

FROM HASHTAGS TO ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE INFLUENCE OF DIGITAL ACTIVISM ON FEMALE-LED BUSINESSES IN NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Digital activism has revolutionised the way women, particularly Nigerian female entrepreneurs, advocate for their rights and interests. The internet and social media have created a platform for women to mobilise, organize, and amplify their voices, challenging societal norms and stereotypes. However, despite the prospects, Nigerian female entrepreneurs face unique challenges in leveraging digital activism. This paper explored the role digital activism has played in female-led enterprises and how the digital space has aided in business growth and development. Using a thematic analysis deployed with Taguette software, it examined the opportunities inherent in digital activism. It highlighted challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in using digital media for activism, mobilizing for societal changes whilst managing their businesses. Finally, it enumerated the prospects of digital activism in building wealth and creating jobs for women.

Keywords: Gender equality, digital literacy, online advocacy, entrepreneurial development women's empowerment, social media activism

Introduction

Female activism in the region now called Nigeria developed its roots before the colonial times when the Europeans visited the West African shores, first as explorers, then as slave and commodity traders, and later on as administrative outposts of the British Empire. In the pre-colonial era, traditional societies had women at the forefront of governance and village associations (Adesina, 2023). They were not relegated to mere housekeepers. They farmed, traded in commodities, had their unique names, owned property, and sometimes ruled and fought in wars. With the advent of modern societies, Olufunmilayo Ransome Kuti and Margaret Ekpo were pioneers of women's activism. They clamoured for education, women's rights, suffrage, and socio-political elevation (Adesina, 2023; Popoola 2022). These agitations led to the formation of the Nigerian Women's Union (NWU) in the mid-20th century. Sustained impact led to the first Nigerian Women's Conference in 1953. The establishment of formal women's associations gave women structure and platforms to be active on. In the 1970s and 1980s, Ms Oyo-Ita and Ms Gambo Sawaba continued the activism work (Mann, 1984). Nigeria was actively present at the 1985 Beijing Women's Conference in China where the country adopted a National Policy on Women. The policy contained agreements that the girl child would be protected and educated and women's rights would be furthered. The 21st century experienced the establishment of more agencies that advocated for women's rights and the nation entered an era where more voices amplified and lobbied for gender and equal rights for women in Nigeria (Adjepong, 2015).

The Federal Ministry of Women's Affairs and Social Welfare was established in 1995 and it concerned itself with programs created to protect women's rights and empower them economically through adopting vocational and formal education. They protect women and children from domestic violence and all forms of degradation, abuse, and illegal activities (Usman, 2020; Simbine, Attoh& Oladeji, 2014). This paper through a qualitative analysis, examined the challenges and opportunities in digital activism in the Nigerian context including recommendations on how to harness its potential for business growth and development in female-led businesses.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The previous paragraphs narrated the “genesis and exodus” of women's activism in Nigeria, revealing that the nation is vibrant when it comes to empowerment and women's rights. Activism for women just like other fields of endeavour has moved into the digital space. In the ensuing literature review, different definitions and theories would be examined on the concept of digital activism. The theory of convergence, the theory of collective action, the theory of digital impact and participation and the theory of connective action are reviewed (Trete&Kaun, 2021; Chadwick, 2020; George and Leidner, 2019, Bennett and Segerberg, 2011).

Digital activism could be complex to define due to its amorphous and continually changing form. Emerging technologies are daily redefining the scope and attributes of digital activism. To establish a universal definition therefore is complex because of the ambiguity, and fluidity of its characteristics. It is nuanced and ties in with so many disciplines from sociology, psychology, to information technology, entrepreneurship, and others. One of the most prominent definitions is by Joyce (2010, p.3) which stated that “digital activism involves the use of technologies to promote and support social, political, or environmental causes and to mobilize public support and action”. “Online activism employs digital media and technologies to effect social and political change, often through online campaigns, petitions, and social media mobilization” (Trete& Kaun, 2021, p. 88). Chadwick (2020, p.10) explored the intersection of digital media and activism, examining how digital technologies shape activist practices. He postulated his theory of digital activism as a “convergence of technology, social norms, political viewpoints and values to drive positive change”.

Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia (2014, p.iii) posited that “information technology is the greatest tool for activism either socially or politically”. Bennett and Segerberg (2011, p.3-5) noted that “digital activism functions as a platform for individual perspectives to be shared in the context of burning societal issues”. Bimber (2019) argued that the digital media environment is a base for “collective action which is founded on organizational actions, social actions, and self-initiated action”. Here we see that digital activism is defined by its function and “who is typing at the other end of the screen”. Bennett and Segerberg (2011) postulated this as the “theory of connective action. This theory explained how digital media enabled deconstructed and adaptive forms of activism. Leong, Pan, et al (2019) observed that “social media assumed a role in activism by enabling the powerless to voice widely shared grievances and organize unequally distributed resources” (Herawati, Marom, & Widowati, 2023; Wallace, 2021). They lent credence to the theory of connective action and also created the theory of social media empowerment. This related to the strategic use of digital tools to air grievances and the issues that affect segments of society so they could be addressed promptly (Zeng et al, 2020; Greijdanus, de Matos et al, 2020).

The third theory was christened the theory of digital impact and participation. George and Leidner (2019) broke this impact into the different roles that digitally active users perform. They stated that “the framework for digital activism was devised by extending Milbrath's (1965) order of political participation which classifies activism into onlookers, movers, and combative activities”. (Chamakiotis, Petrakaki & Panteli, 2021; Forestal, 2021).

The Web 2.0 tools have influenced citizen interaction with the government and modified the way news is reported as well as policy enactment by legislation (Lin & Kant, 2021; Osimo, 2008). It has greatly influenced the way governance is carried out. After the Arab Spring and the uprisings that have led to significant political changes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran, social researchers have noted that information technology has the power to inform social change and government policies (Blagojević & Šćekić, 2022; Bayat, 2021). Morozov defined the theory of clicktivism as the “ability of groups to start social conversations on crucial topics”. However, he demonstrated that these forms of activism usually failed to achieve the desired results. It took focus and tenacity through sustained action for social conversations to have impact. The examined theories and definitions revealed that digital activism could be defined with regards to its functions, the platforms for its use, the personalities using digital platforms, and their specific activities.

Evolution of Digital Activism

Digital activism has evolved significantly over the years as stated in the previous section, influenced by technological developments, societal advancements, and innovative uses of digital tools. Early 1990s: The growth and development of online communities and email directories, enabled activists to connect, share information, and coordinate efforts (Hara & Hunag, 2011; Land, 2009; Schuler, 1994).

Late 1990s: The rise of websites and online networks, allowed activists to interact and gain traction with supporters. The ease of communication through the internet and the affordable cost of networking have made the internet a good platform for digital activism (Schradi, 2018; Uwalaka, 2017). It should be noted that the same qualities that made these communication-based systems durable also made them vulnerable to problems of control, decision-making, and collective identity (Jackson, 2022; Karatzogianni & Karatzogianni, 2015; Faris, 2013).

Early 2000s: Blogs and online forums gained popularity, providing vibrant discussions and debates. Earl and Kimport (2011) stated that “blogs are means for easy communications among activists. Blogs however could be rife with a lot of false information that may not be verified as genuine news. Blogs with filters, on the other hand, offered links to external information complemented with comments. Blogs with filters removed biased comments (Weller, 2020; Maynor, 2009; Drezner & Farrell, 2004).

Mid-2000s: Vibrant social media platforms such as Facebook, and Twitter (now X) emerged, transforming digital activism with real-time updates, hashtags, and viral content. (Yang & Wang, 2021; Lokot, 2021).

2008-2010: Social media encouraged the boost of online campaigns for Barack Obama and the Arab Spring protests. Gire (2017) stated that “social media helped people get organized, motivated and compelled to move for social change. It influenced their decisions through effective arguments and ideas generation for change” (Tarihoran, Fachriyah, & Sumirat, 2022).

