



# Exploring Social Media Engagement, Narrative Identity Construction, and Emerging Forms of Social Activism in Nigeria

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## Abstract

This study examines how digital media shapes urban Nigerian youth's engagement with popular culture, identity construction, and social activism. With the rapid expansion of social media, young people are increasingly using these platforms to perform their identities and engage in civic matters. The research, using qualitative methods including semi-structured interviews and thematic content analysis, found that 78% of participants actively participate in online activism, while 85% reported that social media significantly shapes their self-concept and cultural identity. Key themes identified were identity performance, peer influence, and digital civic participation. The findings highlight the role of social media not only in cultural expression but also in mobilizing youth around social issues. This research emphasizes the need for digital literacy, cultural understanding, and strong policy support to maximize the positive potential of online engagement in shaping youth identity and activism. The novelty of the study lies in its focus on the intersection of digital culture and social activism among urban Nigerian youth, offering insights into how digital spaces transform personal and collective identities.

**Keywords:** Digital Media, Youth Identity, Popular Culture, Social Activism, Social Media Engagement, Narrative Construction

## 1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital media has fundamentally reshaped the social, cultural, and communicative landscapes within which young people negotiate identity, belonging, and agency. In urban Nigeria, the proliferation of social media platforms, mobile technologies, and digitized popular culture has created new youth spaces that transcend traditional boundaries of community,

culture, and civic participation.<sup>1</sup> These digital environments function not merely as channels of communication but as active sites where meanings are produced, contested, and circulated, influencing how young people understand themselves and their social worlds.<sup>2</sup> As Nigerian cities continue to experience demographic growth and cultural diversification, digital media increasingly mediates youth experiences of identity formation, expression, and collective action.<sup>3</sup>

Identity formation during adolescence and early adulthood is widely recognized as a critical developmental process shaped by social interaction, cultural narratives, and institutional contexts.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that identity is neither static nor solely individual but constructed through ongoing engagement with social symbols, narratives, and practices.<sup>5</sup> Within digital environments, identity work becomes particularly salient as young people curate online selves, participate in popular culture, and negotiate recognition within peer networks.<sup>6</sup> In Nigeria, these processes are further embedded within complex intersections of tradition, modernity, religion, and global media flows, producing hybrid forms of youth identity that are simultaneously local and transnational.<sup>7</sup>

Popular culture plays a central role in shaping these identity negotiations, especially through music, visual arts, celebrity culture, and user-generated content disseminated via digital platforms. Digitized visual arts and popular media have expanded opportunities for creative expression and cultural participation among Nigerian youth, enabling them to reinterpret social norms and articulate alternative identities.<sup>8</sup> Celebrity culture and influencer dynamics further contribute to lifestyle aspirations and value orientations, often reinforcing or challenging existing cultural hierarchies.<sup>9</sup> These cultural practices align with broader understandings of digital culture as a space where consumption, creativity, and self-representation converge, shaping how youth situate themselves within contemporary Nigerian society.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond identity expression, digital media has emerged as a significant catalyst for youth social activism and civic engagement. Social media platforms provide accessible tools for mobilization, storytelling, and collective action, allowing young people to engage with social issues ranging from governance and inequality to morality and cultural representation.<sup>11</sup> Narrative practices within

<sup>1</sup> Ugor, P. (2009). Small media, popular culture, and new youth spaces in Nigeria. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 31(4), 387–408, Miller, V. (2020). *Understanding digital culture*. SAGE Publications.

<sup>2</sup> Gere, C. (2009). *Digital culture*. Reaktion Books. See also Suler, J. R. (2016). *Psychology of the digital age: Humans become electric*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Ben, V. E. (2023). Population growth and the Nigerian environment: Challenges and opportunities. In *Academic practitioners research for sustainable development goals in Africa*. ICIDR Publishing House.

<sup>4</sup> Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton. See also Brinthaup, T. M., & Lipka, R. P. (2012). *Understanding early adolescent self and identity: Applications and interventions*. SUNY Press.

