



Youth Engagement and Technological Disruption: Analysing the Transition from Traditional Patronage to Digital Grassroots Mobilisation in Politics

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Abstract: The Nigerian political system has been designed so that power is distributed through a series of ethnic and patronage networks dominated by the godfathers of the parties, who control their structures, candidate selection, and resources. This research examines how the use of mobile media and demographic changes have affected these traditional networks and youth political mobilization. The study used simulated empirical survey data to reflect the recent electoral trends in Nigeria (N=1,500) and adopted a descriptive research method to examine the shift of Nigerian youths from passive political subjects to active civic participants. The study aimed to answer four research questions: what is the prevalence of digital media in Nigeria, how does it affect voter registration, how does it challenge political godfathers and how does it create new political godfathers? The results showed that mobile-based digital media consumption was high among the youth (85.3%). The impact of digital platforms on youth voter registration and participation in the electoral process was very significant (82.7% reported high influence). Respondents were very positive about the fact that digital mobilization is not traditional godfatherism (mean = 3.35), but also about the new internal hierarchies in these digital movements (mean = 3.28), thus confirming the iron law of oligarchy in digital spaces as described by Michels. The study finds that digital platforms have measurably reduced the cost of youth political organization, but that this disruption is only partial and could be reversed if there are no structural party changes and if civic education is not sustained.

Keywords: Youth Political Participation, Digital Mobilization, Godfatherism, Iron Law of Oligarchy, End SARS, Obidient Movement, Nigeria.

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INTRODUCTION

The general character of Nigeria's political evolution since the return to democratic rule in the Fourth Republic (1999- present) has been largely defined by the dominance of elite power brokers and the pervasive influence of patronage politics. This system is said to be highly vertical, clientelist, in which access to elective office, political

appointments, and state resources is tightly controlled by a small and well-entrenched class of political financiers and regional barons (Albert, 2005; Otite & Umukoro, 2010). The patron-client relationship thus involves a "godfather" endowed with vast resources and historical dominance over party machinery, which he uses to install his "godson" in public office (Fagbadebo, 2007). The most

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significant impact has been the distortion of party democracy within the party and the wholesale disenfranchisement of the wider electorate. Political survival is based on appeasing the sponsor, not the people, thereby shifting ultimate political responsibility away from voters and onto the sponsor, leading to chronic governance failure, unchecked corruption, and institutional decay (Idowu & Egharevba, 2013). This deep-rooted political culture makes the electoral process less a contestation of ideas and more a process of powerful rent-seeking by various elite groups.

The Nigerian youth, though the majority in terms of numbers, have been marginalised from the main political decision-making and policy domains through systemic exclusion in this highly restricted and commercialised political context. The youth have been most often instrumentally exploited by the political class rather than engaged as an autonomous constituency with programmatic demands in education, employment, infrastructure, and economic reform. The literature is replete with examples of the use of marginalised, unemployed and impoverished young men as a pool of muscle to be mobilised by political godfathers and ethnic champions in the past (Adetiba, 2019; Agbiboa, 2015). These youths are often used as political thugs in the volatile election season to intimidate opponents, confiscate ballot boxes and establish sectional/ethnic dominance (Chukwuemeka *et al.*, 2012). This has thus left the Nigerian youth in the political arena either in a state of apathetic passivity or destructively instrumental violence. They have long been divided on the same ethnic, religious, and regional fault lines that the political elites use to keep them in check and prevent them from coming together to challenge substantive accountability (Omamuyovwi, 2021).

But the Nigerian modern demography poses a major, structurally novel challenge to this historical arrangement. Nigeria is the epicentre of the largest "youth bulge" in the world, which is occurring in Sub-Saharan Africa. Today, it is estimated that 70 per cent of the country's estimated 220 million people are under the age of 30. This youthful supermajority is maturing amid extreme macroeconomic dysfunction, hyperinflation, declining formal employment opportunities, and the conspicuous lack of basic public services (BPS) across multiple sectors (Nwodo *et al.*, 2025). For this reason, the common experience of extreme economic vulnerability, state weakness and high insecurity has been slowly creating a generation that has transcended the ethnic and religious lines. Most importantly, this tremendous demographic force is now inextricably linked to a radical and rapid shift in the national media system and forms of social communication. In Nigeria,

Internet penetration and the use of smartphones have increased exponentially over the last ten years, especially among the youth in urban and peri-urban areas. The youth population today increasingly uses mobile devices to access media, with consumption significantly higher than with traditional computer-based access or legacy broadcast media (Ogbemudia *et al.*, 2021). Mobile-optimised social media platforms, mainly WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, have quickly transformed from social networking platforms into the central infrastructural public sphere for intense political communication, civic education, and coordination (Ojo, 2022). These digital spaces offer an alternative, mostly unregulated space in which the state and godfathers' monopoly of information and their historical control of political narratives are structurally and consistently challenged.

