

The Role of Digital Media in Promoting Youth Civic Engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Abstract

This literature review looks at the overlap of digital media and civic engagement of youth in Sub-Saharan Africa, specifically the 2024 demonstrations led by Kenyan Generation Z. The study relies on the principles of development communication to point out the way in which digital platforms have emerged as essential mobilizations, advocacy, and participatory dialogue instruments. The theoretical framework combines the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the Participatory Communication Model, and Social Network Theory to provide the theoretical explanation of youth motivations to participate in digital activism, the communal character of online civic places and the networked diffusion of protest messages. #FeesMustFall in South Africa, #EndSARS in Nigeria and the anti-tax protests in Kenya are examples of case studies where hashtags, influencers, and viral campaigns have been used to mobilize youth in mass numbers. Nevertheless, there are always constant obstacles to equal participation in the form of the digital divide, misinformation, governmental surveillance, and urban/rural inequality. There are opportunities in terms of improving civic literacy, bolstering policy advocacy and creating inclusive participatory platforms of communication that incorporate online and offline participation. It is important to note that the review reveals gaps in localized studies, and in this case, the localized studies have gaps in the aspect of rural youth activism and non-social media channels of communication. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers, researchers, and development communication practitioners to harness digital media as a tool for inclusive and sustainable youth civic engagement in Africa.

Keywords: Development Communication, Youth Civic Engagement, Digital Activism, Sub-Saharan Africa, Social Media Mobilization, Kenya Gen Z Protests

2.0 Introduction

Development communication means using different communication methods, media and technology to aid social development. As a field, it focuses on including people, helping them become more powerful and providing them with useful information. As Servaes (2008) explained, development communication includes both information transfer and encouraging people to discuss and support social transformation. In the same way, Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte (2006) emphasize that in development communication, people are involved rather than just given information.

Youth civic engagement refers to the many ways young people join in and take part in political, social or community life. Examples are voting, volunteering, joining protests, speaking out and using the internet for action (OECD, 2020). Since 60% of people in Sub-Saharan Africa are under 25 (UN DESA, 2023), youth are key to the region's democratic and economic progress. Traditionally, young people's opinions are frequently overlooked in formal political activities. For this reason, young Africans are increasingly using digital media to speak out, organize their peers and ask for responsibility from the government (Bosch, 2017).

Mobile phones and internet access have made a big difference in how communication happens in Sub-Saharan Africa. People in the region are now better connected online because of mobile internet. As of this year, almost half a billion people in Sub-Saharan Africa are mobile subscribers and most of them are youth (GSMA, 2023). Many are now using Facebook, Twitter (now X), WhatsApp and TikTok for both entertainment and to learn about and participate in civic activities. As an example, movements like #RejectFinanceBill2024 in Kenya, #EndSARS in Nigeria and #FeesMustFall in South Africa shows how youths can organize civic actions on social media and help set the national agenda (Mutsvairo & Karam, 2018).

Although there has been great progress, digital access is still not the same across all regions and for all people, because of high data costs, poor internet infrastructure and a lack of digital skills (World Bank, 2022). Yet, digital media remains a lively place for young people in Sub-Saharan Africa to participate in civic life, push for improvements and resist established power systems.

2.1 Theoretical Frameworks

To see how digital media supports youth civic participation in Sub-Saharan Africa, we must use different theories. This section introduces three important theories that explain how youth use the internet for civic action: Theory of Uses and Gratifications, Participatory Model and Social Network Theory.

2.1.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), media audiences take an active role to use media to find information, form their identities, integrate into society and communicate with others (Blumler & Katz, 1974). UGT explains how and why young people rely on digital platforms, mainly social media, to gather information, share their opinions, activate their peers or participate in talks about government and human rights.

Since traditional media in Sub-Saharan Africa is often controlled or does not appeal to youth, digital media provides different places for participation. Bosch (2017) and Mutsvairo (2016) report that young people in Kenya and Nigeria use Twitter and WhatsApp to look for uncensored news and take part in political discussions. For this reason, UGT demonstrates that digital media are attractive because they meet certain needs such as those for civic engagement and self-expression, that mainstream methods sometimes fail to provide.