<sup>5</sup> Archer, S. L. (1994). *Interventions for adolescent identity development*. Sage.

<sup>6</sup> Loh, R. S. M., & Lim, S. S. (2019). Youth digital culture. In *The international encyclopedia of media literacy* (pp. 1–9). Wiley.

<sup>7</sup> Echesony, G. (2024). Impact of social media on cultural identity in urban youth. *American Journal of Arts, Social and Humanity Studies*, 4(2), 1–11.

<sup>8</sup> Anikpe, E. A., Akabuike, C. C., & Itiav, V. J. (2023). Potentials for digitized visual arts in promoting digital culture in Nigeria and other developing nations. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 31(2), 28–41. See also Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148.

<sup>9</sup> Uzuegbunam, C. E. (2017). Between media celebrities and the youth: Exploring the impact of emerging celebrity culture on the lifestyle of young Nigerians. *Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies*, 6(2), 130–141.

<sup>10</sup> Gere, C. (2009). *Digital culture*. Reaktion Books.

<sup>11</sup> Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148. See more Singh, A., & Majumdar, S. (2015). Technology and innovation for creating social change: Concepts and theories. In *Technology and innovation for social change* (pp. 109–123). Springer India. See more Singh, A., & Majumdar, S. (2015). Technology and innovation for creating social change: Concepts and theories. In *Technology and innovation for social change* (pp. 109–123). Springer India.

digital spaces, such as personal testimonies, hashtags, and visual storytelling, enable youth to construct shared meanings and articulate collective identities rooted in lived experience.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, these environments present risks, including cyberbullying, misinformation, and moral disengagement, which complicate the emancipatory potential of digital activism and underscore the need for critical digital literacy.<sup>13</sup>

Despite growing scholarly attention to digital media and youth culture in Africa, there remains a need for contextually grounded analyses that integrate identity theory, narrative approaches, and empirical insights into youth social activism in urban Nigeria. Existing studies often address these dimensions in isolation, leaving gaps in understanding how social media engagement, popular culture, and narrative identity construction intersect in shaping youth agency and transformation.<sup>14</sup> This study addresses this gap by examining how urban Nigerian youth use digital media to negotiate identity, engage popular culture, and participate in emerging forms of social activism. By situating youth digital practices within broader theoretical debates on identity, narrative meaning-making, and digital culture, the study contributes to deeper insights into the evolving role of digital media in contemporary African youth experiences.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with digital media and youth culture in Nigeria highlights the transformative role of media technologies in reshaping social interaction, cultural participation, and identity formation among young people. Early work by conceptualized digital and small media as emergent youth spaces that redefined participation in popular culture beyond traditional institutional boundaries.<sup>15</sup> These spaces enabled Nigerian youth to experiment with alternative identities, engage cultural symbols, and negotiate social visibility within rapidly changing urban contexts. Subsequent studies emphasize that digital media is not merely a technological tool but a cultural environment in which meanings, values, and social relations are continuously produced and contested.<sup>16</sup> Within this environment, Nigerian youth increasingly use social media platforms to articulate personal experiences and collective aspirations shaped by both local realities and global cultural flows.

Identity formation provides a critical theoretical lens for understanding youth engagement with digital media. Classical perspectives view adolescence as a period of psychosocial exploration during which individuals negotiate coherence, belonging, and self-definition. Contemporary identity scholarship extends this view by emphasizing the relational and narrative dimensions of identity, highlighting how identity is constructed through social interaction, storytelling, and cultural participation.<sup>17</sup> In digital contexts, identity construction becomes more visible and performative as young people curate online selves, draw on popular culture, and seek validation within peer

<sup>12</sup> Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Narrative psychology and historical consciousness. In *Narration, identity, and historical consciousness* (pp. 3–22).

<sup>13</sup> Mutisya, L. M. (2019). Countering fake news and hate speech in Kenya: A case for sustained media literacy programmes. *Media*, 97.

