

Reclaiming the Timeline: Redirecting Benue Youths' Social Media Engagement from Political Antagonism Toward Constructive Economic Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

The population and visibility of Benue youths on social media continue to increase with the growth of platforms (such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X, Instagram, and TikTok). The simplicity and flexibility of using the platforms have made it easier for people (literate and non-literate) to use them with few challenges. Meanwhile, users' intentions and understanding of context on social media significantly influence their participation. This study investigates the extent to which youths in Benue can redirect their social media engagement from political antagonism to economic and constructive activity for gainful impact. As a result, we adopted a qualitative and survey approach where structured questionnaires were designed and administered to 820 respondents (Benue youths) online. We therefore used percentage analysis to analyse the data. Anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), the study found that while more Benue youths are motivated by political news to engage frequently on social media, a smaller proportion used the same platforms for economic activities such as job search, advertisement, and skills acquisition. It further shows that many youths are willing to redirect their time on social media for gainful activities if guided and assisted. The paper also argues that the imbalance between time spent on political antagonism and economic activities reflects the patterns in gratifications rather than a lack of platforms. Therefore, the study concludes that digital-literacy interventions, intentional content curation, and encouragement through stories of successful peers may help youths to redirect their time on social media to economic activities. It recommends training youths on how to spot fake news, question sources, and identify genuine opportunities on social media platforms.

Keywords: Benue youth, Social media, economic opportunities, political antagonism, and unemployment.

INTRODUCTION

One of the fastest ways to share and exchange information across networked communities in contemporary society is through internet-based social media (Ju et al., 2020). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) view social media as a group of internet-based applications built on technological and ideological foundations that enhance the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Contemporary, youths have turned social media into a default public square to increasingly organise, argue, transact, and earn a living. Duffy (2017) acknowledged that a considerable number of social media users nowadays use it as a site of livelihood through income-generating activities or exposing them to self-branding pressures, precarity, and unstable returns. According to Ajaegbu and Ajaegbu (2024), Nigeria stands out as having the highest number of internet users in Africa. Of these, the study further identified young people between the ages of 18 and 35 years as accounting for the bulk of internet usage. Earlier, social media began as a tool for casual networking (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). However, it later

metamorphosed into a parallel economy and parallel political arena that occupy a similar timeline within the same hour of use. This is because both exist in the same space and at the same time, which makes it extremely difficult to separate. Jancey et al. (2024) state that economic opportunities, political discourse, and personal content nowadays circulate simultaneously within the same undifferentiated social media space, making it extremely difficult for users to distinguish among them.

Many have considered social media a veritable tool that reshapes human interactions and improves their living standards (Rahman et al., 2023; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). For these proponents, social media has shown a real capacity to organise civic action and challenge the government to revise policies perceived as having devastating effects on citizens. Prominent are the cases seen in the #EndSARS movement in 2020 and the #EndBadGovernance protests in 2024 in Nigeria. According to Bassey (2024), both of these movements/protests relied almost entirely on Facebook, WhatsApp, and X for mobilisation. The level and magnitude at which the youth turned out show how powerful and influential these social media platforms can shape social interactions. However, the same platforms serve as theatres of misinformation, uncritical hero-worship of politicians, trading insults, and profiling, which are harmful and dangerous to the unity of societies (Hassan, 2023). Global evidence suggests that the negative effects of social media are not peculiar to societies in Nigeria. Ajaegbu and Ajaegbu (2024) provide evidence that social media is used in politics for both constructive civic mobilisation and corrosive misinformation, voter manipulation, and hate speech in Sub-Saharan Africa. Macharia and Ong'ong'a (2024) also concurred that most young people in Kenya doubt political information on social media due to pervasive misinformation, despite their political engagement.

