THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SHAPING LEADERSHIP PERCEPTION AMONG NIGERIAN YOUTH

By

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Abstract

This study critically examine the role of social media in shaping leadership perception among Nigerian youth, utilizing secondary sources of data such as scholarly articles, government reports, media analytics, and reputable organizational publications. In contemporary Nigeria, where over 60% of the population are under 30 years old and social media use continues to grow, platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok have become powerful arenas for political discourse and civic engagement. Secondary data reveal that social media influences leadership perception through information dissemination, peer interaction, and mobilization of socio-political ideas, enabling Nigerian youth to access real-time political news, engage in debates, and evaluate leadership performance beyond traditional media filters. Findings also show that while social media enhances political awareness and critical evaluation of leaders, it simultaneously exposes young users to misinformation and polarized narratives that can skew perceptions. Literature indicates a dual effect: on one hand, digital activism and online campaigns increase political participation and demand for accountability; on the other hand, the prevalence of unverified content and algorithm-driven echo chambers may create biased or superficial understandings of leadership qualities. Furthermore, secondary evidence highlights demographic variations in how youth interpret leadership messages online, with education level, platform preference, and digital literacy identified as significant moderators of perception. The study concludes that social media plays a complex but significant role in shaping how Nigerian youth conceptualize and respond to leadership, suggesting that policymakers, educators, and media stakeholders should prioritize digital literacy and fact-based online engagement to strengthen constructive leadership perceptions.

Keywords: Social Media, Leadership Perception, Nigerian Youth.

Introduction

Social media usage among Nigerian youth has grown exponentially in recent years, making platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and TikTok critical spaces for political communication, civic engagement, and opinion formation (Oparinde & Adeyi, 2025) . This expansion reflects broader global digital trends where young people increasingly rely on social media as a primary source of information and discourse, particularly in contexts where traditional media may be viewed as less accessible or less responsive to youth interests. In Nigeria, where the youth demographic constitutes a large segment of the population, social media has facilitated unprecedented interaction with political content, enabling young users to access, share, and react to information about leaders, governance, and policy debates beyond the constraints of conventional news outlets (Nyitse & Dogo, 2024).

Empirical evidence from recent studies indicates that social media significantly contributes to political awareness and participation among Nigerian youth, with many young people turning to these platforms to engage in political discussions, mobilise support, and voice opinions during electoral cycles, such as observed during the 2023 general elections (Okoli, Dunu, Okafor & Ezeh, 2025). Such engagement does not merely expose youth to political news; it actively shapes their perceptions of leadership qualities, effectiveness, and accountability, as they interpret and evaluate leaders' actions through the lens of user-generated content and peer discourse.

Furthermore, the integration of social media into everyday life blurs the boundaries between social, cultural, and political spheres, making digital platforms central to identity formation and leadership appraisal among Nigerian youth (Oparinde & Adeyi, 2025). This context underscores the need to understand not only how social media disseminates information, but also how it influences interpretive frameworks that youths use to assess leaders, governance processes, and civic responsibilities. The complex interplay of information access, peer influence, and algorithm-driven content duration suggests that social media's role in shaping leadership perception is neither wholly positive nor entirely negative. Rather, it represents a multifaceted phenomenon requiring critical analysis to inform media literacy initiatives, civic education, and policy responses that ensure digital engagement strengthens democratic values and informed leadership perception among Nigerian youth.

Conceptual Clarification

Concept of Social Media

Social media refers to digital platforms and online tools that enable users to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and multimedia content in virtual communities and networks (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It encompasses websites and applications such as Facebook, Twitter (X), Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp, which allow individuals and organizations to interact,

communicate, and participate in content creation. Unlike traditional media that rely on one-way communication, social media is characterized by interactivity, user-generated content, and real-time information flow, giving users the ability to influence and shape discourse in their social and political environments (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

In the context of Nigerian youth, social media serves not only as a platform for social interaction but also as a powerful tool for political and civic engagement (Oparinde & Adeyi, 2025). Nigerian youths increasingly rely on social media for news updates, discussions about governance, leadership performance, and societal issues. Social media facilitates the dissemination of political ideas and leadership evaluation in a manner that is immediate and participatory, allowing youth to interact with peers, engage in debates, and form perceptions about leaders based on shared content and collective opinions. Moreover, social media is often described as a double-edged sword because, while it enhances communication and engagement, it also exposes users to misinformation, biased narratives, and algorithm-driven content that can shape perceptions in unintended ways (Eseimieghan & Orji, 2025).