2.1.2 Participatory Communication Model

The Participatory Communication Model focuses on bringing marginalized people into decision-making and on creating knowledge together. Unlike the sender-receiver model found in most theories, participatory communication stresses equal talks, increasing power and community involvement (Servaes, 2008).

The model is important for youth civic engagement since it sees young people as active creators and drivers of changes, instead of only receiving data. Digital tools allow young people to make, share and strengthen their personal stories. Such as the #EndSARS campaign in Nigeria, digital platforms enable ordinary people to guide and impact major national conversations (Mutsvairo & Karam, 2018).

Additionally, participatory communication helps achieve "communicative democracy" by encouraging discussion that leads to inclusion and accountability which are basic to sustainable development and strong governance (Freire, 1970; Manyozo, 2012).

2.1.3 Social Network Theory

Social Network Theory (SNT) is concerned with how networks of people and groups shape behavior, information sharing and group activities (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Social network theory demonstrates that, in digital media and youth civic engagement, the strength of social bonds influences how fast civic news and encouragement for action are shared and spread among peers.

On Facebook, TikTok and Twitter, information moves through the relationships people build on these platforms. It is easy for young people to organize events, protests or get the word out online. The way #FeesMustFall and #ZimbabweanLivesMatter spread so widely online proves that networked communication can help movements gain attention and support (Bosch, 2017).

Social network theory points out that certain people in networks such as influencers and opinion leaders, play important roles in uniting different groups and sharing information which makes it a good way to study digital advocacy and mobilization.

2.2 Digital Media and Youth Mobilization

Digital media has become a highly important youth mobilization tool throughout Sub-Saharan Africa (Ajaegbu, 2024). Through its accessible and participatory platforms, it enables young people to go around traditional gatekeepers and straight to peers, policymakers and the public. In this section, it looks into how youth employ digital tools, social media, in particular to mobilise, protest, and demand accountability by using case studies and online civic strategies.

2.2.1 Case Studies of Youth-Led Digital Activism

#RejectFinanceBill2024 in Kenya

In 2024, Kenya experienced a surge of youth digital activism that was led by Generation Z in response to the proposed Finance Bill that was widely opposed (Omweri, 2024). In this famous movement, which was decentralized and leaderless, the mobilization, education and coordination through a digital platform brought together protests from all over the nation. Information move to social media channels such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter) and WhatsApp, and were mined to disseminate the information widely as innovative tools like the use of AI generated content and GPT models were used to demystify the bill to the various dialect in all local dialects to increase accessibility to and understanding by diverse populations.

The protesters, on top of organizing logistical needs (transportation and medical expenses), also proceeded to take advantage of crowdfunding to support their cause. The movement continued, pushing back on the government despite the brutal security engagements, including reports of abduction of activists, and eventual withdrawal of the bill. This episode not only exemplifies the power of the digital in the 21st century of civic engagement but signifies another transformation in Kenya's protest culture from the old, fixed, one place protests to new, myriad issues, tech based activism, that crosses ethnic and geographical boundaries (Kiprono, 2024).

#FeesMustFall in South Africa

In 2015, the #FeesMustFall movement was among the most influential youth-led digital mobilization in Africa (Mokhaloane, 2025). The social media campaign began after student protests against increasing university tuition fees, originating from national and international attention through twitter and facebook (Bosch, 2017). The group creating these hashtags became rallying points for students to document protests, coordinate actions across separate campuses and spread their demands as actions transpired. Hashtags such as #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall emerged.

In addition to being a mobilization tool, social media was also a framing platform and a means of accruing solidarity outside of university spaces. Ampomah and Cooper (2024) argues that it challenged mainstream media portrayals by allowing students to control the messaging of their experience of struggle, echoing the nature of participatory digital civic action.

#EndSARS in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the #EndSARS movement in 2020 grew from its response, namely, police brutality, specifically the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Youth outrage sparked the protests that evolved into a decentralised and youth led anti systemic violence and poor governance movement (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2021).