Meanwhile, the youth unemployment menace has not just continued to deepen but has occupied an important discourse in Nigeria, especially with the increasing national disunity and deteriorating insecurity. Scholars such as Nwankwor et al. (2024) cited rising unemployment rates from 2023 -2024, ranging from 7.2% (Q1) to 8.6% (Q3). A challenge that continues to worsen over the years. Statistics show that Benue State is one of the lowest in unemployment, at 1.6% (NBS, 2024), in Nigeria. However, recent increases in herder-farmer crises have raised the number, given the high number of farmers displaced. This has made many Benue youths readily available for any opportunity social media offers them. Consequently, some youths have adopted the digital space for political thuggery to fuel political antagonism, while others have used it to improve their economic fortunes. The latter sell goods, share genuine job leads, and offer online services via the same social media that publish political abuse to build digital visibility and earn income. For instance, Shi et al. (2024) provide comparative evidence from Ghana, which revealed that social media and e-commerce adoption are influential and significant functions of entrepreneurial intention among graduates. Meanwhile, de Klerk et al. (2025) found in Sri Lanka that social media is a major tool for restructuring entrepreneurship and venture creation. This suggests that youths in Benue State can equally use social media to build businesses, market products, share job links, and learn new skills.

According to Sharabati et al. (2024), misallocation of digital attention affects the exploration of digital opportunity. This suggests that there are endless opportunities in the digital space that, if properly utilised through social media, could significantly improve people's living standards. However, the misallocation of digital attention pushes youth to invest time, reliable data, and cognitive energy in political antagonism that never yields any economic benefits. This misallocation is worsened by the lack of empirical evidence detailing the balance between the economic and political uses of social media among youth in Nigeria, and in Benue State in particular. Most existing empirical studies have examined the role of social media in political mobilisation or economic empowerment separately (Nwankwor et al., 2024). Meanwhile, examining it as a single behavioural trade-off within the same population will provide evidence that policymakers require to address the gap. We therefore intend to bridge the gap by gathering information directly from Benue youths on how they allocate their time to social media engagement and what would make for a more constructive and productive use of social media rather than political confrontations and abuse.

As a result, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do Benue youths use social media platforms for political discourse compared with economic activities?

RQ2: What specific forms does politically antagonistic engagement take among Benue youths on social media?

RQ3: What economic opportunities have Benue youths derived from their social media engagement?

RQ4: What factors would facilitate a shift among Benue youths from politically antagonistic social media use toward constructive economic use?

THEORETICAL REVIEW

We built this study around the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), given its relevance to addressing the above research questions. The theory was postulated by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) as a departure from the existing assumption that audiences only passively receive media content. They argue that individuals receive media content to satisfy their social and psychological needs. As a result, users carefully select which particular media and the content within them that satisfy their needs. They further classified the needs into five categories of gratifications: cognitive needs (information and understanding), affective needs (emotional and aesthetic experience), personal integrative needs (credibility and status), social integrative needs (companionship and affiliation), and tension-release needs (escapism and diversion).

The UGT lends credibility to this study by explaining why the same platform can be used by different users for different ends, or by the same user at different times. For instance, someone who logs onto a WhatsApp group to read political commentary may be satisfying a combination of social integrative needs (belonging to an online community defined by shared grievance), tension-release needs (venting frustration at governance failure), and cognitive needs (staying informed). On a different day, the same youth or another youth may log on to the same platform to satisfy distinct gratification needs, such as economic and cognitive needs. They may acquire new skills through tutorials, customer engagement forums, or learn about new jobs through job postings.

Therefore, the theory satisfies three reasons for this study. First, the theory treats social media as a deliberate choice rather than platform determinism, which is consistent with our argument that users' attention can be deliberately redirected to viable and economic use through altered incentives rather than technological change. Second, the theory accommodates different and competing needs and gratifications within a population, paving the way for this study to examine both political antagonism and economic opportunities as competing gratifications. Given the surge of youth on social media, especially Facebook, who attack others for political interest in Benue state and those who use it for digital visibility for income, it is apt to examine it not as mutually exclusive platforms. Third, the theory has been widely adopted in studies in Africa and Nigeria, particularly in social media research and lends credible support to the findings (Uzuegbunam, 2015). Moreover, reclaiming the timeline seems to be a gratification-substitution challenge that requires careful examination and application of policy measures to reduce the misallocation of digital attention. Consequently, making economic gratifications (income, skill acquisition, market access) more available, emotionally satisfying, and socially rewarding than political gratifications (belonging, outrage-venting, status through partisan alignment) will improve the benefits of social media to the youths. In view of this, the theory provides both the lens for diagnosis and the logic underlying the policy measure recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Political Antagonism among African Youth

