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Digital Media And The Amplification Of Marginalised Voices In Select Communities In Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

This study investigated the potential of using digital media to amplify marginalised voices in select communities in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The objectives were to examine the extent to which digital media amplifies marginalised voices, identify the challenges faced by marginalised groups in utilising digital media, and explore strategies for enhancing the use of digital media to promote marginalised voices. The study was anchored on the Social Identity Theory and Technological Acceptance Model. The study adopted a survey research design, with a sample size of 399 respondents selected using Taro Yamane's formula. Data analysis revealed that 37% of respondents indicated that digital media "often" amplifies marginalised voices, while 26% faced obstacles related to online harassment and cyberbullying, and 25% lacked digital literacy skills. The study also found that digital literacy training programmes (23%) and access to digital devices (23%) were paramount strategies for enhancing the use of digital media. The study concludes that digital media has the potential to amplify marginalised voices, but its effectiveness is hindered by challenges, highlighting the need for targeted interventions. Recommendations include prioritising inclusivity and accessibility features on digital media platforms, implementing digital literacy training programmes and online safety measures, and providing access to digital devices, affordable internet data plans, and digital literacy training programs to promote digital inclusion

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and empowerment among marginalised groups.

Keywords: **Digital Media, Marginalised Voices, Amplification, Digital Inclusion, Empowerment**

INTRODUCTION

There is no gainsaying that the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has revolutionised the world, altering all facets of human existence. Advances that were revolutionary, unimaginable in the past, are today realities, turning our analogue world digital. Digital media, a term used to describe a number of types of electronic communication enabled by computer technology, is now ubiquitous. Seema (2013) has mapped digital media as encompassing websites, streamed video and audio, media chat, virtual reality worlds, digital camcorders, and mobile computing. Manovich (2021) defines digital media as including "media that are created, stored, and transmitted in digital form, allowing for easier access, manipulation, and distribution". This encompasses an extremely long list of platforms and formats like websites, social media, podcasts, streaming media, and electronic publications.

Digital media has emerged as a liberatory force in the contemporary era, re-charting the ways of the people and communities engaging, exchanging information, and organizing for transformation. As a megaphone, digital media gives voice to the excluded and marginalized, allowing them to speak to larger publics, challenge dominant discourses, and organize social justice activism. To Omojola (2019), the digital media has opened up information communication to everyone irrespective of background such that public opinion can be mobilized by individuals of different backgrounds without the gatekeeper function that traditional media has increasingly taken. An example is the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, which gained traction in 2020, demonstrating the ability of digital media to empower voice previously disenfranchised. Activists utilized media like Twitter to tell individual stories, organize protests, and attract foreign media attention, demonstrating the effectiveness of digital media in organizing collective action (Ogunbajo, 2021). Studies have confirmed that social media has been central to promoting the protection of human rights in Akwa Ibom State, with citizens using such media to condemn perpetrators and reach a wider audience (Atakpa, 2023).

Marginalisation of the marginalised voices in Nigeria is a multifaceted issue fueled by political, historical, and socio-cultural dynamics. Nigerian marginalized groups include women, ethnic minorities, the disabled, and minority religions. Women in Nigeria (WIN) and Nigeria's LGBTQ+ advocacy platform have been established to try to provide platforms for these

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marginalized voices. International organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, also step in to bring the stories to the world stage, forcing the Nigerian government to act more in safeguarding the rights of these groups of marginalized people. The groups, since the naming by Amnesty International (2022), have been actively vocal in bringing the causes of human rights abuse to the forefront and advocating for policy change. But international advocacy can be spasmodic in its effectiveness, depending on how well grassroots is able to sustain mobilization at home. Even though the strength of online media is welcome, there are challenges.