Hashtags such as #EndSARS and #EndPoliceBrutality was widely used on social media, viral videos and graphic testimonies went viral online and it all felt urgent and got global attention (Ani & Onu, 2024). First, the youth were tech savvy, using tools of crowdfunding, the building of infographics and sharing of real time updates which showed how digital media could play its role in strengthening civic organization and visibility (Iwilade, 2021). Regardless of internet blackouts and state repression, digital media survived to chronicle abuses about them and document the movement for historical record and international advocacy.

2.2.2 Role of Influencers, Hashtags, and Online Campaigns

Digital influencers and content creators are key to amplifying the youth civic campaigns. Nkemdilim (2024) adds that they are intermediaries between the grassroots movements and scale, with a large online following that helps them shape public opinion and encourage greater engagement. For instance, Nigerian influencers such as Falz, a musician and DJ Switch helped to make #EndSARS a campaign of choice and to offer real time coverage as mainstream media refused to report on at the beginning (Iwilade, 2021).

In particular, hashtags are extremely powerful for organizing civic discourse. Herianto (2024) argues that they act as digital 'rallying cries' for messages that unify, trend visibility and participation. Data from them shows that hashtags have the potential to be both informational and emotional catalysts that create movement as understandable, legitimate and community driven (Bosch, 2017; Mutsvairo & Karam, 2018).

Additionally, the media used in coordinated online campaigns often involves creative media such as infographics and live streams. Video testimonials that address emotion and reason increases the persuasive power of such

campaigns (Ologunebi & Taiwo, 2025). Digital mobilization shapes civic landscapes of Sub-Saharan Africa by exerting pressure on governments, attracting donors' attention, and creating transnational solidarity to secure these campaigns.

2.3 Barriers and Challenges

Although, compared with other regions, Sub Saharan Africa's use of digital media for civic engagement and amplifying youth voices is quite immature, the potential of this medium to further youth's voices is great though it comes with structural and systemic challenges (Okocha et al. 2024). Included in these barriers are the continued digital divide, the turmoil of misinformation and state surveillance, and pronounced urban-rural inequalities in access and participation.

2.3.1 Digital Divide

Despite the emergence of the digital divide, the gap that people living in Sub Saharan Africa experience between those who have access to modern information and communication technologies vs ones who don't, this gap persists in the region. It is true that mobile penetration and the use of the internet rose in recent years, yet despite this, there are still disparities in access, especially among the poor, gender and the education level as well as geographic location (World Bank, 2022).

Low income households and areas that may be remote can make it hard for youth to achieve limited or expensive internet access, a lack of digital devices and insufficient digital literacy. Such inequalities result in a two tiered system where only digitally privileged youth are able to participate in online civic discourse consistently and the rest of the youth are excluded from digital public spheres (GSMA, 2023). Therefore, many youths are disenfranchised and unable to engage in the types of digital activism that are redefining civic engagement in urban centers.

2.3.2 Misinformation and Surveillance

A major source of news for many youths through social media makes unverified information more likely to cause public confusion, fear, and to manipulate civic action (Ndlela & Mano, 2020). To threaten democracies, misinformation campaigns can delegitimize movements, incite violence or suppress turning out during elections or protests.

It further threatens youth activists due to digital surveillance and repression by state actors as well. Various legal and technological measures in the form of governments across the region have been adopted to monitor online activity, suppress dissent, and to criminalize digital activism. Youth protesters have been harassed, arrested or had internet shutdowns in countries such as Uganda, Nigeria and Tanzania when they mobilize digitally (Mutsvairo & Karam, 2018; Iwilade, 2021). Such surveillance not only sends a climate of fear and self-censorship within the politically active youth, but it also damages trust in the digital spaces as safe forums for civic participation.

2.3.3 Urban-Rural Disparities

Due to compounded challenges such as geography, rural youth have reduced civic digital engagement (Kelly & McGrath, 2024). The lack of infrastructural deficits such as unreliable electricity, poor broadband infrastructure and inadequate ICT resources limits the access to digital media and to participate meaningfully in online campaigns (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, low levels of literacy in the formal education sector can contribute to lower digital literacy in rural areas.