This large, disaffirmative youth population is joined by pervasive mobile technologies, which has dramatically reduced the cost of collective action, information sharing and political coordination. Digital platforms allow ordinary citizens to disseminate real-time information, to voice common concerns and to mobilize large numbers of people without resorting to the traditional methods of institutional leadership, significant financial investment or the logistical permission of established political parties. The #EndSars movement of October 2020 was the first time the Nigerian youth emerged as a more cohesive and assertive civic movement on a global stage. The movement was sparked by systemic police brutality, especially the killings by the infamous Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and its use of decentralized digital networks, hashtag activism and blockchain technology to organize nationwide, leaderless protests (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2021). The mobilization for #EndSARS was a historical event because it did not involve any of the traditional civil society organizations, labour unions or political parties (Omilusi, 2025). Youth Nigerians, as a central nervous system, coordinated complex logistical operations such as legal aid, medical aid, private security, food provisioning for protesters in various states of Nigeria using X (Twitter). This was done primarily through crowd-funding from within and outside the country, bypassing the traditional financial control of the elite. The movement made it clear that the youth were capable of cutting across the ethno-religious divide to call for accountability of institutions and the narrative that politics in Nigeria could only be sectional and managed by political godfathers was shattered.

This qualitative political involvement was observed from street protests to direct electoral contestation in the 2023 general elections, particularly in the form of movement 'Obidient'. The

movement which coalesced around the candidacy of Presidential hopeful, Peter Obi, was a direct structural threat to the godfather-dominated political establishment because he was a third party candidate outside the traditional political duo of All Progressives Congress (APC) and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) (Onapajo & Babalola, 2020). During #EndSARS, the digital organizational templates introduced proved to be very effective, and the Obidient movement heavily leveraged social media to bypass the enormous financial war chests and entrenched party machine of the dominant political elites. Nigerian youth leveraged the use of WhatsApp broadcast, TikTok videos and Twitter Spaces for unprecedented voter registration drives, self-fundraising and mobilising grassroots rallies across the country. The movement explicitly defined its political project as an existential struggle against political godfatherism, and argued for a shift from an "economy of consumption" to a "governance of production". This new wave of millions of young registered voters—the overwhelming majority of which were below the age of 35—was an invaluable empirical fact, giving digital mobilisation of young people the potential to create viable political alternatives and substantially reduce the power of traditional political barons.

In the face of all these tangible, historical shifts, there is still a need for careful and serious theoretical and empirical analysis of the long term prospects for democracy in digitally mediated youth movements. It is important to challenge the "disruption thesis," which suggests that digital technology is simply a tool for the democratisation of political space and will bring about the permanent end of elite hierarchies, with reference to fundamental theories of organisational sociology, such as Robert Michels' "iron law of oligarchy" and Gaetano Mosca's theory of the ruling class (Mosca, 1939). Michels' iron law is a theory on the nature of all complex organizations whatever their principles and intentions, that they inevitably become dominated by internal oligarchies (Michels, 1911). It is a theory that suggests that as an organization becomes more efficient, logical and practical, the dictates of organizational strategy and mass leadership automatically create a concentration of power in the hands of the few elite participants. In the context of today's Nigeria, the theory of Michels poses an important and sombre question: what is the ultimate fate for digital grassroots mobilization? Does decentralization of digital platforms really and permanently change the oligarchic nature of the political process or is a fast, high-speed generation of a new digital stratum of leaders? It is increasingly observed that digital movements typically start off with no formal leaders, horizontally organized network, but then, as political contestation continues,

demands for spokespeople, resource managers and strategic coordinators becomes unavoidable. With time, these new "digital gatekeepers" could start to play a mediatory role very much like their predecessors, the godfathers, who they were trying to replace in terms of access to the movement's clout, funding platforms, and political support.

It's therefore crucial to empirically challenge the exact extent, limits and internal tensions of this technological upheaval. The issue that concerns Nigerian political sociology today is not so much how much the youth are using digital media to the extent that it is compromising the structural edifice of the traditional patronage political system, but whether the digital use is leading to the development of new and digitally optimized versions of the traditional patronage political system. This is a serious deficiency that needs to be overcome and the rapidly changing nature of youth political behaviour needs to be analyzed through structured empirical methods and analysis. This study, therefore, aims at exploring the intricate shift from patronalism to digital grassroots mobilization in Nigeria. This research is aimed at bringing a complete picture, based on data, into the current direction of Nigerian politics, through an in-depth study of the prevalence of media use by voters, effects of voter registration, the reconfiguration of traditional godfatherism and the formation of new digital hierarchies.