Over the years, studies in sub-Saharan African countries have been divided on the role of social media in the political paradigm. Ajaegbu and Ajaegbu (2024) conducted a mini-review of 50 studies, and the findings indicate that social media is fostering a new era of democracy across the region, given its capacity to organise movements and protests like the EndSARS demonstrations, among others. The same review further reveals that the same social media mobilising power operates side-by-side with toxic factors such as hate speech, fake news, voter manipulation, and general misinformation, which endanger the peaceful coexistence of communities. A

disturbing menace that some of the reviewed studies recommended tight regulation or shutting down social media among youths (Denniss & Lindberg, 2025; Warnke, Maier & Gilbert, 2024).

Macharia and Ong'ong'a (2024) provided a more granular and elaborate examination of social media use for political discourse among 224 youths in Kenya. They found X as the dominant social media tool used for political engagement. They further found that most youths acknowledge social media as the platform that enhances civic education and influences their political attitudes but remain suspicious of its credibility due to the level of misinformation that emanates from it. This study also discovered that more youths engage on social media but less utilise it for economic or civic value. This is in line with the aim of our study, to ascertain which digital attention attracts youths' attention most on social media in Benue State. Bassey (2024) specifically sampled 300 youths across the administrative headquarters of Nigeria (the FCT) during the #EndBadGovernance protests in 2024 to ascertain the sources of mobilisation and the causes of protest. The findings reveal that social media is the most instrumental tool used in mobilising young Nigerians to protest against the removal of fuel subsidy, unemployment, and high costs of living.

Social Media and Youth Economic Empowerment in Comparative Perspective

A body of literature has demonstrated that youths can leverage social media engagement for gainful and economic opportunities. Shi et al. (2024) studied 232 graduates in Ghana and discovered that social media and e-commerce adoption have a significant and measurable association with entrepreneurial intention. They further found that internal motivational factors (social influence and habit) are significantly more effective in influencing the adoption than external factors like expectancy. The findings imply that social media users (entrepreneurs) in West African settings are mostly driven by personal disposition and social norms.

Meanwhile, de Klerk, Buick, and Ranasinghne (2025) adopted a qualitative method to examine 40 youth entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka's Western Province. The findings show that social media has change the venture-creation process, reducing the originally five-stage model into four mediated stages (opportunity discovery through platform tracking, cost redefinition through virtual operation, integrated marketing and branding, and conversion of customers into brand ambassadors through reviews). Further evidence shows that several participants confirm their businesses were solely relied on social media for survival, suggesting the level social media can influence entrepreneurial activity. Opute and Nwaizugbo (2022) extended the torchlight using a systematic review across African countries to examine the digital entrepreneurship contribution to their economic growth. The evidence suggests that digital platforms (including social media) are increasingly replacing the formal financial and marketing infrastructure that was not readily available for young entrepreneurs.

Nwankwor et al. (2024) narrowed the research to Nigeria, surveyed 400 youths in Rivers State, and found that marketing and content creation via social media significantly enhance self-employment and online sales among young entrepreneurs in Nigeria. They further identified inadequate network access and digital skills as factors affecting digital adoption among youths, and recommended that more awareness campaigns should be carried out to encourage entrepreneurial activities in the digital space.

Synthesis and Gap

Based on the literature review, we established two realities. Firstly, many youths in Nigeria and other African countries are highly active on social media, especially in politically antagonistic engagement. Secondly, youths in other countries (the Western world) are also active on social media but mostly on substantial economic engagements. Meanwhile, there is a lack of critical examination of internal allocation between these two uses among the same youths in Nigeria. More troubling is the condition under which the allocation could shift between political and economic engagements. To the best of our knowledge, none of the studies has attempted to measure the proportion of engagement that youths attribute to economic activity and political antagonism, and their willingness to reallocate time to each activity. We therefore bridge this gap by empirically measuring the proportion of engagement using percentage analysis in Benue State.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we adopted a descriptive survey design due to its relevance and suitability in achieving the research objectives. The method was adopted by other studies (Macharia & Ong'ong'a, 2024; Bassey, 2024) to ascertain youth behaviour on social media in different settings. Moreover, this method is appropriate for self-reported preferences among respondents in a population without manipulating variables.