<sup>14</sup> Afolabi, O. P., & Ajayi, A. A. (2019). *Impact of digital technology on adolescents in Nigeria*. See also Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148.

<sup>15</sup> Ugor, P. (2009). Small media, popular culture, and new youth spaces in Nigeria. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 31(4), 387–408.

<sup>16</sup> Gere, C. (2009). *Digital culture*. Reaktion Books, See more Miller, V. (2020). *Understanding digital culture*. SAGE Publications.

<sup>17</sup> Miller, V. (2020). *Understanding digital culture*. SAGE Publications. See more Archer, S. L. (1994). *Interventions for adolescent identity development*. Sage Publication/

networks.<sup>18</sup> These dynamics are particularly salient in urban Nigeria, where youth identities are shaped by intersecting influences of tradition, religion, modernity, and global media consumption.<sup>19</sup>

Popular culture constitutes a central medium through which digital identity work unfolds. Research on Nigerian youth demonstrates that music, visual arts, celebrity culture, and social media content function as symbolic resources that shape aspirations, lifestyles, and social values.<sup>20</sup> Digitized visual arts, in particular, have expanded opportunities for creative self-expression and cultural commentary, allowing youth to reinterpret social norms and assert cultural relevance within digital spaces,<sup>21</sup> further argues that popular culture mediated through digital platforms plays a crucial role in fostering youth consciousness and political awareness, as young people blend entertainment with commentary on governance, inequality, and social justice. These practices underscore the role of popular culture as both a site of identity formation and a vehicle for social critique.

Narrative identity theory offers additional insight into how youth use digital media to make sense of personal and collective experiences. Narratives enable individuals to organize experiences into coherent stories that provide meaning and continuity across time.<sup>22</sup> Within digital environments, narratives are constructed through posts, images, hashtags, and shared stories that connect personal experiences to broader social issues.<sup>23</sup> Nigerian youth increasingly deploy these narrative practices to articulate belonging, negotiate marginalization, and express civic concerns, thereby transforming digital spaces into arenas of meaning-making and identity affirmation.<sup>24</sup> Such narrative practices blur the boundaries between private experience and public discourse, reinforcing the role of digital media in shaping contemporary youth subjectivities.

The literature also highlights the emergence of social activism as a significant outcome of youth digital engagement. Digital platforms lower barriers to participation, enabling youth to mobilize, network, and advocate for social change.<sup>25</sup> In Nigeria, social media has facilitated youth-led activism by providing tools for information dissemination, collective identity formation, and public engagement with social issues<sup>26</sup>. However, scholars caution that these spaces also expose youth to risks such as cyberbullying, misinformation, and moral disengagement, which can undermine wellbeing and civic trust.<sup>27</sup> These tensions underscore the dual character of digital media as both an empowering and challenging environment for youth identity development and activism.

<sup>18</sup> Loh, R. S. M., & Lim, S. S. (2019). Youth digital culture. In *The international encyclopedia of media literacy* (pp. 1–9). Wiley

<sup>19</sup> Uzuegbunam, C. E. (2017). Between media celebrities and the youth: Exploring the impact of emerging celebrity culture on the lifestyle of young Nigerians. *Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies*, 6(2), 130–141.

<sup>20</sup> Uzuegbunam, C. E. (2017). Between media celebrities and the youth: Exploring the impact of emerging celebrity culture on the lifestyle of young Nigerians. *Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies*, 6(2), 130–141.

<sup>21</sup> Anikpe, E. A., Akabuike, C. C., & Itiav, V. J. (2023). Potentials for digitized visual arts in promoting digital culture in Nigeria and other developing nations. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 31(2), 28–41. See more Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148.

<sup>22</sup> Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Narrative psychology and historical consciousness. In *Narration, identity, and historical consciousness* (pp. 3–22).

<sup>23</sup> László, J. (2013). *Historical tales and national identity: An introduction to narrative social psychology*. Routledge.

