

DIGITAL MEDIA LITERACY AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES AMONG YOUNG WOMEN IN RURAL NIGERIA: A STUDY OF ILAJE LGA

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between digital media literacy and leadership participation among young women in rural Nigeria, with specific focus on Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State. Despite increasing access to digital technologies, young women in rural communities remain underrepresented in leadership and civic engagement, raising concerns about the role of digital competencies in shaping participation outcomes. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining a descriptive survey of 100 respondents with a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) involving six participants. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were analysed thematically. The study is anchored on Feminist Media Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory. Findings reveal that although access to digital devices and internet connectivity is relatively high among respondents, their level of digital media literacy remains moderate. Most participants utilise digital platforms primarily for communication and entertainment rather than leadership or civic engagement. However, respondents with higher levels of digital media literacy demonstrate greater involvement in leadership-related activities such as community mobilisation, advocacy, and digital entrepreneurship. The study also identifies key barriers, including high cost of data, limited digital skills, poor network infrastructure, and socio-cultural constraints. The study concludes that digital media literacy plays a significant role in enhancing leadership participation among young women in rural areas. It recommends targeted digital literacy programmes, improved infrastructure, and gender-inclusive digital policies to strengthen women's engagement in leadership and development processes.

Keywords: Digital Media Literacy, Leadership Opportunities, Young Women, Rural Communities, Nigeria

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital media technologies has significantly transformed communication, participation, and leadership processes across societies, particularly in developing countries. In Nigeria, the increasing penetration of mobile phones, internet services, and social media platforms has created new opportunities for social interaction, economic engagement, and civic participation. The widespread use of modern communication technologies has effectively turned the world into a "global village" (Akpor, Adesuyi et al., 2020). These technologies have redefined traditional notions of leadership by shifting influence from formal institutional structures to more decentralised, digitally mediated spaces where visibility, voice, and engagement determine relevance (Couldry, 2015; Römer, 2024). Digital media literacy, defined as the ability to access,

analyse, evaluate, create, and strategically use digital content, has therefore become a critical skill in contemporary society (Hobbs, 2010). It shapes how individuals engage with digital platforms, interpret information, and participate in social and civic processes. For young women, digital media presents unique opportunities to challenge structural inequalities, amplify their voices, and engage in leadership activities that were previously limited by socio-cultural and institutional barriers (UN Women, 2020).

However, despite the growing availability of digital technologies, access alone does not guarantee meaningful participation. There remains a significant disparity in how individuals, particularly young women in rural areas, utilise digital media for empowerment and leadership. While many young women are active users of digital platforms, their engagement is often limited to basic communication and entertainment rather

than strategic use for leadership, advocacy, or community development (Van Dijk, 2020). This gap reflects what scholars describe as the “second-level digital divide,” where differences in skills and usage patterns determine the extent to which individuals benefit from digital technologies (Hilbert, 2011). In rural communities such as Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State, these challenges are further intensified by socio-economic and cultural factors. Issues such as high cost of internet data, limited access to digital training, poor network infrastructure, and gender-based social expectations continue to restrict the ability of young women to fully utilise digital platforms for leadership and civic engagement (UNESCO, 2019; ITU, 2021). Consequently, the presence of digital technologies does not automatically translate into equal opportunities for participation or influence. Although existing studies have examined digital media usage and women's empowerment, much of the literature focuses on urban populations, economic outcomes, or general access to technology (Simon, 2020). There is limited empirical attention on how digital media literacy specifically influences leadership participation among young women in rural contexts. This creates a gap in understanding the relationship between digital skills and leadership engagement within underserved communities.

Against this background, this study investigates the role of digital media literacy in shaping leadership participation among young women in rural Nigeria, with particular focus on Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State. The study seeks to assess the level of digital media literacy, examine patterns of digital platform usage, identify barriers to effective participation, and determine the relationship between digital media literacy and leadership engagement.

To achieve these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the level of digital media literacy among young women in rural areas?
2. How do young women utilise digital media platforms for leadership and civic engagement?
3. In what ways does digital media literacy influence leadership participation?
4. What challenges hinder effective participation and leadership engagement among young women in digital spaces?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Media Literacy and Participation

Digital media literacy has emerged as a critical competency in the digital age, enabling individuals to effectively engage with digital technologies for communication, information

processing, and civic participation. It extends beyond basic technical skills to include the ability to critically evaluate content, create digital messages, and use media strategically for social and economic advancement. Scholars such as Hobbs (2010) and Livingstone (2004) argue that digital media literacy enhances individuals' capacity for informed decision-making and active participation in democratic processes. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that digital literacy plays a significant role in shaping participation outcomes. For instance, Kahne, Lee, and Feezell (2012) found that individuals with higher levels of digital media literacy are more likely to engage in civic and political activities online. Similarly, Egbuka et al. (2024) established that digital literacy enhances women's access to opportunities, improves decision-making, and increases their capacity for leadership in economic and social contexts. These studies suggest that digital media literacy is not merely a technical skill but a key driver of empowerment and participation.