The fact that these narratives and civic interests of rural youth do not always have the opportunity to be represented or even show up at all however valid means that the digital public discourse is often lacking or underrepresented (Sasidharan, 2025). The digital marginalization makes socio-political inequalities in reality even worse as urban youth increasingly take the lead in the making of civic action and visibility while the rural perspectives remain neglected. This gap has to be bridged with the development of the communication strategies that would support extension of digital media access, training and platforms to the underserved rural populations to enable more inclusive and representative civic engagement.

2.4 Opportunities for Development Communication

While digital media presents challenges, it also provides opportunities to further development communication goals in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, in a strategic way, digital platforms can support inclusive governance, increase civic awareness, and facilitate active engagement of youth as agents of change. This section discusses three main chances that I will focus on from this study, namely civic literacy, policy advocates and participatory communication platforms.

2.4.1 Enhancing Civic Literacy

Digital media can be a powerful tool for promoting civic literacy in youth, and for that matter when integrated into educational and development initiatives. For example, civic literacy is defined by UNESCO (2019) as the knowledge and skills to understand and participate in democratic processes such as being aware of one's rights, responsibilities, institutions and procedures.

For example, in countries including Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa, organizations have developed online content, including animated explainers, infographics, interactive quizzes, podcasts, among others, that educate young people on voting, governance and social accountability. These formats are not only accessible and engaging, they are also manageable as they can be localized to local languages and contexts in order to broaden their reach (Khamis & Muriithi, 2022).

In addition, mobile based learning apps and social media campaigns are scalable platforms to deliver learning to dispersed people including marginalized youth in informal settlements or post conflict areas. Development communication can strengthen democratic youth participation and reduce youth civic apathy through increasing the youth's political awareness, together with the digital fluency, and thus offering them a significant opportunity to play a significant role in public affairs (Hngokchai, 2025).

2.4.2 Policy Advocacy

Through digital platforms, youth and civil society actors are highly enabled to engage in policy advocacy in many ways (Bwire, 2024). Unlike traditional lobbying, digital advocacy is more about grassroots voices speaking to demand and generate public support over borders.

Online petitions, open letters or hashtag campaigns all can attract policymakers, donors and also international bodies. For instance, in the case of #EndSARS in Nigeria, digital petitions and virtual town halls led to the pressure on the government to disband SARS and give the promise of reforms (Iwilade, 2021). Kenyan youth too have used Twitter to shame public spending, and question budget transparency under the likes of #RejectFinanceBill2024.

This trend can be supported by development communication practitioners who can advocate for evidence based, communication trained and amplified visibility of youth-led policy proposals. Acharya (2024) adds that local issues can be taken further to national and global platforms with the help of digital storytelling, data visualization, and citizen journalism.

2.4.3 Creating Participatory Communication Platforms

Participatory communication platforms are a cornerstone of development communication because they are dialogue, inclusive and places where things can be created together. The particularity of digital media offers the possibility of building such platforms in new ways, especially when the target group has traditionally been excluded from mainstream media and political discourse.

Social media groups, civic tech platforms like U-report, Ushahidi and online forums allow horizontal communication amongst youth so that they can raise issues, as well as share solutions, and brainstorm development initiatives together. Bringing together community building, solidarity and real time feedback loops between citizens and institutions (Manyozo 2012).

Participatory digital platforms can also be designed for specific development sectors like health, education or climate change, allowing youth to participate in issue advocacy, and program design (Sebunya & Gichuki 2024).

Inclusivity is the key, which is to say integrating local languages, gender equity, and extension of access to the underserved populations to ensure digital participation is truly reflective of the whole range of youth voices.

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

While there has been a growing scholarly interest in digital media and youth civic engagement in Sub-Saharan Africa, the problem remains under researched. The gaps prevent a thorough understanding of how development communication can be harnessed more effectively in varied settings and people. What still gets underexplored are: the lack of localized case studies, and the absence of research on rural youth and other non-social media digital platforms.