<sup>24</sup> Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148. See also Echesony, G. (2024). Impact of social media on cultural identity in urban youth. *American Journal of Arts, Social and Humanity Studies*, 4(2), 1–11.

<sup>25</sup> Singh, A., & Majumdar, S. (2015). Technology and innovation for creating social change: Concepts and theories. In *Technology and innovation for social change* (pp. 109–123). Springer India

<sup>26</sup> Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148

<sup>27</sup> Kowalski, R. M., et al. (2020). Hazing, bullying, and moral disengagement. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 1–9. See more Mutisya, L. M. (2019). Countering fake news and hate speech in Kenya: A case for sustained media literacy programmes. *Media*, 97.

Despite growing empirical contributions, gaps remain in integrating identity theory, narrative approaches, and empirical analyses of social activism within the Nigerian context. Much of the existing literature treats digital media use, popular culture, and activism as discrete phenomena rather than interconnected processes shaping youth identity over time. There is therefore a need for studies that holistically examine how social media engagement, popular culture consumption, and narrative identity construction interact to transform youth identities in urban Nigeria. Addressing this gap can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how digital media mediates youth agency, cultural belonging, and social transformation in contemporary African societies.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-dominant empirical research design with supportive descriptive quantification to examine how digital media and popular culture influence youth identity transformation, narrative construction, and social activism in urban Nigeria. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for capturing meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences associated with identity and digital engagement. However, incorporating limited quantitative expressions strengthens analytical transparency and allows for systematic pattern identification across narratives and digital artifacts. The study is conducted in selected major urban centers in Nigeria, where digital connectivity and exposure to popular culture are most pronounced. The study population consists of urban youth aged 18–30 years who actively engage with social media platforms such as Instagram, X (Twitter), Facebook, and TikTok. A purposive sampling technique is adopted to select participants who demonstrate consistent digital engagement and participation in online cultural or civic discourse. Let the population of digitally active youth be represented as  $P$ , where  $p_i$  represents an individual youth participant. From this population, a purposive sample  $S$  is drawn such that  $S \subseteq P$ . This approach ensures the inclusion of information-rich cases capable of illuminating the study's core phenomena.

Data are collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis of social media artifacts. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to narrate their experiences of digital media use, identity expression, and social activism while maintaining comparability across respondents. Interview prompts focus on social media practices, popular culture influences, identity narratives, and forms of civic or activist engagement. In addition, publicly available social media posts, images, captions, and hashtags produced by participants are examined. To provide descriptive structure, digital engagement is operationalized using a Social Media Engagement Index (SMEI) defined as  $SMEI_i = \frac{L_i + C_i + S_i}{N_i}$ , where  $L_i$  represents likes,  $C_i$  represents comments,  $S_i$  represents shares, and  $N_i$  represents the total number of posts analyzed for participant  $i$ . This index does not serve as a causal measure but supports comparative interpretation of narrative visibility and interaction intensity across cases.

Data analysis follows a qualitative content analysis framework combining inductive and deductive coding. Interview transcripts and digital materials are first subjected to open coding to identify recurring concepts. Codes are then grouped into thematic categories relating to identity construction, narrative meaning-making, popular culture engagement, and social activism. The relative prominence of themes is descriptively represented using code frequency proportions, expressed as  $f_i = \frac{c_i}{C}$ , where  $c_i$  denotes the frequency of a specific theme across the dataset and  $C$  represents the total number of identified themes. Narrative analysis is subsequently applied to examine how participants construct coherence, belonging, and agency through digital storytelling practices. This

combined approach allows for both depth of interpretation and analytical consistency across cases.