Overview of Social Media Usage Among Nigerian Youth

Social media adoption in Nigeria has surged alongside broader internet access, with a significant share of users falling into the youth demographic. As of late 2025, Nigeria had over 100 million active social media users, a figure driven largely by individuals aged roughly 16–26, who engage frequently with digital platforms for communication, entertainment, news, and commerce (Brand Network, 2024; Cultures of West Africa, 2024). Studies suggest that more than 20 % of respondents in this age group spend over five hours daily on social media, highlighting not only high penetration but intense use patterns among young Nigerians (Brand Network, 2024).

The landscape of social platforms among Nigerian youth features both longstanding giants and rapidly growing newcomers. Traditionally dominant platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube remain widely used, with WhatsApp penetration reaching near-universal levels among internet users and Facebook maintaining tens of millions of accounts (Statista, 2025; Cultures of West Africa, 2024). However, TikTok has experienced explosive growth, often rivaling Facebook in total users, particularly among younger cohorts who prefer short-form, creative video content (Intelpoint, 2025; DataReportal, 2026). Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn also feature as significant parts of the youth social ecosystem, though their relative popularity varies by age, interests, and purpose (Statista, 2025; Cultures of West Africa, 2024).

Nigerian youth use social media not only to stay connected with peers and family but also to create and share content that reflects local culture, trends, and personal identities. Research indicates a high frequency of engagement, with many young users reporting they are "very often" on these platforms, using them to access information, news, and social updates (Adeosun & Akinwalere,

2021). Beyond passive consumption, youths actively participate in trend creation, skit making, and entrepreneurial activities—leveraging platforms like TikTok and Instagram to showcase creativity and build audiences. Moreover, a significant portion of Nigerian youth consider social media content influential in their purchasing decisions, suggesting that online behavior directly shapes consumer habits and cultural participation (Brand Network, 2024).

The general digital behavior of Nigerian youth also reflects broader socio-political engagement. Platforms such as Twitter/X and WhatsApp serve as spaces for discussion, mobilization, and collective action, where young users access news, express opinions, and organize around causes (International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 2024). WhatsApp groups, in particular, are reported to foster community solidarity, while real-time discourse on Twitter/X connects users to national debates and current events (International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science, 2024). This pattern of civic interaction underscores how social media functions as both a communication tool and a public sphere for Nigerian youth (Adeosun & Akinwalere, 2021).

Social Media as a Tool for Political Awareness and Engagement

Social media platforms have become central to how youth access political information, often surpassing traditional media channels in reach and immediacy. For many young Nigerians, platforms like Twitter/X, Facebook, and Instagram serve as primary channels for political news, campaign updates, and insights into leadership decisions (Nafisat Akeusola, 2025). During key national events, including the 2023 elections, exposure to diverse online political content significantly correlated with higher levels of political knowledge and awareness among youth, illustrating the capacity of social media to disseminate crucial political information rapidly and widely (Nafisat Akeusola, 2025; Enems Project, 2025).

Beyond passive exposure to information, social media actively contributes to heightened political awareness among young citizens. Research in Nigeria shows that political content on social platforms fosters political consciousness, encouraging youths to pay attention to governance issues, public debates, and community development concerns (Inobemhe, 2024). These platforms enable engagement with issues that directly affect young people's lives like government policies, election procedures, and leadership accountability thus shaping their civic outlook and sense of political efficacy.

Social media does more than inform it mobilizes. Campaigns and online movements (for example, hashtag-driven advocacy) have broadened the reach of political dialogue and enabled youth participation in civic debates beyond physical spaces. Studies of youth involvement during election cycles in Nigeria show that active social media engagement such as sharing, commenting, and debating political posts enhances awareness and correlates with engagement in offline political

activities (Nafisat Akeusola, 2025). Social media also provides unique pathways for young users to interact with political figures and leadership content directly. Many politicians, aspirants, and civic organizations maintain active social media profiles, using them for announcements, Q&A sessions, and policy explanations. This direct communication breaks down barriers that traditionally separated leaders from citizens, allowing young people to receive unfiltered political messages and even voice questions or criticisms in comment threads (Abdullah et al., 2025). The accessibility of leadership information through these digital channels enhances transparency and fosters engagement that might not otherwise occur in conventional media environments. As a result, youth feel more connected to political processes and more empowered to engage critically with governance issues. Despite its transformative potential, the use of social media in political awareness and engagement also presents challenges (Eseimieghan & Orji, 2025).