In Nigeria, so wide is the digital divide that all marginalized voices are not given equal opportunities on online media. It varies with internet access, digital literacy, and the economic condition. Olatunji (2021) observes that the challenges can limit the potential of digital media to amplify marginal voices. In addition, the Nigerian government has also clamped down on opposition voices in the past through internet censorship and harassment of activists, particularly anti-status quo activists. Ikeji (2020) recognises the need for activists to exercise vigilance in handling such concerns in a bid not to be muzzled. The spreading of disinformation and online bullying can also be redirected towards minority communities, manipulating the records and creating fractures. Social media has been a key engine for civic political engagement and human rights protection in Akwa Ibom State.

Social media, for instance, has become a powerful resource in fighting against government institutions and agents over human rights abuse, according to Atakpa (2023). There is a need for the establishment of a special human rights protection board tasked with gathering and investigating human rights cases reported on online websites. Social media has also improved civic political engagement in the state as citizens use the websites to receive and share information and also engage political authorities. Regulation is, however, required to keep at bay the abuse of social media in the spread of unverified or censored information.

Statement of the Problem

The evolution of digital media has transformed communication patterns worldwide and Nigeria is not left behind. Studies have shown that digital media websites increase civic political engagement and protect human rights within the state and individuals resort to the websites to condemn the abusers and reach a wider audience (Aremu, Gbenga & Daniel, 2019). However, along with the positive result, there exists a basic challenge: the effective utilisation of digital media to give voice to marginalised groups in some communities within Akwa Ibom State. Marginalised groups like women, ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities continue to be excluded and misrepresented in digital spaces, further exacerbating extant asymmetries of

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power. The task is to balance the potential of digital media and the danger of enhanced marginalisation, with internet hate speech, illiteracy, and censorship amongst significant challenges. The circumstances need to favour establishing a measure that will involve marginalised communities to enhance the use of digital media while controlling the risks. This entails the examination of the current level of digital media adoption, identifying the barriers of access and utilization, and finding ways to enhance digital literacy and access. Thus, it behoves the researchers to ask: Is there a possibility for digital media to become a catalyst for empowering the voices of the marginalised in Akwa Ibom State, and if so, how can its effect maximally be optimized?

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were:

i. To examine the extent to which digital media amplifies marginalised voices in select communities in Akwa Ibom State.
ii. To identify the challenges faced by marginalised groups in utilising digital media in Akwa Ibom State.
iii. To explore strategies for enhancing the use of digital media to promote marginalised voices in Akwa Ibom State.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Media and Marginalised Voices: An Overview

Digital media has reshaped the way individuals and societies communicate, share information, and demand change. Digital media is any type of media that exists in a machine-readable format and comprises various types of content, including text, audio, still images, and motion pictures, that is created, distributed, and received via digital technology, such as websites, social media, podcasts, streams, and digital magazines, with enhanced convenience, treatment, and sharing (Manovich, 2021). The proliferation of online media platforms has democratized information sharing, and anyone irrespective of background can engage in the public discourse without conventionally asserted gatekeeping by mainstream media (Omojola, 2019). This has been particularly important for marginal voices who were previously excluded from mainstream media discourses. Digital media provides an avenue for such voices to be louder heard, as they reach more people and counter-narratives.

The subtle function of digital media in giving a louder voice to the marginalized is at the center of its contribution. Social media platforms, in particular, have played a key role in

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mobilizing the masses and promoting social justice movements (Ogunbajo, 2021). For instance, the #EndSARS revolution in Nigeria, which escalated in 2020, demonstrates how digital media can be leveraged in giving voice to marginalized voices and mobilizing collective action. Activists made use of social media outlets like Twitter to give voice to marginalized voices as they shared personal testimonies, mobilized protests, and rallied international intervention, demonstrating the potential of digital media in mobilizing social change.