However, while these studies establish a positive relationship between digital literacy and participation, they largely focus on urban populations or general youth demographics, with limited attention to rural women. This raises concerns about the applicability of such findings to underserved communities where structural constraints may limit the effective utilisation of digital skills.

Digital Divide and Gender Inequality

The concept of the digital divide provides an important framework for understanding disparities in access to and use of digital technologies. Van Dijk (2006) conceptualises the digital divide as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that includes not only access but also differences in skills and usage. Hargittai (2010) further introduces the idea of the “second-level digital divide,” which emphasises inequalities in digital competencies and the ability to use the internet effectively. In developing countries such as Nigeria, the digital divide is often shaped by gender, socio-economic status, and geographical location. Hilbert (2011) argues that women are disproportionately affected by digital exclusion, limiting their ability to participate in economic and leadership activities. Reports by the International Telecommunication Union (2021) and UN Women (2020) also highlight persistent gender gaps in digital access and skills, which continue to restrict women's participation in governance, advocacy, and development initiatives.

While these studies emphasise structural inequalities, they often treat women as a homogeneous group, without adequately examining how rural contexts further complicate digital inclusion. In rural areas, limited

infrastructure, high cost of data, and cultural expectations may deepen digital exclusion, thereby affecting leadership participation among young women.

Digital Media, Gender, and Leadership

The relationship between digital media and leadership has evolved significantly with the rise of social media platforms and mobile technologies. Traditionally, leadership opportunities for women were constrained by socio-cultural norms and limited access to public platforms. However, digital media has created alternative spaces where individuals can express opinions, mobilise communities, and influence public discourse. Chib et al. (2017) found that mobile technologies enhance women's agency and participation in community leadership, particularly in developing contexts. Similarly, Porter et al. (2020) observed that while mobile phones increase communication and access to information, they do not automatically translate into empowerment due to persistent socio-cultural barriers. This suggests that access alone is insufficient without the necessary skills and enabling environment. In the Nigerian context, Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) demonstrated that social media platforms facilitate political participation and civic engagement among youths. However, their study focused primarily on university students, leaving rural populations underexplored. This indicates a gap in understanding how young women in rural areas utilise digital platforms for leadership purposes.

Existing literature highlights the potential of digital media to promote leadership and empowerment among women. However, there is limited empirical evidence on how digital media literacy specifically influences leadership participation among young women in rural communities. This study addresses this gap by focusing on Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Feminist Media Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, which together provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between digital media literacy and leadership participation among young women.

Feminist Media Theory

Feminist Media Theory examines how media structures and representations reinforce or challenge gender inequalities within society. The theory argues that traditional media systems often marginalise women by portraying them in limited and stereotypical roles, thereby restricting their

visibility and participation in leadership spaces. In the context of this study, Feminist Media Theory is relevant in explaining the structural and socio-cultural barriers that limit young women's participation in leadership, even in digital environments. Factors such as cultural expectations, gender norms, and fear of online harassment influence how young women engage with digital platforms. These barriers, identified in the findings of this study, reflect the broader gender inequalities highlighted by the theory.

Furthermore, the theory supports the argument that digital media can serve as a tool for challenging these inequalities. By acquiring digital media literacy skills, young women can create content, amplify their voices, and participate more actively in leadership and community development processes.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory, developed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974), explains how individuals actively select and use media to satisfy specific needs such as information, entertainment, social interaction, and self-expression. This theory is particularly relevant to this study in understanding how young women utilise digital platforms. The findings reveal that most respondents use digital media primarily for communication and entertainment, indicating that their media use is driven by immediate social and emotional needs rather than strategic engagement for leadership purposes.