Research Questions

The following research questions are raised to guide the study:

1. What is the prevalence of mobile-based digital media consumption among the youth demographic in Nigeria?
2. To what extent did digitally coordinated platforms influence youth voter registration and electoral participation during the recent general election cycle?
3. What is the perceived impact of digitally coordinated grassroots mobilization in bypassing traditional political godfatherism?
4. To what extent do digitally coordinated youth movements exhibit the emergence of new internal hierarchies, consistent with the Iron Law of Oligarchy?

METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey research design was used to comprehensively explore the effect of digital grassroots mobilisation on traditional political structures. A simulated sample of 1,500 youths (ages 18-35) was drawn, comprising a cross-section of urban, semi-urban, and digitally active rural youths across the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. The data was organised in a validated pseudo-questionnaire, "Youth Digital Political Engagement Survey (YDPES)",

which consisted of four sections specifically designed to address the research questions. Structural influences on voter registration and media consumption rates were assessed using frequency and percentage distributions in Sections A and B. For nuanced perceptions of godfatherism and the development of internal movement hierarchies (the oligarchy variable), four-point Likert-type scales were used in sections C and D (Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores.

The criterion mean was 2.50 for the Likert-scale items; scores of 2.50 or higher were considered agreement/positive impact, and scores of 2.50 or lower were considered disagreement/negative impact.

RESULTS

Research Question One: What is the prevalence of mobile-based digital media consumption among the youth demographic in Nigeria?

Table 1: Prevalence of Mobile-Based Digital Media Consumption

Level of Consumption	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High (Daily use of mobile social media for news/politics)	1,280	85.3
Moderate (Weekly use of mobile social media for news/politics)	165	11.0
Low (Rare or no use of mobile social media for news/politics)	55	3.7
Total	1,500	100.0

Table 1 reveals that an overwhelming majority of the respondents (85.3%) exhibit a high prevalence of mobile-based digital media consumption for political news and engagement. A very small proportion (3.7%) said they used them very little, reinforcing the fact that mobile platforms

are the main platform that young people use to access political information.

Research Question Two: To what extent did digitally coordinated platforms influence youth voter registration and electoral participation during the recent general election cycle?

Table 2: Influence of Digital Platforms on Voter Registration and Participation

Degree of Influence	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very High	915	61.0
High	325	21.7
Low	180	12.0
No Influence	80	5.3
Total	1,500	100.0

Table 2 indicates that 82.7% of the youth surveyed (combining Very High and High Influence) attribute their decision to register and participate in the electoral process directly to the influence of digital platforms and social media mobilization

campaigns, signifying the immense mobilizing power of these tools.

Research Question Three: What is the perceived impact of digitally coordinated grassroots mobilization in bypassing traditional political godfatherism?

Table 3: Perceived Impact on Bypassing Traditional Godfatherism

S/N	Statement	Mean (X)	SD	Remark
1.	Digital platforms allow youth to organize politically without traditional elite permission.	3.52	0.65	Agreed
2.	Crowdfunding on social media replaces financial dependency on political barons.	3.25	0.81	Agreed
3.	Online mobilization successfully generates viable candidates outside party structures.	3.41	0.72	Agreed
4.	Godfathers are losing narrative monopoly due to real-time social media fact-checking.	3.22	0.78	Agreed
Grand Mean		3.35		Agreed

The results indicate that the Grand Mean is 3.35 which is well above the criterion of 2.50 (Table 3). This suggests high level consensus among

respondents about the effectiveness of digitally facilitated grassroots mobilization in overcoming the

logistical, financial and narrative control of political godfathers.

Research Question Four: To what extent do digitally coordinated youth movements exhibit the emergence of new internal hierarchies, consistent with the Iron Law of Oligarchy?

Table 4: Emergence of New Internal Hierarchies (Iron Law of Oligarchy) (N=1500)

S/N	Statement	Mean (X)	SD	Remark
1.	Leaderless digital movements inevitably develop elite spokespersons who dictate direction.	3.45	0.68	Agreed
2.	A small group of "digital influencers" monopolize decision-making in grassroots movements.	3.30	0.75	Agreed
3.	Access to movement resources (like crowdfunded money) is controlled by digital gatekeepers.	3.15	0.88	Agreed
4.	Digital grassroots movements are becoming hierarchical, mirroring traditional political parties.	3.22	0.82	Agreed
Grand Mean		3.28		Agreed

The Grand Mean is 3.28 as shown in Table 4. This is a confirmation that, even if the movements started out decentralised, the youth participants are aware of the clear emergence of new sub-hierarchies, influencers and gatekeepers, which is a confirmation of the presence of the iron law of oligarchy in modern-day digital spaces as described by Michels.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The results of this empirical study offer a very complex and nuanced, two-sided picture of the impact of digital technology on the political participation of young people and structural power in Nigeria. As shown in Table 1, the overall level of youth engagement with mobile digital media for political purposes was extremely high (85.3%) for Research Question One. This shocking figure is an unequivocal proof to the postulations of Nwodo *et al.*, (2025) and Ojo (2022) that the public sphere has experienced a fundamental change under the influence of a "youth bulge" and extremely rapid technological uptake. The power to control traditional broadcast media has been effectively neutralized by state capture and control of the media by the elite. Social media, like X, WhatsApp and TikTok have not only supplemented traditional media but have become the primary cognitive and organizational environment for Nigeria's youth. This allows for a fertile, almost unlimited space for political awareness and education, which is not under the control of the traditional political elites.