Digital media is also a place where marginal voices resist hegemonic discourses and provide counter-discourses. The internet has given the user the power to create and distribute their own content, bypassing the conventional media gatekeepers and resisting mainstream discourses (Manovich, 2021). This has been particularly empowering for the marginalized groups, traditionally misrepresented or left out of mainstream media discourse. The digital media provide these marginalized communities with a voice to narrate their own stories and fight for their own narratives. The use of digital media to provide voice for marginalized groups is not an activity devoid of challenges. The digital divide, or the disproportionate access to digital technologies and the internet, is a long-standing hindrance to access by marginalized communities to digital media (Olatunji, 2021). The divide is typically exacerbated by socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and exclusion from access to education and digital literacy skills. As a result, most of the marginalised groups are unable to leverage the power of digital media in voice amplification.

Despite these constraints, digital media remains an important voice amplification tool among marginalised communities. The use of digital media can give marginalised groups a feeling of empowerment and agency and enable them to take control of their own narratives and advance their own stories (Atakpa, 2023). For example, marginalised communities in Akwa Ibom State employed the social media to criticise government agencies and officials for abuse of human rights, a pointer to the potential of the new media to strengthen and give voice to marginalised communities. The potential of the new media to amplify voices of marginalised communities is quite high but requires conscious attention to the issues at stake. It is imperative to develop strategies of advancing digital literacy and facilitating digital inclusion in order to enable marginalized groups to fully benefit from digital media (Ikeji, 2023).

Challenges and Barriers to Digital Media Access among Marginalized Groups

Access to digital media is a crucial aspect of modern life, yet marginalized groups face numerous challenges and barriers that hinder their ability to fully harness the potential of digital technologies. The digital divide, which refers to the unequal access to digital technologies and the internet, is a significant barrier to digital media access among marginalized groups (Olatunji,

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2021). This divide is often exacerbated by socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and lack of access to education and digital literacy skills. For instance, in Akwa Ibom State, many marginalized communities lack access to reliable internet connectivity, making it difficult for them to access and utilize digital media platforms (Atakpa, 2023).

Limited digital literacy skills are another significant barrier to digital media access among marginalized groups (Ikeji, 2020). Many individuals in these communities lack the necessary skills to effectively use digital technologies, making it difficult for them to create and disseminate their own content. This limited digital literacy also makes them vulnerable to online harassment and cyberbullying, which can further exacerbate their marginalization.

Socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and lack of access to digital devices, also hinder digital media access among marginalized groups (Nwosu, 2022). Many individuals in these communities cannot afford digital devices, such as smartphones and computers, making it difficult for them to access and utilize digital media platforms. This limited access to digital devices also perpetuates the digital divide, further marginalizing these communities.

Cultural and linguistic barriers also play a significant role in limiting digital media access among marginalized groups (Okoro, 2022). Many digital media platforms are designed with a Western audience in mind, making it difficult for marginalized communities to access and utilize these platforms. This limited cultural relevance also makes it difficult for these communities to create and disseminate their own content, further exacerbating their marginalization.

These challenges and barriers highlight the need for targeted interventions to promote digital inclusion and access among marginalized groups. Strategies such as digital literacy training, affordable digital devices, and culturally relevant digital content can help bridge the digital divide and promote digital media access among marginalized groups (Adegbite, 2023).

Empowering Marginalized Voices through Digital Media: Strategies and Opportunities

In contemporary society, the rise of digital media has transformed the ways in which various voices are heard and represented, especially those of marginalised communities. The advent of platforms such as social media, podcasts, and blogs has emerged as tools that significantly enhance the visibility of voices often overlooked by mainstream media outlets. In regions like Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, this phenomenon becomes particularly poignant. The pervasive use of mobile devices and internet accessibility has enabled individuals from traditionally marginalised groups be they women, ethnic minorities, or persons with disabilities to share their stories and advocate for their rights. Gwladys (2021) notes how digital platforms provide new avenues for self-expression and mobilising community action, emphasising that

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empowerment stems from the ability to communicate one's narratives in an authentically resonant manner.