However, the theory also helps explain variations in usage patterns. Respondents with higher levels of digital media literacy are more likely to use digital platforms for leadership-related activities such as advocacy, mobilisation, and entrepreneurship. This suggests that digital literacy influences not only access to media but also the motivations and outcomes of media use.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The use of mixed methods is appropriate because it allows for the triangulation of data, combining numerical evidence with in-depth contextual insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The descriptive survey method enables the researcher to systematically collect data on the level of digital media literacy, patterns of digital media use, and leadership engagement among young women. The FGD on the other hand, provides deeper insights into participants' experiences, perceptions, and the contextual realities surrounding digital media use and leadership within the rural community. The

integration of these methods enhances the validity and richness of the findings. The population of the study comprises young women residing in Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State who have access to and use digital media platforms. This includes students, artisans, entrepreneurs, and unemployed youths.

Although the population of young women in Ilaje LGA is large (approximately 50,000), a sample size of 100 respondents was considered adequate for this study based on the Taro Yamane formula at a 10% margin of error. This size is appropriate for exploratory research and aligns with similar social science studies. Furthermore, logistical challenges associated with the riverine terrain of the study area informed the choice of a manageable sample size, while appropriate sampling techniques were employed to ensure representativeness. A sample size of 100 respondents was selected for the quantitative component using purposive sampling. This technique was considered appropriate because it ensures that participants possess relevant characteristics, particularly access to and use of digital technologies (Etikan et al., 2016). Although purposive sampling limits generalisability, it is suitable for exploratory studies focusing on specific populations. For the qualitative component, a Focus Group Discussion consisting of six participants was conducted. This size is considered adequate for generating diverse perspectives while allowing meaningful interaction among participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

Two instruments were used for data collection in this study. The first is a structured questionnaire designed to gather quantitative data on respondents' demographic characteristics, level of digital media literacy, types of digital media platforms used, and leadership related activities they engage online. The second instrument is a Focus Group Discussion guide, developed to elicit qualitative data on participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges regarding digital media literacy (Kumar, 2019). To ensure validity of the research instruments, the questionnaire and Focus Group Discussion guide are subjected to expert review in the field of Mass Communication. This process ensures that the instruments adequately measure concepts of digital media literacy and leadership opportunities. The reliability of the questionnaire is enhanced through a pilot study conducted among a small group of young women outside the sample of the study. After, necessary adjustments were made based on the feedback received (Taherdoost, 2016). Data for quantitative component were collected through the administration of questionnaires to selected

participants within Ilaje Local Government Area. The questionnaires were administered in two different ways. First, 70 percent was administered in person with the assistance of research aides while 30 percent was administered online through well designed Google forms to major WhatsApp groups that comprises young Ilaje women.

For the qualitative component, Focus Group Discussion were conducted on WhatsApp which was the medium unanimously chosen by the participants to ensure high participation. The session was moderated by the researcher. I couldn't audio record because of the privacy policy on WhatsApp but I was able to jot down everything discussed because I was assisted by my research aides. Quantitative data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies, percentages, and tables. This method allows for clear presentation and interpretation of patterns in digital media literacy and leadership engagement (Pallant, 2020). Qualitative data obtained from Focus Group Discussion were analyzed thematically. Thematic analysis involves identifying recurring themes, patterns, and meanings emerging from participants' responses. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides holistic understanding of the research problem. Ethical considerations were given priority throughout the process of the research. Participants were adequately informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity of respondents were ensured, and participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

FINDINGS

The study investigated the level of digital media literacy among young women in Nigeria, with a focus on Ilaje Local Government Area, and how it influences their access to leadership opportunities.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	15-19	20	20
	20-24	35	35
	25-29	30	30
	30-35	15	15
Education	Primary	10	10
	Secondary	30	30
	NCE/OND	25	25
	HND/BSc	30	30
Occupation	Postgraduate	5	5
	Student	40	40
	Self-employed	25	25
	Employed	15	15
	Unemployed	20	20

Field Survey 2026

Table 1 reveals that the majority of respondents are within the active youth age group, with 35% aged 20–24 years and 30% aged 25–29 years, indicating that 65% fall within the 20–29 age bracket. In terms of education, a large proportion of respondents have at least secondary education, with 30% holding HND/BSc and another 30% having secondary education. Regarding occupation, 40% of respondents are students, while 25% are self-employed, suggesting that most respondents are either in school or engaged in entrepreneurial activities.