2.5.1 Few Localized Case Studies

As has been the case for much of the existing literature on youth digital activism in Africa, most literature about youth digital activism in Africa focuses on major large scale movements such as #EndSARS in Nigeria and #FeesMustFall in South Africa (Bosch, 2017; Iwilade, 2021). These cases are useful to show the potential of digital mobilization, but they usually refer to urban, university, and politically conscious youth populations. As a result, the literature often derives its arguments from a very few cases which may not adequately portray the African youth's wider experiences in different regions and levels of economic development.

What was missing was studies of localised digital civic engagement in non-mainstreamed geographical settings or those linguistically underrepresented settings such as peri urban towns or smaller rural districts. They could find unpublished communication patterns, platform preferences and civic concerns that go against mainstream narratives. The localized research would also bring out the ways in which youth interpret and react to development communication initiatives in culturally determined ways (Manyozo, 2012).

2.5.2 Limited Focus on Rural Youth and Non-Social Media Platforms

A major gap in the literature is the paucity of existing work exploring the use of non-social media platforms by rural youth for civic engagement. In most studies, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are emphasized, which are easier to access by urban, digitally literate youth (GSMA, 2023). Yet, many young people in rural or low connectivity areas rely on basic mobile phones, SMS and community radio, which are often ignored in digital media research.

Even though these non-social media channels can still be used as an important tool for civic engagement and development communication. For instance, UNICEF uses SMS-based platforms such as U-Report, used in Kenya, Uganda and other countries to allow youth to share their opinion on policy issues through simple mobile technology (UNICEF, 2020). Interactive radio programs as urged by Girard (2014) can also construct participatory spaces for rural youth to discuss community concerns and engage in democratic dialogue.

This research gap would contribute to broadening the understanding of civic participation beyond the digital elite and identifying inclusive communication strategies aimed towards infrastructural realities. This would also be closer to development communication's emphasis on participation, localization, and equity.

2.6 Conclusion

In this literature review, the dynamic interaction of digital media, youth civic engagement and development communication in Sub Saharan Africa have been investigated. It is found that digital platforms have fundamentally changed the way in which young people engage in political and social discourse, creating new ways of political and social activism, and mobilization, and delivery of dialogue.

Such digital youth engagement is explained through several theoretical models, such as the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the Participatory Communication Model, and Social Network Theory. Social media enabled case studies, like the #RejectFinanceBill2024 movement in Kenya, #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa and the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, shows that there is tremendous potential for using social media to spark civic action especially within urban and university educated youth.

However, notable barriers persist. Limited in terms of inclusion is the digital divide, misinformation, surveillance and urban–rural disparities. Most of the youth, especially the ones in the rural areas, are disconnected from Digital Civic Spaces or underrepresented. However, digital media holds meaningful prospects to heighten civic literacy, attain policy partnering, as well as cultivate participatory media in tune with development communication precepts.

2.7 Policy and Research Recommendations

Broaden Digital Access and Literacy: Infrastructure investment to expand internet and mobile connectivity in regions without connectivity should be a primary focus for both governments, NGOs, and development partners. In order to ensure equitable civic participation, digital literacy programs are essential especially targeted to young women, rural youth and persons with disabilities (UNESCO, 2019).

Encourage Inclusive Digital Platforms: Social media should not be the end point of development communication; radio, SMS, WhatsApp, and mobile apps should be used that are based on local languages and user needs. Building such an inclusive media strategy will pull many marginalized voices into civic conversation (Girard, 2014; UNICEF, 2020).

Safeguard Digital Rights: Government must ensure digital rights including minimising surveillance; avoiding arbitrary shutdowns and strengthening the cybersecurity policy that promotes freedom of expression and data protection (Mutsvairo & Karam, 2018).

Support Localized Research: Future research should examine how youth from underrepresented communities use digital tools when living in rural, peri urban or conflict affected areas. The insights into the context specific communication dynamics can only be achieved by the use of mixed methods research, ethnographic studies and participatory action research (Manyozo, 2012).

Promote Youth-led Communication: Policymakers as well as the media organizations should encourage youth-led initiatives and storytelling platforms that enable young people to define development narratives, to monitor institutions and encourage civic innovation from the grassroots level.

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