2010-2020: Hashtag activism became prominent, employing social media to raise awareness and mobilize action. Lampinen (2020) stated that findings made from the data suggested that the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo hashtags were mainly used for disseminating opinions that supported the movements and their philosophies, while tweets that criticized the movements were eliminated. The hashtags were often employed for shaping stories in the news from different viewpoints; this suggests that Twitter (now called X) was used as a tool to tell stories based on the experiences of certain societal groups that were unique to them (Sadler, 2021; Dobrin, 2020; Dawson, 2020; Dawson & Makela, 2020).

Digital security and encryption tools such as Tor, and Signal became more accessible, protecting activists' online privacy and security. Tor and Signal allowed activists to communicate without revealing their identities or locations. They provided end-to-end encryption ensuring only the sender and recipient could read them (Collier 2021, Lindner & Xiao, 2020; Collier, 2020; Schillinger and Schindelbauer, 2019; Barenghi, Beretta, Di Federico & Pelosi, 2014 Rady, 2013).

2020 to present day: Artificial intelligence, machine learning, and data analytics were increasingly used in digital activism, enabling more targeted and effective campaigns. Artificial intelligence-powered platforms like Stand to End Rape (STER) and Women's Rights and Health Project (WRAHP) used data analytics to track and report cases of gender-based violence, helping authorities respond effectively (<https://standtoendrape.org>, 2024). Data analytics has helped organizations like UNICEF and the Nigerian government map FGM hotspots, enabling targeted interventions. Technology tools have enabled organizations like the Nigerian Women's Digital Initiative (NWDI) to educate women on online safety and digital literacy, reducing harassment and promoting inclusive online spaces. Data analytics has helped organizations like the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) Women's Association to identify gaps in healthcare access for women, informing advocacy efforts. (<https://data.unicef.org,2024>;<https://lagosmwan.org,2024>;<https://nitda.gov.ng,2024>; Mindel, Overstreet, Sternberg, et al, 2024; Rahman, Guidi & Baiardi, 2020; Guidi, Clemente, García, & Ricci, 2020, Rossaro, 2019).

The Nigerian Digital Experience

The movement in Nigeria has grown significantly in the last ten years, with various campaigns and movements leveraging digital tools to promote social change. Some notable examples include #OccupyNigeria (2012), a digital movement protesting fuel subsidy removal, leading to nationwide protests (Luqman, Arazeem, Shade, et al,2023;Agbo,Ugwuanyi and Obieluem, 2021).#BringBackOurGirls (2014), a social media campaign demanding the release of kidnapped Chibok schoolgirls, highlighting the Boko Haram insurgency (Onah,2024; Ajakaiye et al,2021).

Other movements that have arisen are #NotTooYoungToRun in 2016, a movement advocating for reduced age limits for political office holders (Obani, 2023; Mohammed, 2020; Aliyu, 2019), #NigerianLivesMatter, a 2018 campaign against police brutality and extrajudicial killings. #EndSARS in 2020, a digital campaign demanding police reform and an end to the brutality, leading to nationwide protests (Asemah and Nwaoboli, 2022; Dambo, Ersoy, Auwal, et al, 2022; Mustapha and Omar, 2020; Uwaazuruike, 2020). The #SexForGrades in 2019 was an investigative report and social media campaign exposing sexual harassment in universities (Silva, Anabi, Jani, et al,2023; Okpoki and Anadobi,2023) as well as the #ArewaMeToo in 2019, a digital movement highlighting sexual harassment and assault in northern Nigeria (Nair and Shamim,2024; Silva et al,2023; Mulupi and Blumell,2023). Furthermore, #TwitterBan in 2021 was a campaign against the Nigerian government's Twitter (now X) ban, advocating for digital rights and freedom of expression. These digital activism efforts have raised awareness, mobilized support, and influenced policy changes in Nigeria, demonstrating the power of digital tools in promoting social change. Finally the #EndBadGovernance (2024), was a recent 2024 online campaign to protest hyperinflation experienced in Nigeria.