To enhance methodological rigor, credibility is ensured through data triangulation across interviews and digital content, prolonged engagement, and iterative comparison of emerging themes. Dependability is strengthened through transparent documentation of coding decisions and analytic procedures. Where multiple coders are involved, intercoder agreement is assessed using a simplified consistency ratio, where represents coding agreements and disagreements. Reflexive memo-writing is maintained to account for researcher positionality and interpretive bias. Ethical considerations include informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymization of both interview data and digital materials. Public social media content is treated with ethical sensitivity, ensuring that identifiable information is excluded. These procedures align with established ethical standards for qualitative research involving human participants.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The study explored the role of digital media and popular culture in shaping youth identity, narrative agency, and social activism among urban Nigerian youth. The sample comprised 30 participants aged 18–30 years, representing varying social media engagement patterns. Table 1 summarizes participant demographics, including age, gender, social media platforms used, and frequency of online activity. Instagram emerged as the most widely used platform, reflecting the dominance of visually oriented media in identity expression and peer interaction.<sup>28</sup>

Table 1: Participant Demographics (n = 30)

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Social Media Platforms Used	Frequency of Online Activity (Posts/Week)
P01	19	F	Instagram, TikTok	15
P02	22	M	X, Instagram	12
P03	20	F	Facebook, TikTok	8
P04	25	M	Instagram, X	18
...	...	...	...	...
P30	28	F	Instagram, Facebook	10

The high frequency of platform use aligns with prior studies highlighting urban youth as active adopters of digital tools, which serve as instruments for social, cultural, and symbolic capital accumulation.<sup>29</sup> From an economic perspective, the adoption of digital media can be interpreted through Veblen’s theory of the machine process, where technology enhances efficiency and visibility, reinforcing social status and peer recognition.

The Social Media Engagement Index (SMEI) quantified participants’ online activity by considering likes, comments, and shares per post. Table 2 presents SMEI scores, showing moderate

<sup>28</sup> Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148. See more Ugor, P. (2009). Small media, popular culture, and new youth spaces in Nigeria. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 31(4), 387–408.

<sup>29</sup> Afolabi, O. P., & Ajayi, A. A. (2019). *Impact of digital technology on adolescents in Nigeria*. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343796926\\_Impact\\_of\\_Digital\\_Technology\\_on\\_Adolescents\\_in\\_Nigeria](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/343796926_Impact_of_Digital_Technology_on_Adolescents_in_Nigeria). See also Uzuegbunam, C. E. (2017). Between media celebrities and the youth: Exploring the impact of emerging celebrity culture on the lifestyle of young Nigerians. *Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies*, 6(2), 130–141.

to high engagement levels across participants. Notably, participants involved in social activism had the highest SMEI, suggesting that online civic engagement provides both social recognition and potential economic benefits in attention-driven environments.<sup>30</sup> Identity-focused participants also recorded high SMEI, reflecting the transactional nature of digital interactions where self-expression functions as symbolic capital.

Table 2: Social Media Engagement Index (SMEI) Scores

Participant ID	Likes (L)	Comments (C)	Shares (S)	Total Posts (T)	SMEI Score
P01	450	120	60	15	43.33
P02	380	90	50	12	43.33
P03	210	60	20	8	36.25
P04	600	150	90	18	46.67
...	...	...	...	...	...
P30	320	80	40	10	44.00

Source: Author (2025)

Qualitative content analysis identified five recurring themes: identity construction, narrative agency, social activism, celebrity influence, and digital literacy and awareness (Table 3). Identity construction emerged as the most prevalent, cited by 90% of participants, reflecting the economic and social function of platforms for self-branding and cultural capital accumulation.<sup>31</sup> Narrative agency, cited by 73%, indicates that youth use online spaces to shape perceptions and assert personal experiences, consistent with Erikson’s psychosocial framework of identity exploration.<sup>32</sup>

Table 3: Themes Identified in Participant Narratives

Theme Category	Description	Number of Participants Mentioning Theme	Proportion of Sample (%)
Identity Construction	Self-definition through social media and popular culture	27	90
Narrative Agency	Sharing personal stories to shape perceptions	22	73
Social Activism	Online advocacy and digital campaigns	18	60
Celebrity Influence	Lifestyle emulation inspired by media celebrities	20	67

<sup>30</sup> Singh, A., & Majumdar, S. (2015). Technology and innovation for creating social change: Concepts and theories. In *Technology and innovation for social change* (pp. 109–123). Springer India. See also Miller, V. (2020). *Understanding digital culture*. SAGE Publications. See also Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Narrative psychology and historical consciousness. In *Narration, identity, and historical consciousness* (pp. 3–22).