The initial challenge faced by these communities in Akwa Ibom State is not merely access to digital tools, but rather the capacity to harness them effectively. Training programs tailored to the unique needs of these groups represent a critical step towards leveraging digital media for empowerment. Initiatives spearheaded by local NGOs, such as the Women's Digital Empowerment Project, provide workshops that teach essential digital skills. Participants learn to navigate social media effectively, understand content creation, and engage with online communities in meaningful ways. Studies show that when individuals are equipped with digital skills, they are far more likely to engage in advocacy and activism (Dumont, 2023), which can have profound implications for issues ranging from gender equality to resource management in their communities.

Building an online presence, whilst necessary, is not sufficient in itself. It is vital that these voices cultivate authentic narratives that resonate with broader audiences. The power of storytelling in fostering connection cannot be overstated. Digital platforms allow for the sharing of personal stories that not only humanise experiences but also create empathy amongst listeners. Noteworthy projects, such as “Our Stories, Our Voices” in Akwa Ibom, provide a platform for women to narrate their struggles and triumphs. This initiative has effectively mobilised community support, bringing attention to social issues such as gender-based violence and economic marginalisation (Adesola, 2022). Through these compelling narratives, individuals become changemakers, encouraging surrounding communities to partake in dialogues that inspire transformation.

Further complicating the digital empowerment narrative are the challenges posed by information dissemination itself. Quality control, misinformation, and online harassment can endanger the fragile voices emerging from these marginalised communities. The case of a prominent Akwa Ibom activist, whose campaign against harmful cultural practices faced significant backlash and misinformation online, illustrates this struggle. To combat this, media literacy programmes are increasingly necessary. These will equip individuals to discern credible information, respond to digital harassment, and engage constructively in online discourse (Smith, 2023). Educators and advocates must prioritise fostering critical thinking and media-savvy skills, helping community members not just to participate but to thrive in the digital space.

Engagement with international digital networks opens doorways for global solidarity and resource sharing for Akwa Ibom's marginalised voices. The digital media landscape is not confined to local narratives; it provides opportunities for voices to connect with like-minded advocacy

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groups worldwide. A pertinent example is the collaboration between local women groups in Akwa Ibom and international NGOs working to combat domestic violence. This partnership has facilitated cross-border dialogue, shared resources, and access to international platforms for advocacy campaigns. Studies suggest that solidarity initiatives engage individuals from different contexts, fostering a sense of global community that is pivotal for sustained advocacy efforts (Fan & Ng, 2021).

Strategic partnerships with established media outlets also present exciting opportunities. Collaborative journalism can identify stories helping to uplift marginalised voices. This approach ensures that while grassroots narratives are integrated into larger conversations, they retain their authenticity. For instance, a partnership between local radio stations and digital platforms has led to the creation of broadcast segments that highlight the stories of people with disabilities in Akwa Ibom. This not only serves to amplify their voices but also raises awareness among the broader public about their challenges and contributions (Talabi, 2023). Such initiatives demonstrate how media collaborations can enhance visibility for causes that require urgent attention and compassion.

Policy frameworks must also adapt to support the integration of digital media as a tool for empowerment among marginalised communities. Governments and institutions need to establish regulations that support inclusivity in digital spaces while combating online harassment. Landmark legislation in some states has begun to address these issues, but Akwa Ibom can look to improve its own policies. Developing a coherent digital inclusion strategy that prioritises resources for vulnerable populations, such as internet subsidies and training resources, can facilitate significant progress. As outlined in advocacy guidelines by Olugbuyiro (2022), enhancing regulatory frameworks can lay the groundwork for sustained growth and empowerment within these communities.