Influence of Social Media on Leadership Perception

Social media has fundamentally transformed the ways in which young people perceive and evaluate leadership. Unlike traditional media, social media platforms provide immediate access to a wide range of political and organizational figures, allowing youths to observe leaders' actions, statements, and policies in real time. As noted by Adegbite (2021), social media serves as both a source of information and a platform for interactive engagement, enabling users to comment, share, and critique leadership practices. This level of interactivity allows youths to form opinions based not only on official communication but also on public reactions, shaping perceptions of credibility, effectiveness, and moral character in leaders.

Online discourse significantly influences leadership perception among youths. Social media discussions, often manifested in comments, threads, and hashtags, create echo chambers where prevailing opinions are amplified. According to Nwosu (2022), these digital conversations shape users' interpretations of leadership qualities, as youths are exposed repeatedly to particular narratives that validate or undermine leaders' image. Furthermore, the tone and framing of discourse whether supportive, critical, or satirical can impact emotional responses, making leaders appear more relatable, authoritative, or untrustworthy. Consequently, young people's understanding of leadership is increasingly filtered through the collective lens of online communities rather than formal institutional communication.

Peer influence is another critical factor in shaping leadership perception on social media. Adolescents and young adults are highly susceptible to the opinions of their peers, particularly within online networks where peer approval is visible through likes, shares, and comments. As indicated by Oladejo (2020), peers often serve as opinion leaders who validate or challenge youths' existing views, reinforcing conformity or prompting re-evaluation of leadership stances. In this context, leadership perception becomes socially constructed, as youths internalize the judgments,

biases, and endorsements circulating within their digital peer networks, which may diverge significantly from objective performance metrics.

Content algorithms further shape youths' views of leaders by selectively curating the information they encounter. Social media platforms employ algorithms designed to maximize engagement, often prioritizing sensational, emotionally charged, or ideologically aligned content. According to Eze (2021), such algorithmic filtering can create a skewed representation of leadership, emphasizing certain behaviors, scandals, or accomplishments over others, and limiting exposure to dissenting viewpoints. As a result, youths may develop a distorted or polarized perception of leaders, believing that the amplified narratives they encounter represent the full reality of a leader's capabilities and decisions. The influence of social media on leadership perception among youths is multifaceted, involving the interplay of online discourse, peer influence, and content algorithms. These factors collectively shape how young people evaluate leaders, often prioritizing visibility, relatability, and social validation over formal qualifications or policy achievements. Understanding this dynamic is critical for policymakers, educators, and leaders themselves, as it underscores the need for strategic engagement with digital platforms to foster informed and balanced perceptions. The insights highlight the growing role of social media as both a tool and a mediator in contemporary leadership evaluation (Adegbite, 2021; Nwosu, 2022; Oladejo, 2020; Eze, 2021).

Challenges of Social Media in Leadership Perception Formation

Social media, while instrumental in shaping leadership perception, presents several challenges that complicate how youths form opinions about leaders. One of the most critical issues is misinformation, where inaccurate or misleading content circulates widely, often faster than corrective information. As noted by Okonkwo (2021), misinformation on social media can distort youths' understanding of leaders' actions, policies, and achievements, creating a perception based on falsehoods rather than verified facts. This not only undermines informed judgment but can also erode trust in leadership structures and institutions, particularly when misleading narratives go unchallenged or gain viral traction.

Another significant challenge is the prevalence of fake news, which refers to deliberately fabricated content designed to mislead or manipulate audiences. Fake news often exploits sensationalism and emotional triggers, making it particularly potent in influencing youths' views of leaders. According to Abimbola (2020), fake news can exaggerate scandals, fabricate endorsements, or misrepresent leaders' positions, leading to skewed evaluations that may persist even after the falsehood is exposed. The virality of fake news, amplified through shares and algorithmic prioritization, makes it difficult for youths to discern credible information, further complicating the formation of accurate leadership perceptions.

Polarization is another challenge that arises from social media dynamics. Digital platforms often create echo chambers, where users are primarily exposed to information and opinions that reinforce their pre-existing beliefs. As highlighted by Okoye (2022), this can intensify divisions among youth populations, leading to highly polarized perceptions of the same leader. In polarized online environments, neutral or moderate viewpoints may be marginalized, and the evaluation of leaders becomes more about allegiance to a particular group or ideology rather than objective assessment. This fragmentation contributes to conflict, misjudgment, and selective interpretation of leadership behavior.