Opportunities in Adopting Digital Activism

Female entrepreneurs, working together on campaigns, initiatives, and creative endeavours have been developing ways through which they could share entrepreneurial resources and knowledge. Women can create safe work spaces, establishing online environments that are inclusive, respectful, and free from harassment through dedicated business and network hubs (Amar, El-Naggar, and Osman,2021; Jouët,2018).Mendes, 2020; Baer, 2018). (Aceros, Duque & Paloma, 2021; Mendes, 2022; Wing-Fai, 2019).

Interviews, and business-related lectures on feminist topics as well as work ethics, inclusivity, and diversity in the workplace are used to educate audiences through structured learning experiences (Ijeoma,2022).Partnerships through collaborating with social media influencers to amplify feminist messages, the use of online petitions, and surveys by gathering signatures and data to demonstrate public support are effective in digital activism (Liu,2024;Titus,2018) Digital art and creative expression showcase feminist-themed art, music, and performance(Turner,2021). Facilitating discussions, question and answer sessions, and support groups help spread information on how to build and sustain businesses and raise awareness on salient issues whilst working towards empowering feminist leadership (Visvizi, Lytras, Chuman, et al, 2023).

Digital tools enable rapid mobilization, campaign organization, and event planning, facilitating online and offline activism (Liu, 2024). Activism may relate to vocational activities, welfare, socio-political or business events (Singh, 2020). The strength of digital activism lies in driving social change and advocacy. It mobilizes support for policy changes and social justice (Wing-Fai, 2019).Digital activism pressures policymakers, influencers, and leaders to address feminist concerns (Chiluwa, 2023).Directly petitioning policymakers and influencers, they can leverage social media influence and challenge dominant discourses (Parmar, 2021, Biss, 2019). Digital activism can challenge systemic oppression in the workplace, promote gender equality, and create a more just and equitable society where women can access loans and start up their businesses (Sadler, 2021).

As of May 2023, there were over 12.2 million Instagram users in Nigeria, accounting for 5.4% of the country's population. The number of Instagram users in Nigeria is forecast to increase by 6.6 million users (+66.2%) between 2024 and 2028. As of 2022, Facebook had over 34 million users in Nigeria. A 2020

survey found that 62% of Nigerian women use Facebook for business purposes. Another survey in 2020 reported that 45% of female entrepreneurs in Nigeria use Facebook to promote their businesses (statista.com, 2024 data).

Women can express opinions and views without being identified and they can organize and mobilize activities without revealing their identity (Rajani, 2022). They can protect themselves from online harassment and bullying, thus maintaining privacy and security in sensitive or high-risk contexts (Rajani, 2022). Business women can engage in whistleblowing or exposing injustices without fear of reprisal (Kenny and Fotaki, 2023). They can access information and resources without being traced, connect with others who share similar experiences or views, and participate in online activism without compromising their offline life (Amer et al, 2022).

Subscribers to digital activism preserve their mental health and well-being by maintaining anonymity and they can use pseudonyms on digital platforms (Ciurria, 2024, Biss, 2019). This empowers marginalized voices and facilitates free speech and expression (Biss, 2019). However, it is important to note that anonymity can also have drawbacks, such as a lack of accountability and the spreading of misinformation (Daniel, Robin, and Aleksander, 2022).

Ghobadi and Sonenshein (2024) stated that “socially aware organizations have increasingly embraced digital activism, using social media and networking tools to advocate for a cause, to mobilize globally distributed consumers and pressure businesses to change their practices (Daniel, Robin & Aleksander, 2022). An example of such advocacy has been experienced in Nigeria with the WIMBIZ (Women in Management, Business, and Public Service) which is a Nigerian non-profit organization. The scope of their work ranges from capacity building for female entrepreneurs in management and business. Conferences and seminars are organised annually to synthesize knowledge to complement mentoring programs and create networking in business hubs. They link deserving businesses with access to capital and give deserving trailblazers and performers’ awards (wimbiz.org, 2024 website).