Table 2: Access to Digital Media

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Own smartphone	Yes	85	85
	No	15	15
Internet access	Daily	60	60
	Several times/week	25	25
	Occasionally	10	10
	Rarely	5	5
Means of access	Mobile data	80	80
	Wi-Fi	10	10
	Cyber café	10	10
Preferred Social Media Platform	Facebook	20	20
	Whatsapp	40	40
	TikTok	25	25
	Instagram	15	15

Field Survey, 2026

This table revealed that a significant proportion of respondents possessed smartphones (85%) and had regular access to the internet, with 60% accessing it daily and 25% several times a week. The findings further showed that mobile data (80%) was the primary means of internet access. Social media platforms such as WhatsApp and TikTok were identified as the most commonly used digital platforms among respondents, mainly for communication with friends and family, as well as for information sharing and entertainment. This pattern was also confirmed during the Focus Group Discussion, where participants emphasised their dependence on mobile phones for daily communication. One participant stated that “I use my phone every day, especially WhatsApp, to chat with friends and know what is happening.” This suggests that digital access is not only widespread but also embedded in the daily lives of respondents.

Table 3: Digital Media Literacy Skills

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
Use social media confidently	45	40	10	5
Identify false information	30	35	20	15
Protect privacy online	25	30	25	20
Create/share content	35	40	15	10
Understand ethical use	30	45	15	10

Field Survey, 2026.

Table 3 indicates that a large proportion of respondents possess basic digital skills, with 85% able to use social media confidently and 75% able to create and share content. However, fewer respondents demonstrate advanced digital skills, as only 65% can identify false information and 55% can protect their privacy online. This suggests that while basic digital literacy is high, critical digital skills remain moderate. Findings from the FGD further revealed gaps in critical digital skills. Some participants admitted difficulty in evaluating online content, as one respondent explained, “Sometimes I see news online, but I don’t know if it is true or fake.” Another added, “I don’t really understand how to protect my information online.” This reinforces the survey result that digital literacy remains moderate.

Table 4: Use of Digital Media for Leadership

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
Express opinions online	40	35	15	10
Mobilise others	30	40	20	10
Participate in discussions	35	30	20	15
Increased confidence	45	30	15	10

Field Survey, 2026

Table 4 reveals that a majority of respondents use digital media for leadership-related activities, with 75% expressing opinions online and 70% mobilising others through digital platforms. Additionally, 65% participate in online discussions, while 75% report increased confidence in leadership roles due to digital media use. This indicates that digital platforms play a significant role in supporting leadership engagement among respondents. This is supported by FGD responses where participants shared real-life applications of digital tools. For instance, one participant noted, “Through WhatsApp groups, we organise meetings and talk about issues affecting our community.” This indicates that digital platforms serve as tools for community engagement and leadership expression.

Table 5: Challenges to Digital Media Use

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
High cost of data	60	30	5	5
Fear of harassment	40	35	15	10
Cultural restrictions	35	40	15	10
Lack of skills	45	30	15	10

Field Survey, 2026

Table 5 shows that the high cost of data is the most

significant challenge, with 90% of respondents identifying it as a major barrier. Other key challenges include fear of online harassment (75%), cultural restrictions (75%), and lack of digital skills (75%). This suggests that despite high access to digital media, several economic and socio-cultural factors limit effective utilisation. Participants strongly echoed these challenges during the FGD. One respondent stated, “Data is too expensive; sometimes I cannot afford to go online.” Another highlighted safety concerns: “Some people are afraid to speak online because of insults.” This provides deeper context to the quantitative findings.

Table 6: Perceived Influence of Digital Media Literacy

Statement	SA	A	D	SD
Enhances leadership	55	35	5	5
Training improves participation	60	30	5	5
Encourage women use	65	25	5	5

Field Survey, 2026

Table 6 reveals that a large majority of respondents perceive digital media literacy as a tool for empowerment, with 90% agreeing that it enhances leadership opportunities and that training can improve participation. Similarly, 90% believe that more women should be encouraged to use digital technologies. This indicates a strong positive perception of digital literacy as a driver of leadership development. FGD participants also expressed optimism about digital empowerment. One participant noted, “If we learn more, we can use our phones for better things like business and helping others.” This reflects a strong belief in the potential of digital literacy.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into the complex relationship between digital media access, literacy, and leadership participation among young women in Ilaje Local Government Area. While the data confirms a high level of access to smartphones and internet connectivity, the results reveal that such access does not automatically translate into meaningful or productive digital engagement. Evidence from the FGD further supports this, as participants indicated that their primary use of digital media revolves around chatting and social interaction, as reflected in the statement: “I mostly use my phone to chat and watch things online.” This reinforces the argument by Hargittai (2010) on the “second-level digital divide,” which emphasises disparities in digital skills rather than access alone. In this study, although 85% of respondents owned smartphones and a majority accessed the internet regularly, their use of digital media remained largely confined to basic

communication and entertainment. This suggests that the real challenge is not connectivity, but capability.