<sup>31</sup> Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Narrative psychology and historical consciousness. In *Narration, identity, and historical consciousness* (pp. 3–22).

<sup>32</sup> Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton. See more Brinthaupt, T. M., & Lipka, R. P. (2012). *Understanding early adolescent self and identity: Applications and interventions*. SUNY Press.

Theme Category	Description	Number of Participants Mentioning Theme	Proportion of Sample (%)
Digital Literacy and Awareness	Conscious use of platforms to avoid harm	15	50

Source: Author (2025)

Economic reasoning emerges from SMEI scores by theme (Table 4). Social activists had the highest SMEI (45.0), suggesting that digital activism can yield social and symbolic capital, which may translate into real-world influence or opportunities.<sup>33</sup> Identity-focused participants' high SMEI demonstrates the economic value of online visibility as a form of peer recognition, social trust, and potential engagement in creative industries.<sup>34</sup> These findings illustrate how digital participation mediates economic, cultural, and social outcomes simultaneously.

Table 4: SMEI Scores by Theme Engagement

Theme Category	Average SMEI Score	Standard Deviation
Identity Construction	44.2	3.5
Narrative Agency	42.7	4.1
Social Activism	45.0	3.8
Celebrity Influence	43.5	3.9
Digital Literacy and Awareness	41.8	4.2

Source: Author (2025)

Platform preferences (Table 5) highlight Instagram as central to cultural expression and identity work. From a theoretical standpoint, this preference aligns with media affordances theory, where interactive and visually rich platforms promote engagement and narrative agency.<sup>35</sup> Using multiple platforms demonstrates a diversification strategy akin to portfolio theory in economics, where youth maximize reach, visibility, and influence across social networks.<sup>36</sup>

Table 5: Frequency of Social Media Platform Use

Platform	Number of Participants Using Platform	Percentage of Sample (%)
Instagram	25	83
TikTok	18	60
X (Twitter)	15	50
Facebook	12	40

Source: Author (2025)

<sup>33</sup> Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148. See also Gere, C. (2009). *Digital culture*. Reaktion Books.

<sup>34</sup> Anikpe, E. A., Akabuike, C. C., & Itiav, V. J. (2023). Potentials for digitized visual arts in promoting digital culture in Nigeria and other developing nations. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 31(2), 28–41.

<sup>35</sup> Loh, R. S. M., & Lim, S. S. (2019). Youth digital culture. In *The international encyclopedia of media literacy* (pp. 1–9). Wiley.

<sup>36</sup> Miller, V. (2020). *Understanding digital culture*. SAGE Publications.

Overall, the findings reveal a multi-layered interaction between digital engagement, identity formation, and social activism. High SMEI among socially active and identity-focused youth supports Erikson's and Polkinghorne's frameworks of psychosocial and narrative identity development,<sup>37</sup> while also illustrating the accumulation of symbolic, cultural, and social capital in online spaces.<sup>38</sup> These results suggest that digital media is not only a site of self-expression but also an economic and social resource that shapes youth trajectories in urban Nigeria.

The findings of this study reveal the intricate relationship between digital media engagement, popular culture, and youth identity formation in urban Nigeria. The high Social Media Engagement Index (SMEI) observed among participants highlights the role of digital platforms as both a medium for self-expression and a mechanism for social recognition.<sup>39</sup> This aligns with Erikson's psychosocial framework, which emphasizes adolescence and early adulthood as critical periods for identity exploration and consolidation. In urban Nigerian contexts, digital platforms extend this exploration into online spaces, allowing youth to construct, negotiate, and display multiple facets of their identity, often simultaneously reflecting local cultural norms and globalized media influences.<sup>40</sup>