In reflecting upon the pathways for empowering marginalized voices through digital media in Akwa Ibom State, it becomes evident that a multifaceted approach is necessary. As noted, this encompasses training initiatives, storytelling, media literacy, international partnerships, and policy advocacy. Collectively, these strategies foster an ecosystem in which marginalised groups can not only assert their voices but influence the societal narrative. Digital media offers an unprecedented opportunity to democratise communication, ensuring that every voice, especially those historically silenced, plays a role in shaping the community and beyond. In this regard, Akwa Ibom stands as an exemplification of how local actions, backed by global solidarity, can lead to

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study is anchored on two key theories: Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Technological Acceptance Model (TAM). SIT, proposed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s, posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their identity from the groups to which they belong. This theory is relevant to the present study as it helps explain how digital media interactions can both exacerbate and challenge ethnic stereotypes and marginalization, particularly among individuals whose voices are muffled in local communities or cities in Nigeria. However, SIT has been critiqued for its potential to foster divisiveness, with studies demonstrating that strong group identification can lead to in-group favoritism and less tolerance for out-groups (Crisp & Turner, 2010).

TAM, developed by Fred Davis in 1986, provides a framework for understanding how users come to accept and use new technologies. This theory is relevant to the present study as it sheds light on the factors influencing the adoption and use of digital media among marginalised groups in Nigeria. TAM's constructs of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are particularly useful in understanding the dynamics of user acceptance and the pervasive use of digital platforms among these communities. However, TAM has been critiqued for its reductionist nature, neglecting social, organisational, and contextual variables that influence technology acceptance of digital media. This limitation restricts the model's predictive validity and adaptability across diverse demographic groups and technological environments (Venkatesh et al., 2003). In this study, TAM highlights the need to consider the specific needs and challenges of marginalised groups in Nigeria when designing and implementing digital media interventions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a survey research design, considered suitable for investigating people's opinions, feelings, and attitudes. The population comprised 110,336 inhabitants of Mbo Local Government Area, the area chosen for this study. The study had a sample size of 399 determined using Taro Yamane's formula. A combination of purposive and systematic random sampling techniques was employed to administer questionnaires to respondents in Mbo. The study employed questionnaire as the research instrument. Data collection yielded a 98% return rate, with 380 out of 399 questionnaires filled and correctly returned. Data analysis involved tabulation and statistical analysis using frequency scores and simple percentages.

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Data Presentation and Analysis

RQ1: To what extent does digital media amplify marginalised voices in select communities in Akwa Ibom State?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage %
Very often	103	27
Often	141	37
Sometimes	73	19
Rarely	53	14
Never	10	3
Total	**380**	**100**

The majority of respondents (37%) indicate that digital media "Often" amplifies marginalised voices in select communities in Akwa Ibom State.

RQ2: What challenges do marginalised groups face in utilising digital media in Akwa Ibom State?

Variables	Frequency	Percentage %
Limited access to digital devices	54	14
Poor internet connectivity	29	8
Lack of digital literacy skills	96	25
High cost of internet data	82	22
Online harassment and cyberbullying	100	26
Limited relevant online content	14	4
Others	5	1
Total	**380**	**100**

The top three challenges faced by marginalised groups in utilising digital media in Akwa Ibom State are online harassment and cyberbullying (26%), lack of digital literacy skills (25%), and high cost of internet data (22%).

RQ3: What strategies can enhance the use of digital media to promote marginalised voices in Akwa Ibom State?

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Variables	Frequency	Percentage %
Digital literacy training programmes	89	23
Affordable internet data plans	68	18
Access to digital devices	86	23
Online platforms for storytelling and content creation	31	8
Social media campaigns to raise awareness about marginalised issues	73	19
Collaborations with influencers and online activists	16	4
Development of relevant online content for marginalised groups	6	2
Others	11	3
Total	**380**	**100**