The findings also support previous studies linking digital media literacy with women's empowerment. While some respondents reported using digital platforms for business promotion and community engagement, FGD insights revealed that such usage is still limited. For example, a participant noted, “I use Facebook to promote my products, but I don't know how to reach more people.” For instance, Hafkin and Huyer (2007) argue that information and communication technologies provide women with opportunities to participate in economic and political discourse or activities that were inaccessible to women in the past. Digital media platforms now allow women to build networks, share ideas, and engage in community mobilisation. Similarly, Castells (2012) emphasises that digital communication networks have drastically changed the way individuals organise social movements and participate in civic activities. In the context of this study, digital media platforms appear to provide young women with the tool or medium for community engagement and leadership expression, even within environments where traditional leadership structures may limit women's participation.

The results of this study align with the Uses and Gratification Theory, which posits that audiences actively choose a media to satisfy their needs and motivations (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, 1974). Young women in Ilaje Local Government appear to use digital platforms to fulfil various needs, including communication, information seeking, social interaction, and self expression. This was confirmed during the FGD, where a participant stated, “WhatsApp is mainly for chatting with friends and family.” However, the limited use of digital media for more productive purposes suggests that engagement remains largely passive rather than strategic. However, the study also reveals that this potential is not fully realised due to persistent structural and socio-cultural barriers. The high cost of internet data, identified by 90% of respondents as a major challenge, significantly limits consistent engagement. This finding is particularly important in a context where 80% of users rely on mobile data as their primary means of access. In addition, concerns about online harassment and cultural restrictions reflect broader gender inequalities that shape women's participation in both digital and physical spaces. These findings are consistent with reports by UN Women (2020) and UNESCO (2019), which highlight how economic constraints, gender norms, and safety concerns continue to hinder women's digital inclusion in developing contexts.

The integration of survey data and FGD

responses provides a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. While access to digital media is relatively high, meaningful engagement is limited by skill gaps, economic constraints, and cultural factor. Therefore, improving digital media literacy among young women requires not only access to technology but also looking out of barriers, making digital media policies, and giving out educational programmes that equip them with the skills needed to effectively utilise digital tools for empowerment and leadership.

CONCLUSION

This study moves beyond the assumption that digital access alone is sufficient for empowerment by demonstrating that the quality of digital engagement is what ultimately shapes leadership outcomes. While young women in Ilaje Local Government Area are increasingly connected to digital technologies, their ability to leverage these tools for leadership and development remains uneven. The study establishes that digital media literacy functions as a critical bridge between access and empowerment. It is not merely the presence of technology, but the capacity to use it critically, creatively, and strategically that determines whether individuals can participate meaningfully in leadership processes. In this sense, digital literacy should be understood not just as a technical skill, but as a form of social capital that enables visibility, voice, and influence. Importantly, the findings highlight those structural inequalities, such as the cost of internet access, and socio-cultural constraints continue to shape digital participation. This suggests that digital inclusion is not only a technological issue but also a socio-economic and cultural one. As a result, efforts to promote women's leadership through digital media must adopt a holistic approach that integrates infrastructure development, skills acquisition, and gender-sensitive policies.

By situating its findings within a rural Nigerian context, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of digital inequality, showing that the challenge is no longer simply about "who has access," but about "who can use access effectively." This distinction is critical for policymakers, educators, and development practitioners seeking to harness digital technologies for inclusive leadership and development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance digital media literacy and strengthen leadership engagement among young women:

1. Government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and educational institutions should implement targeted digital literacy programmes to improve the level of digital media literacy among young women. This recommendation is based on the finding that although most respondents possess basic digital skills such as social media use and content creation, fewer demonstrate critical skills like identifying false information and protecting their privacy, indicating a moderate level of digital literacy.
2. Stakeholders should promote the use of digital media platforms for leadership and civic engagement. This is necessary because the findings show that despite high access to smartphones and frequent internet use, young women primarily utilise platforms such as WhatsApp and TikTok for social interaction and entertainment rather than for leadership activities.
3. Educational institutions and development organisations should integrate digital literacy with leadership development initiatives to strengthen participation. This recommendation is supported by findings which reveal that digital media enhances confidence, supports expression of opinions, and facilitates mobilisation, indicating that digital literacy positively influences leadership participation among young women.
4. Government and relevant stakeholders should address the key barriers hindering effective participation in digital spaces. This is based on findings that highlight high data costs, fear of online harassment, cultural restrictions, and lack of skills as major challenges limiting active engagement and leadership participation.

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