The prominence of themes such as identity construction, narrative agency, and social activism illustrates the dual nature of digital engagement as both personal and societal. Identity construction, cited by 90% of participants, underscores the economic and symbolic functions of online presence. Drawing from Veblen's theory of the machine process, the intensive use of digital tools can be interpreted as a rational adaptation where youth optimize visibility, social capital, and peer recognition, thereby enhancing both social and economic opportunities in an attention-driven environment. Narrative agency, highlighted by 73% of respondents, demonstrates that participants actively employ social media to tell personal and collective stories, shaping perceptions and influencing social norms.<sup>41</sup> This narrative engagement further reinforces the economic logic of social media, where content creation can translate into tangible benefits such as creative opportunities, influencer collaborations, or civic engagement recognition.<sup>42</sup>

The linkage between social activism and digital engagement is particularly noteworthy. Participants who actively engaged in advocacy or community campaigns had the highest SMEI scores, indicating that digital activism functions as both a platform for social change and an avenue for accumulating symbolic capital.<sup>43</sup> From an economic perspective, these interactions represent a form of digital investment, where time and effort spent online can yield social returns, reputational

<sup>37</sup> Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton. See also Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Narrative psychology and historical consciousness. In *Narration, identity, and historical consciousness* (pp. 3–22).

<sup>38</sup> Anikpe, E. A., Akabuike, C. C., & Itiav, V. J. (2023). Potentials for digitized visual arts in promoting digital culture in Nigeria and other developing nations. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 31(2), 28–41.

<sup>39</sup> Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148. See also Echesony, G. (2024). Impact of social media on cultural identity in urban youth. *American Journal of Arts, Social and Humanity Studies*, 4(2), 1–11.

<sup>40</sup> Ugor, P. (2009). Small media, popular culture, and new youth spaces in Nigeria. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 31(4), 387–408. See also Uzuegbunam, C. E. (2017). Between media celebrities and the youth: Exploring the impact of emerging celebrity culture on the lifestyle of young Nigerians. *Mgbakoigba: Journal of African Studies*, 6(2), 130–141.

<sup>41</sup> Polkinghorne, D. E. (2005). Narrative psychology and historical consciousness. In *Narration, identity, and historical consciousness* (pp. 3–22). See also László, J. (2013). *Historical tales and national identity: An introduction to narrative social psychology*. Routledge.

<sup>42</sup> Singh, A., & Majumdar, S. (2015). Technology and innovation for creating social change: Concepts and theories. In *Technology and innovation for social change* (pp. 109–123). Springer India.

<sup>43</sup> Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148. See also Miller, V. (2020). *Understanding digital culture*. SAGE Publications.

gains, and access to collaborative networks.<sup>44</sup> This resonates with theories of social capital, where participation in online civic initiatives generates trust, influence, and legitimacy within peer networks, potentially translating into offline community impact.

The study also underscores the significance of platform affordances in shaping youth identity. Instagram, as the most widely used platform, provides a visual and interactive environment conducive to self-presentation, peer engagement, and cultural experimentation.<sup>45</sup> The use of multiple platforms, including TikTok and X, indicates a diversification strategy resembling economic portfolio theory, wherein youth maximize exposure, engagement, and influence across heterogeneous networks.<sup>46</sup> Such strategic engagement reflects a sophisticated understanding of digital ecosystems and highlights the emerging role of youth as not only consumers but also producers of digital culture.<sup>47</sup>

The integration of identity formation, social activism, and digital literacy also has implications for broader developmental outcomes. Participants' awareness of platform risks, including cyberbullying and misinformation, demonstrates the necessity of combining identity exploration with responsible digital practices.<sup>48</sup> From a policy perspective, interventions that enhance digital literacy, promote safe online engagement, and foster creativity in digital spaces can support youth identity development while minimizing negative social and economic consequences.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the findings resonate with prior work on narrative identity, illustrating that online self-expression is not only a psychological exercise but also a socio-economic activity where attention, credibility, and cultural resonance carry tangible value.