The most effective strategies to enhance the use of digital media to promote marginalised voices in Akwa Ibom State are digital literacy training programmes (23%) and access to digital devices (23%), followed closely by social media campaigns to raise awareness about marginalised issues (19%) and affordable internet data plans (18%).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings regarding the extent to which digital media amplifies marginalised voices in select communities in Akwa Ibom State reveal a significant engagement with digital platforms. With 37% of respondents indicating that digital media "often" amplifies these voices, it is evident that while the potential for engagement exists, there remains a gap between opportunity and effectiveness. The Social Identity Theory (SIT) elucidates this situation, explaining how individuals within marginalised communities draw their identities from collective experiences and shared narratives. This collective identity becomes a catalyst for social activism when channelled through digital media. For instance, during the #EndSARS movement, digital media served as a tool for reclaiming agency, allowing individuals to share their stories and construct a shared narrative in opposition to hegemonic discourses (Ogunbajo, 2021). Such dynamics highlight the capacity of digital platforms to act as vehicles for amplifying voices that have long been silenced. Nonetheless, SIT also points to a potential drawback: the risk of creating echo chambers where the discourse may become insular, undermining broader societal discourse (Crisp & Turner, 2010). This underscores the necessity for broad-based engagement that transcends the confines of group identity while fostering inclusivity that promotes diverse voices in public discourse.

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Challenges associated with utilising digital media among marginalised groups further underscore the gaps in access and capability. The data indicates that 26% of respondents face obstacles related to online harassment and cyberbullying, revealing the darker side of digital engagement. This threat is not only a barrier to individual expression but also hampers communal voices striving for recognition. The impact of digital harassment on marginalised communities is profound, as it can deter individuals from expressing themselves freely online. This aspect is corroborated by Olatunji (2021), who notes that the well-documented digital divide is exacerbated by these adverse experiences, thereby constraining the ability of marginalised groups to utilise digital media for advocacy. Furthermore, 25% of respondents identified a lack of digital literacy skills as a key challenge. The Technological Acceptance Model (TAM) aptly illustrates this predicament, as the perceived usefulness and ease of use are critical determinants for user engagement with technology (Davis, 1986). In environments where digital skills are scarce, the potential utility of digital media diminishes, effectively sidelining these communities from the socio-political narratives that shape their realities. Addressing issues of online harassment while enhancing digital literacy is thus essential, as it empowers individuals to navigate the digital ecosystem without fear and promotes effective participation in social discourse.

Strategies for enhancing the use of digital media also reveal a pathway towards greater empowerment for marginalised voices in Akwa Ibom State. The data indicate that both digital literacy training programmes and access to digital devices are paramount strategies, each receiving a commendable 23% recognition. These findings align with the broader discourse surrounding digital empowerment. Initiatives such as the Women's Digital Empowerment Project exemplify the transformative potential of targeted training programmes. Equipped with essential digital skills, individuals can move beyond passive consumers of content and become active creators and advocates for their narratives (Gwladys, 2021). Cultivating authentic storytelling, as exemplified by the "Our Stories, Our Voices" initiative, serves to foster connections that humanise experiences and galvanise community action (Adesola, 2022). Moreover, addressing issues such as high internet data costs and inadequate online content further enables these communities to increase their digital engagement. Localised strategies that include partnerships with established media outlets can also serve to amplify these voices while maintaining their authenticity. As Olugbuyiro (2022) highlights, sustainable policy frameworks must evolve to combat systemic barriers while promoting inclusivity in digital spaces. Collectively, these strategic interventions not only alleviate obstacles but also energise a movement towards greater visibility and representation for marginalised groups, creating a more equitable digital ecosystem in which all voices can actively partake in societal narratives.

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CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital media has the potential to amplify marginalised voices in Akwa Ibom State, but its effectiveness is hindered by challenges such as online harassment, lack of digital literacy skills, and limited access to digital devices, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to promote digital inclusion and empowerment.

Recommendations

i. Digital media platforms should prioritise inclusivity and accessibility features to enhance the amplification of marginalised voices.

ii. Stakeholders should implement digital literacy training programs and online safety measures to address the challenges of online harassment and cyberbullying.

iii. Policymakers and practitioners should prioritise initiatives that provide access to digital devices, affordable internet data plans, and digital literacy training programs to promote digital inclusion and empowerment among marginalised groups.

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