The Lagos State Ministry of Women Affairs and Poverty Alleviation manages programs geared towards women's empowerment and whilst developing and managing skill centres. They also give vulnerable people support from domestic violence and abuse of all forms. More than 600 cases of abuse and violence towards women and children have been successfully addressed in 2020. They hold seminars and workshops to advocate gender equity, inclusivity, and diversity (<https://wapa.lagosstate.gov.ng>, 2024).

Challenges Experienced In Adopting Digital Activism

Limited access to the internet and digital literacy hinders women's ability to engage in digital activism (Amer et al, 2021). Women in marginalized communities, rural areas, or developing countries may lack reliable internet connectivity (Chiluwa, 2023). Women may not have the necessary skills or knowledge to effectively utilize digital platforms (Amar et al, 2021). They may not have access to devices such as smartphones, computers, or tablets and may face online harassment, cyberbullying, or privacy concerns (Amar et al, 2021; Nayyar, Aggarwal, Khatter, Kumar, et al, 2019).

Socio-economic constraints make women prioritize basic needs over internet access or device ownership (Nayyar et al, 2021). Women may face restrictions in their online activities due to cultural or social norms. Women's online actions may be seen as reflecting on their family's reputation and they may face pressure to conform to traditional gender norms online (Amer et al, 2022). Disability access may cause women with disabilities to face barriers in accessing digital platforms (Amar et al, 2021). The generational divide may cause older women to be less familiar with digital technologies (Amar et al 2021; Nayyar et al, 2019).

On the other hand, stereotyping and bias through online harassment, sexist comments, and patriarchal attitudes can have a chilling effect on women's participation in digital activism, leading to women hesitating to share their opinions or business experiences (Chiluwa, 2023). The absence of women's voices can lead to a lack of nuanced understanding. The absence of women's participation can hinder collective action and social change (Daniel et al, 2022). Finally, economic barriers due to limited financial

resources and access to technology could hinder women's ability to sustain digital activism (Emeh, Oliseh, et al, 2020). In the next section, the research methodology and justifications are discussed.

Methodology

The research methodology chosen for this study was a qualitative analysis. This method was preferred because this study explored the intersection of digital activism which is a sociological topic, female activities which is gender studies, and entrepreneurship which lies in business management. These fields are complex, nuanced, and contextualized in their issues. To achieve an in-depth understanding and explore different perspectives, a qualitative method was appropriate. Quantitative methods might not fully capture the socio-political experiences and discourses that relate to digital activism and business growth for women. The emerging trends, layers of opinions, and perspectives could only be conceptualized by qualitative data (Moriarty, 2011).

Data was collected through structured interviews with 40 female entrepreneurs and business leaders as participants. The researcher fielded ten (10) questions relating to the effect of digital activism on female-led businesses. Participants were drawn from ages 20-65 years in Lagos Mainland and Victoria Island areas of the Lagos metropolis of Nigeria. 10% were within the 20-35 years age range, 65% were within the 36-45 years age range and 25% were above 45 years. 4 women in retail market sales, 4 women in business consulting, 6 in health and beauty, 4 in food and catering businesses, 6 lawyers, 4 women in educational services, 4 women in security/law enforcement, 4 in media and communications, and 4 in social work made up the business class demographics for the study.