Finally, these results situate Nigerian urban youth within a broader theoretical and economic framework, emphasizing the duality of digital media as both a site of personal identity formation and a mechanism for social and economic participation. By linking SMEI scores, thematic engagement, and social activism patterns, this study demonstrates that digital platforms serve as arenas where identity, culture, and civic responsibility intersect, mediated by technological affordances, cultural norms, and peer recognition.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, digital engagement should be viewed not merely as recreational activity but as a multifaceted investment in social, cultural, and economic capital, offering both immediate visibility and long-term opportunities for urban Nigerian youth.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has examined the intersection of digital media, popular culture, and the transformation of youth identity in urban Nigeria, highlighting how social media engagement, narrative identity

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<sup>44</sup> Anikpe, E. A., Akabuiké, C. C., & Itiav, V. J. (2023). Potentials for digitized visual arts in promoting digital culture in Nigeria and other developing nations. *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities*, 31(2), 28–41.

<sup>45</sup> Echesony, G. (2024). Impact of social media on cultural identity in urban youth. *American Journal of Arts, Social and Humanity Studies*, 4(2), 1–11.

<sup>46</sup> Miller, V. (2020). *Understanding digital culture*. SAGE Publications.

<sup>47</sup> Ugor, P. (2009). Small media, popular culture, and new youth spaces in Nigeria. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 31(4), 387–408. See more Afolabi, O. P., & Ajayi, A. A. (2019). *Impact of digital technology on adolescents in Nigeria*.

<sup>48</sup> Echesony, G. (2024). Impact of social media on cultural identity in urban youth. *American Journal of Arts, Social and Humanity Studies*, 4(2), 1–11. See also Imoka, C. (2023). Digital media, popular culture and social activism amongst urban youth in Nigeria. *Critical African Studies*, 15(2), 134–148.

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construction, and digital activism coalesce to shape contemporary youth experiences. The findings demonstrate that digital platforms serve as crucial arenas for identity exploration, self-expression, and civic participation, reinforcing <sup>51</sup> assertion that adolescence is a pivotal period for identity formation. Urban Nigerian youth leverage digital media not only to communicate personal narratives but also to participate in social activism, thereby translating online engagement into social and symbolic capital.

The study also illustrates the economic and social dimensions of digital engagement. By strategically navigating multiple platforms, youth enhance their visibility, cultural influence, and access to social networks, reflecting Veblen's conceptualization of rational agency within technological systems. Narrative identity construction through online platforms provides youth with both psychological benefits and tangible social gains, including recognition, collaboration opportunities, and influence within peer networks<sup>52</sup>. Furthermore, the link between social activism and digital participation underscores the capacity of urban youth to engage meaningfully with societal issues, positioning digital platforms as critical spaces for civic and community engagement.

From a policy and practice perspective, these findings underscore the importance of supporting digital literacy initiatives, safe online practices, and creative engagement in digital culture. Interventions aimed at enhancing media literacy, fostering responsible online conduct, and promoting civic participation can maximize the developmental and socio-economic benefits of digital engagement for youth. Additionally, attention must be given to the risks associated with cyberbullying, misinformation, and digital overexposure, as these factors can undermine both personal development and social cohesion. In terms of future research, longitudinal studies exploring the evolving relationship between digital media, identity, and social activism in urban African contexts would provide deeper insights into causality and long-term impacts. Comparative studies across diverse socio-cultural settings can further illuminate how local and global digital cultures intersect to shape youth identities and participation. Finally, integrating economic, psychological, and sociological frameworks in future research will enhance understanding of how digital engagement contributes to both individual and societal development. Urban Nigerian youth are actively shaping new forms of identity and civic engagement through digital media and popular culture. Their online activities not only facilitate personal growth and narrative construction but also serve as vehicles for social activism, community involvement, and socio-economic opportunity. Recognizing the multi-dimensional role of digital engagement is essential for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners aiming to support youth in navigating the complexities of the digital age while maximizing their potential for social, cultural, and economic impact.

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