Population and Sample

This study considers a population comprising Youths between 18 and 35 years who actively use at least one social media platform in Benue State. Given the difficulty in sampling this population directly, we adopted purposive and snowball sampling techniques, targeting respondents via their online platforms and communities. We used a Google Forms link to share a structured questionnaire exclusively through social media platforms (WhatsApp groups, X threads, Facebook groups) over a period of four weeks. We deliberately and consciously adopted this approach because the phenomenon we are examining is social media, which strengthened the ecological validity of the respondents' responses. Meanwhile, out of the 984 respondents who accessed the questionnaire, 820 respondents completed and returned the questionnaires in full for analysis, representing a valid response rate of 83.3%.

Analysis Technique

As mentioned earlier, the study adopted a percentage analysis method to analyse the responses exported from Google Forms and the Google Sheets backend for computation. They were computed as simple percentages of the valid sample (percentage = $f/N \times 100$), cross-tabulated by response category, and visualised through auto-generated summary charts rather than manually tallied frequency sheets. This approach is not only effective and standard in survey-based research, but also minimises errors during transcription as compared to manual coding. According to Manohar and Prasad (2025), it also allows for real-time monitoring of responses during the window of collection.

Data Presentation And Analysis

Table 5.1 The demographic information of the 820 valid respondents.

Table 5.1 Respondents' Demographic Information ($N = 820$)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	18-24 years	338	41.2
	25-30 years	293	35.7
	31-35 years	189	23.0
Gender	Male	448	54.6
	Female	372	45.4
Employment status	Employed	233	28.4
	Unemployed	325	39.6
	Self-employed	180	22.0
	Student	82	10.0

Source: Field Survey Data, 2026

Table 5.1 shows the demographic information of the respondents. It presents the age, gender, and employment of the 820 valid respondents. It also shows that the sample was weighted slightly toward the 18–24 age bracket and male respondents. The employment category is characterised by the highest number of unemployed youths (39.6%), indicating the economic backdrop inherent in our society.

Table 5.2 Self-reported information which motivates respondents' daily social media engagement relating to RQ1.

Table 5.2 Motivations for Respondents' Daily Social Media Use (N = 820)

Primary Daily Purpose	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Political commentary/activism	382	46.6
Entertainment/leisure	227	27.7
Economic activity (job search, business, skills)	158	19.3
Academic/educational purposes	53	6.5

Source: Field Survey Data, 2026

Table 5.2 presents information on how respondents share their engagement on social media across four broad areas daily. It shows that political engagement or activism occupies 46.6%, more than double the 19.3% who use the space primarily for economic activity. This therefore provides empirical answer to the RQ1 on political versus economic use.

Table 5.3 Respondents Forms (multiple forms permitted) of Political Engagement as demanded in RQ2.

Table 5.3 Different Forms of Political Engagement by Respondents (N = 820)

Form of Political Engagement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Sharing/reposting political opinions	587	71.6
Following and commenting on politicians' pages	451	55.0
Engaging in online arguments/insults with opposing views	319	38.9
Participating in protest-related hashtags/mobilisation	274	33.4
Spreading unverified political information	180	22.0

Source: Field Survey Data, 2026

Note. Multiple responses were permitted; percentages do not sum to 100.

Table 5.3 presents a breakdown of respondents' specific behaviours when online for political engagement, ranging from opinion sharing to outright misinformation. It further reveals that reposting or sharing political opinions is the most common behaviour (71.6%), while 22.0% admit to spreading political information without proper verification, indicating the corrosive nature of this engagement.

Table 5.4: Respondents reported economic benefits derived from the daily usage of social media.