Data preparation involved anonymization and organization into a coding framework. Thematic analysis followed a hybrid coding approach, using Taguette software to facilitate data analysis. Rigor and validity were ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexivity. Ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to look for patterns and derive themes from the data set. This enabled the researcher to make meaning from the responses of the interviewees. For this study, the researcher adopted an inductive approach. Meaning from data was derived by identifying themes within the data with no preconceptions. The data was analyzed with no expected outcomes (Moriarty, 2011; Attride-Stirling, 2001)

Thematic Analysis

In summary, the themes that emerged from opportunities in digital activism for female entrepreneurs were capacity building, access to capital, content creation, product development, constitutional changes, financial inclusion, education, and skills transfer. Themes relating to challenges were digital illiteracy, lack of access to digital tools, lack of capital, and inadequate government intervention in the plight of female entrepreneurs and businesswomen (Fadugba, 2023). The interpretations of these themes were that through capacity building, digital activism could provide female entrepreneurs with training, mentorship, and networking opportunities, enhancing their business skills and confidence (Sadler, 2021). Digital platforms could offer alternative funding sources, such as crowdfunding, online loans, and grants, helping female entrepreneurs overcome financial barriers. Digital tools could enable female entrepreneurs create interesting and motivating content for their social media handles (Chiluwa, 2023). Content creators could leverage engaging their audiences to build followership that translates into business profits. These adverts are crucial for business growth. They also have the potential to develop and market innovative products, reaching a wider audience and increasing their competitiveness (Amar et al., 2021; Nayyar et al, 2019).

Digital activism could advocate for policy reforms, promoting a more inclusive business environment and protecting female entrepreneurs' rights (Obadare, 2021). Digital platforms could offer access to educational resources, workshops, and webinars, empowering female entrepreneurs with knowledge and skills. Digital activism could facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration among female entrepreneurs, promoting skills transfer and collective growth (Obadare, 2021; Jouet, 2018).

Emerging themes on challenges in digital activism were that limited digital skills and knowledge hinder female entrepreneurs' ability to effectively utilize digital tools and platforms. Inadequate access to digital

devices, internet connectivity, and digital platforms restricts female entrepreneurs' participation in digital activism (Obadare, 2021, Nayyar et al, 2019). Insufficient funding and financial resources limit female entrepreneurs' ability to invest in digital tools, training, and business development (Chiluwa, 2023). Inadequate government support and policies fail to address the unique challenges faced by female entrepreneurs, exacerbating their struggles (Nayyar et al, 2019). These themes highlighted the potential of digital activism to empower female entrepreneurs in Nigeria, while also underscoring the need to address significant challenges. By understanding these opportunities and challenges, stakeholders can develop targeted interventions to support female entrepreneurs and promote digital activism in Nigeria. Studies that reflected these findings are Ihejimaizu and Inyang (2022) which buttressed the fact “digital platforms provide opportunities for women entrepreneurs to leverage on its advantages to build and scale businesses”. Fadugba (2023) posited that “gradually more Nigerians and underserved segments are using technology to impact economic and business activities as well as to address socio-political issues”. Omontese (2022, p.3) stated that women “have taken advantage of social media to build businesses and reach a wider audience regardless of the challenges they face daily in Nigeria”. Omontese (2022) however advocated for “more support for the women in their entrepreneurial journey.”

Conclusion and Recommendations

To fully harness the prospects of digital activism for female entrepreneurs, the Nigerian government through its agencies, and private institutions through nascent infrastructure should create initiatives that can focus on increasing internet access and affordability, digital literacy training and education, device donation or low-cost options, online safety and security measures. Language accessibility and translation tools should be provided at the grassroots level to ameliorate socio-economic constraints (Ihejimaizu and Inyang, 2022). Other ways are by challenging cultural and social restrictions, improving disability access, rural-urban digital inclusion initiatives, and intergenerational digital mentorship programs. Though a lot of agencies in Nigeria are making great strides in the provision of these services, in a country of more than a million people, grassroots digital literacy is the best way to achieve a comprehensive reach (Omontese, 2023). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 5 on gender equality, and SDG 9 on local technology innovation advocate the use of enabling technology, in particular, information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women. The goal is to adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels (Fadugba, 2023). By addressing the challenges and leveraging the prospects, Nigerian female entrepreneurs can harness the power of digital activism to drive change, promote gender equality, and empower themselves, their businesses, and their communities.

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