Social media also fosters the potential for biased or distorted leadership evaluations. Peer influence, content curation, and algorithmic filtering can combine to present a one-sided view of leaders. Itemized challenges include:

1. Overemphasis on leaders' personal traits rather than policy outcomes.

2. Amplification of negative or scandalous content over positive achievements.

3. Reinforcement of stereotypes or prejudices about leaders based on identity markers.

4. Limited exposure to alternative perspectives or fact-based analyses (Eze, 2021).

The challenges of social media in shaping leadership perception are multi-layered and interconnected. Misinformation, fake news, polarization, and biased evaluations collectively create an environment where youths' understanding of leadership can be superficial, distorted, or ideologically skewed. Addressing these challenges requires media literacy education, critical engagement with content, and strategies to verify information before forming opinions. Recognizing these issues is essential for researchers, educators, and policymakers seeking to foster informed, balanced, and resilient leadership perceptions among the younger population (Okonkwo, 2021; Abimbola, 2020; Okoye, 2022; Eze, 2021).

Implications for Civic Education and Leadership Development

The increasing influence of social media on youths' perception of leadership carries significant implications for civic education. One major implication is the need to integrate digital literacy programs into the educational curriculum. Digital literacy equips youths with the ability to critically assess online content, discern credible sources from misinformation, and evaluate leadership narratives objectively. As noted by Nwosu (2022), incorporating media literacy training into schools and tertiary institutions empowers students to navigate social media responsibly, reducing susceptibility to fake news and biased representations of leaders. Such programs also promote analytical skills necessary for active and informed citizenship.

Another implication is the formulation of policy interventions aimed at regulating content circulation and promoting transparency on social media platforms. Governments and educational bodies can establish guidelines for social media usage, fact-checking mechanisms, and public awareness campaigns targeting youth populations. According to Adegbite (2021), policies that incentivize accurate reporting and penalize deliberate dissemination of false leadership narratives can help curb misinformation and polarization, creating a more balanced environment for leadership perception formation.

The findings also underscore the importance of initiatives to cultivate informed leadership perception. Youth-oriented programs can provide opportunities for interactive engagement with leaders, workshops on civic responsibility, and simulated governance exercises. Itemized approaches include:

- Hosting social media literacy workshops that focus on political content evaluation.

- Organizing debates and online forums with verified leaders to promote direct engagement.

- Developing mentorship programs that highlight ethical leadership and civic accountability.

- Encouraging fact-checking clubs or digital watchdog groups in schools and communities (Oladejo, 2020).

Furthermore, civic education curricula should emphasize critical thinking and ethical evaluation as central components of leadership development. Encouraging students to analyze policy impacts, scrutinize leaders' statements, and assess decision-making processes fosters a culture of informed political engagement. As Eze (2021) highlights, this approach mitigates the risk of superficial judgment based on charisma or online popularity alone, ensuring that youths prioritize competence, integrity, and effectiveness in leadership appraisal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that social media plays a pivotal and multifaceted role in shaping leadership perception among Nigerian youth by serving as a primary source of political information, a space for online discourse, and a mechanism for peer-driven and algorithmically curated content exposure. The findings reveal that while social media enhances youths' access to leaders and promotes participatory engagement, it simultaneously exposes them to misinformation, polarization, and biased narratives that can distort objective evaluation of leadership qualities. The interactive and networked nature of digital platforms means that leadership perception is no longer formed solely through traditional media or institutional communication but is increasingly constructed through online conversations, social validation, and content personalization systems. Consequently, the study underscores the necessity for

strengthened digital literacy, critical thinking skills, and policy frameworks that encourage responsible media consumption and ethical online engagement. Ultimately, fostering informed, balanced, and evidence-based leadership perception among Nigerian youth is essential for democratic consolidation, effective civic participation, and sustainable national development in an increasingly digital society.

Suggestions

In line with the above discussion, the following suggestions were made;

☐ Integrate digital literacy education into school curricula at secondary and tertiary levels to equip students with critical skills for evaluating online political and leadership-related content.

☐ Establish youth-focused fact-checking initiatives and media clubs in schools and communities to promote verification of information before sharing or forming opinions about leaders.

☐ Encourage responsible social media engagement campaigns led by educational institutions and civil society organizations to promote constructive dialogue and reduce online hostility and polarization.

☐ Strengthen regulatory and policy frameworks that address misinformation and fake news while protecting freedom of expression on digital platforms.

☐ Promote direct youth–leader engagement platforms, such as moderated online town halls and civic forums, to provide accurate information and foster informed leadership perception.

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