Table 5.4 Economic Benefits from Social Media Use (N = 820)

Economic Activity Derived	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Learned a skill via tutorials/videos	243	29.6
Discovered a job vacancy	199	24.3
Promoted a personal business/product	186	22.7
Received direct payment for content/services	101	12.3
None of the above	271	33.0

Source: Field Survey Data, 2026

Note. Multiple responses were permitted; percentages do not sum to 100.

Table 5.4 above presents the economic benefits (such as skills learned or jobs discovered) gained from social media by the respondents. The results reveal that 29.6% acquired skills through online tutorials, while 33.0% derived no single economic benefit, suggesting the scale of the underutilised opportunity. It also implies that many youths engage with social media platforms basically for consumptive rather than economically motivated reasons.

Table 5.5 The proportion of respondents who confirm that each factor would enhance a shift to economic use as related to RQ4.

Table 5.5 Factors Facilitating Social Media Use to Economic Activity (N = 820)

Facilitating Factor	Agree + Strongly Agree (%)
Access to verified job/scholarship information pages	81.5
Digital skills training	76.9
Peer success stories/role models	74.2
Government-backed digital entrepreneurship programmes	70.0
Reduced data cost for economic-focused platforms	68.1

Source: Field Survey Data, 2026

Table 5.5 ranks the factors that would most encourage respondents to redirect their social media use from political antagonism toward economic activity. The results show that access to verified job and scholarship information ranked first (81.5%), followed closely by digital skills training (76.9%), suggesting that the main barrier is gaps in information and skills rather than attitude.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

We found empirical evidence that supports gaps already identified in the literature. The results indicate that 46.6% of respondents confirmed using most of their time on social media for political commentary, compared with only 19.3% who used social media for economic activity. Though this is at the state level, it conforms with what Ajaegbu and Ajaegbu (2024) found at the continental level that youths' attention on social media is disproportionately apportioned to political engagement rather than economic activity. According to Bor et al. (2026), they mostly use social media for political antagonism, even with the availability of potential and

rewarding economic opportunities. Boulianne (2015) earlier found that political engagement dominates economic activity on social media among youth because they perceive it as a space for political expression and civic participation. This pattern implies that the economic potential of social media is underexploited relative to its capacity to foster entrepreneurship and livelihood diversification (Skoric et al., 2016).

Our results further reveal specific forms of political engagement on social media by youths in Benue State. It shows that 38.9% of the respondents engage in online insults or arguments with political opponents, while 22.0% share or circulate unverified political information. The results collectively show that a significant number of youths in Benue State spend their time on social media engaging in political arguments, insults, and the circulation of unverified and fabricated information. This corresponds to findings by Macharia and Ong'ong'a (2024) in Kenya, where youths confirmed they circulate news which they are not sure of its authenticity and reliability. We therefore infer from this result that most youths circulating political news on social media are neither constructive nor well-informed. According to Penney (2019), they spent time on social media venting frustration rather than engaging in meaningful, verifiable civic or economic activity. This is justified by the tension-released gratification, one of the tenets of UGT.

However, the findings in this study cannot be taken to mean that youths in Benue are indifferent to the economic potential of social media. This is because our results indicate that 29.6% have used social media to acquire a skill, while 24.3% have discovered a new job opportunity through social media platforms. This suggests that some Benue youths on social media are exploring the positive and economic aspects of it to improve their livelihood despite the dominance of political discourse. Nwankwo et al (2024) also found similar results in Rivers State, where a minority of social media users adopt it for entrepreneurial activities. Broadly, it suggests that the majority of youths in Nigeria consider social media as a platform for civic and political engagements. In contrast, scholars found that youths in Ghana and Sri Lanka utilise social media as a platform to build businesses (such as e-commerce, side hustles, freelancing, etc.) and make money (de Klerk et al., 2025; Shi et al., 2024). According to the studies, using social media for economic reasons is considered normal in these countries. They identified peer influence, social networks, and habit as factors motivating social media users irrespective of the phone model or type used. This comparison is instructive, suggesting a missing priority and a lack of peer encouragement, habit formation, and cultural normalisation among Benue youths, as is common in Ghana and Sri Lanka. We also found that 74.2% of respondents are influenced by their peers who succeeded in making economic fortunes on social media, hence consider redirecting their own usage towards economic activities. This implies that Youths in Benue may be moving toward a social-proof mechanism that normalises entrepreneurial activities on social media, as in Ghana. Even though it has not yet reached critical mass domestically, if sustained, it may grow to change the narratives.