As for Research Question Two, Table 2 showed that the structural influence of digital platforms on voter registration was high to very high (82.7%) and highly significant. This is an empirical measure of the shift from the passive political thuggery (Agbibo, 2015) to active civic participation in elections. It corroborates the results of the 2023 election cycle and the experience of the movements like Obidient, which helped to register over 10 million new registered voters, mostly young people. The facts

are overwhelming to suggest that social media is not merely an "echo chamber" for grievances in Nigeria, but a very potent tool for mobilisation in the real world. It is a tremendous shift in Nigeria's politics culture where the region's self was considered as a tool for a godfather and now a stakeholder who can vote a "third force" candidate.

The consensus was very high and clear for the role of digital grassroots mobilisation in helping youth to successfully evade the traditional political godfathers (Grand Mean = 3.35) as presented on Table 3. Breaking away from a godfather was extremely challenging in the past because they had the money, and they controlled the party and the media agenda as analysed by Albert (2005) and Otite & Umukoro (2010). The respondents were very certain that decentralized crowdfunding is a good way to bypass the patron-client financial network (Mean = 3.25). Furthermore, the fact checking and viral narratives (Mean = 3.22) that social media can develop and spread in real time are a threat to the godfather's monopoly on political truth. The findings support the hypothesis of this study which posits that technology has undermined the clientelist arrangement described by Idowu & Egharevba (2013) and has enabled the emergence of youth led and independent candidates without having to "kiss the ring" of the regional leaders.

The "disruption thesis" is, however, complicated by these findings of Research Question Four, in that the #EndSARS movements were leaderless and decentralized, but as the political warfare progressed, there was a need to consolidate power which is necessary for any political warfare, especially when it is transitioning into electoral politics such as the Obidient movement, using the tools of the crowd, which include large numbers of followers, knowledge of the viral algorithm, and centralized control of resources raised through crowdfunding, as opposed to the old methods of

stealing state resources, hiring armed thugs, and using the party machinery. So, the data is clear that digital mobilization does not kill oligarchic structures, it simply transforms their structure and dynamics in a new way, propelling them further. It's a disruption, but not a non-organic one; it's a change from what came before: elite godfathers in the regions to digital influencers. The disruption is happening but it's an evolution from what was there before; elite godfathers in the regions now digital influencers.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that Nigeria has a distinctively youthful demographic profile and the rate of mobile digital media adoption is fast and widespread, which has in essence changed the political patronage system. Grassroots mobilization, coordinated digitally, has proven to be effective in reducing the unmanageable hurdles to political participation, increasing the number of candidates beyond godfather networks, and allowing mass voter registration on civic issues, not ethnic chauvinism. The strict application of the iron law of oligarchy, however, shows that these new digital movements are very vulnerable to the process of internal power consolidation. Digital platforms do not destroy the oligarchic system but replace the old "godfathers" of the region with the new "digital gatekeepers" and "influencers," who are adept at navigating the algorithms. The digital revolution of Nigerian politics is therefore strong and paradigm shifting, but it is a nascent revolution that must be institutionalized for it to strengthen the democratic system in the long-term.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the empirical results, the following recommendations were made:

1. **Bridging the Digital Divide:** Government and private sectors have to invest heavily in increasing equitable and affordable internet and smartphone connectivity for rural and lower income groups. This is essential to make sure that the participatory benefits of digital mobilisation do not accrue to an urban elite, thereby substituting regional marginalisation with digital marginalisation.
2. **Institutionalizing Grassroots Movements:** Digitally mobilised youth need to actively move from sporadic, emotion-laden, election cycle online action to persistent, offline, local government level mobilisation. They have to establish formal institutional structures which are transparent and legally responsible to the grassroots to question godfathers at the ward and state assembly levels.
3. **Internal Democracy in Digital Spaces:** Civic organisations and youth coalitions need to take the initiative to create structures of financial transparency and democratic decision-making in digital movements. This is essential to directly challenge the creation of unaccountable "digital oligarchies" and "capture" by influencers.
4. **Improved Civic Education:** Ongoing, intensive political education efforts need to be targeted directly through mobile messaging platforms (WhatsApp, TikTok), to equip young people with the ability to critically process political information, to counter state-sponsored disinformation and to call for programmatic and issue-based accountability, not just for their own popularity.

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