an empirically tested model of best practice which has not been replicated by the larger sector. Having a Facebook community of more than one million users, user-created content every day, and with high emoji reactions, comments, and discussion threads, FIN shows what can be achieved when the social media is designed to be community-based, as opposed to content-driven. Its model demonstrates that the most fruitful way to move the industry ahead is not merely to post more or better or to create more participatory production values, but to reorganize communication to focus on dialogue with the audience, participatory content architectures, and community membership.

On the basis of the study's findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

1. Nigerian gender equality NGOs should transition from broadcast-oriented informational communication to strategically framed, action-oriented content strategies. Organisations should deliberately embed specific calls to action in a meaningful proportion of their posts, deploy community-building content architectures particularly Facebook group functionality and Instagram comment communities and produce the kind of participatory content that converts passive audience awareness into active advocacy involvement.
2. NGOs should invest in audience research as a foundational prerequisite for effective social media strategy. Systematic evidence about target audiences' platform preferences, content format preferences, and motivational profiles should underpin content decisions, replacing the implicit assumption of a generic "Nigerian audience" whose diversity makes undifferentiated communication strategies structurally inadequate.

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