More so, 33.0% of the respondents confirmed no economic benefit whatsoever from the use of social media. This is the most worrisome statistic, especially when compared to the number of unemployed youths in the state and Nigeria at large. Statistically, it implies that many Benue youths on social media are only hanging out, chatting, and following politics instead of earning money or doing business, as it happens in countries like Ghana and Sri Lanka. This cannot be attributed to any limitation in the forms of platforms, as the same platforms used for political engagements can support economic activities for the remaining two-thirds of the users. This is explained by the gratification-substitution argument, where economic gratification has not replaced social and political gratifications.

Meanwhile, the findings show encouraging facilitator statistics, indicating that the imbalance is not fixed. It shows that 76.9% of respondents, representing three-quarters of the total respondents, identified digital skills, while 81.5% identified access to job opportunities and scholarship information. Meaning, youths in Benue are willing to redirect their social media engagements given the right inputs, support, and motivation. Others have concurred that in areas where there are high levels of unemployment, youths could use social media as a gainful platform for building businesses and earning incomes (Sithole et al., 2026; Tulibaleka & Katunze, 2024; Wheeler et al., 2022). According to Bassey (2024), unemployment and idleness are key factors driving Nigerian youth into political social media activity, as found during the #EndBadGovernance protests. As found in this study, youths nowadays express economic frustrations using political platforms and are willing to redirect the same frustration and energy into gainful activity as long as skills pathways and credible information exist. This is one

of the salient and insightful findings of the study, as political antagonism and economic engagements are not competing values but the same underlying grievance shared via two distinct channels.

CONCLUSION

The number of youths on social media continues to increase due to the emergence of digital platforms that facilitate easy communication and information sharing online, which is supported by the surging number of unemployed youths in Benue State. Meanwhile, the literature has established that youths on social media spend most of their time on social/civic engagement or economic activities (Bor et al., 2026; Wheeler et al., 2022). As a result, this paper examines how youths in Benue State devote their time to social media engagements. More so, to ascertain what has influenced them to use their time on social media. The evidence obtained shows that many youths are tilted toward politically antagonistic conversations that are neither verified nor productive, even though a meaningful minority explored the real economic benefits from the same social media platforms. However, a reasonable number of youths are willing to redirect their intention and usage to economic activities, given institutional support and peer motivation. We conclude that if the unemployment crisis could significantly drive political frustration, antagonistic arguments, and abuse on social media here in Benue, others elsewhere are using it for productive economic activities. Therefore, reclaiming the timeline in this context is about using the platforms to build skills and acquire relevant information that enhances constructive and productive engagements. Until this is done, youths in Benue will continue to trade off their most powerful platforms for money-making to defend and fight over politicians who have less impact on their lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper provides three recommendations to address the problems.

1. Government and other stakeholders should create social media accounts or use similar accounts where political issues are discussed to post job opportunities and skills acquisition links for young people to access. This will enable youth to redirect their social media attention to meaningful ventures.
2. Government and private organisations should embark on youth empowerment programmes that not only rely on skills acquisition, but also enhance their confidence by sharing real stories of peers who succeeded in building their businesses through social media. This is because learning only the skills does not guarantee application. In countries where it succeeded, young people saw their peers succeeding, and they emulated them.
3. Youths and other social media users should be taught by media-literacy organisations and civil society groups on how to verify the credibility or otherwise of news before sharing. They should be able to question the source vis-à-vis spotting fake news when they come across it. Reading reliable, truthful news will enable them to make the most of social media and have a better understanding of politics, as the study indicated that most youths lack these skills.

Suggestion For Further Research

Future studies should adopt a longitudinal approach to address real behavioural change rather than relying on self-reported preferences.

More so, future studies should adopt comparative research between Benue and other states like Lagos, or Nigeria and Ghana, using similar survey instruments to identify state- or country-specific factors that influence social media users' intention.

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