# SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF GENDER ROLES AMONG CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN YOUTHS

**Sunday Onyema Iherue, Ph. D**
**Department of Religion and Peace Studies,**
**Faculty of Humanities,**
**Imo State University, Owerri**

**Abstract**
Social media has become one of the most influential spaces through which contemporary Nigerian youths encounter, interpret, contest, and reproduce ideas about gender. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Telegram expose young Nigerians to local and global conversations on masculinity, femininity, marriage, paid work, domestic responsibility, sexuality, body image, leadership, and gender-based violence. This paper examines how social media is changing perceptions of gender roles among Nigerian youths. It argues that social media does not simply replace traditional gender norms; rather, it creates a contested digital environment in which patriarchal expectations, feminist advocacy, religious teachings, consumer culture, humour, celebrity influence, and youth subcultures compete for attention and legitimacy. Using social learning theory, gender schema theory, hegemonic masculinity, performativity, and networked publics as interpretive frameworks, the paper shows that Nigerian youths are increasingly exposed to egalitarian ideas about gender, while simultaneously encountering digital content that reinforces male dominance, female respectability, financial dependence, and rigid family roles. The paper concludes that social media has expanded the imaginative possibilities available to Nigerian youths, but its impact depends on digital literacy, offline social structures, religious and family expectations, economic conditions, and the quality of gender-related content young people consume. Recommendations are offered for educators, parents, policymakers, civil society organisations, and platform designers.
**Keywords:** Social media, gender roles, Nigerian youths, gender equality, digital culture.

## Introduction

Gender roles refer to socially learned expectations about the behaviours, responsibilities, appearances, emotions, and social positions considered appropriate for men and women in a particular society. In many Nigerian communities, these expectations have historically been shaped by patriarchy, religion, ethnicity, family structure, colonial history, and economic organisation. “Men have often been expected to provide financially, exercise authority, display toughness, and lead households, while women have frequently been expected to nurture children, perform domestic labour, maintain sexual respectability, and support male authority” (Connell, 1987, p. 183; Eagly, 1987, p. 12).

Contemporary Nigerian youths, however, are growing up in a media environment that is markedly different from that of previous generations. Smartphones, affordable data bundles, social networking applications, online entertainment, and digital activism have made gender-related ideas more visible, portable, and negotiable. A young person in Lagos, Enugu, Kano, Port Harcourt, or Maiduguri may encounter a feminist campaign on Instagram, a religious sermon on YouTube, a viral TikTok video about “provider men,” a WhatsApp broadcast about marriage, and a Twitter discussion on gender-based violence within the same day. Social media therefore functions as a space where gender norms are not only communicated but also debated, mocked, defended, and reworked.

This paper examines the relationship between social media and changing perceptions of gender roles among contemporary Nigerian youths. It asks three related questions. First, how does social media expose Nigerian youths to alternative ideas about masculinity and femininity? Second, in what ways does social media reinforce traditional or patriarchal gender expectations? Third, what conditions determine whether social media produces more egalitarian or more conservative gender perceptions among young Nigerians?

The central argument is that social media is a double-edged force. It has widened young people’s access to feminist discourse, gender-equality advocacy, diverse role models, and global conversations about rights and identity. At the same time, it has amplified misogynistic content, gender stereotypes, online harassment, materialistic relationship expectations, and conservative interpretations of masculinity and femininity. Consequently, social media does not automatically produce gender equality; it produces contestation.

## Background and Context

Nigeria is a culturally diverse country with more than 250 ethnic groups, substantial religious diversity, and wide regional differences in social organisation. Gender expectations are therefore not uniform across the

country. In many communities, however, patriarchal norms remain influential. Men are often positioned as heads of households and primary providers, while women are expected to demonstrate obedience, modesty, domestic competence, and commitment to family life. These expectations may be expressed through proverbs, religious teachings, marriage customs, inheritance practices, parenting styles, and everyday language.

At the same time, Nigerian society has experienced significant social change. Urbanisation, female education, women's participation in paid employment, delayed marriage among some groups, economic hardship, and increased access to digital technology have altered the practical realities of gender relations. Many Nigerian women now combine paid work with family responsibilities, while many young men face unemployment or underemployment that complicates the expectation that they must be sole providers. These material changes create tension between inherited gender ideals and contemporary lived experience.

Social media enters this context as both a mirror and a modifier of social reality. It reflects existing gender anxieties—such as debates over bride price, domestic work, male providerhood, female submission, sexual morality, and women's financial independence—while also introducing new vocabularies through which those anxieties are discussed. Terms such as "feminism," "patriarchy," "gender equality," "toxic masculinity," "soft life," "provider man," "billing culture," "submission," and "independent woman" circulate widely among Nigerian youths online.

"Research from Oyo State found that residents became highly knowledgeable about gender equality through social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn, suggesting that these platforms can function as informal sites of gender education" (Adeyemi et al, 2023, p. 45). Similarly, "studies of Nigerian university students indicate that exposure to gender-related campaigns on Instagram, X, and TikTok can challenge traditional norms, strengthen self-confidence, and encourage advocacy among female undergraduates" (Okafor et al., 2025, p. 112). Yet the same digital environment also contains content that normalises financial dependence, objectifies women, and frames feminism as a threat to family stability.

**Purpose and Significance**

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of how social media shapes gender-role perceptions among Nigerian youths. The topic is significant for several reasons.

First, youths are among the most active users of digital platforms. Their gender perceptions matter because today's youths will become tomorrow's parents, spouses, employees, employers, religious leaders, politicians, and community members. If social media influences how they understand authority, care work, marriage, sexuality, and economic responsibility, it may also influence future family and workplace relations.

Second, gender norms affect concrete social outcomes. Rigid masculinity can discourage men from caregiving, emotional expression, and help-seeking, while rigid femininity can restrict women's educational, professional, reproductive, and leadership choices. Gender inequality is also connected to gender-based violence, unequal domestic labour, workplace discrimination, and limited political participation.

Third, social media is now a major arena of public opinion formation in Nigeria. Hashtags, viral videos, influencer content, online religious preaching, celebrity gossip, and youth comedy can reach millions of people rapidly. Understanding how gender messages travel through these networks is therefore important for education, public health, advocacy, and policy.

Finally, the topic highlights the need to move beyond simplistic claims that social media either liberates or corrupts young people. A more useful approach is to examine the specific platforms, content types, audiences, and offline conditions through which gender meanings are produced.

**Conceptual Clarifications**

**Social Media**

Social media refers to digital platforms and applications that enable users to create, share, comment on, and interact with content. Common examples include WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, YouTube, Snapchat, Telegram, and Reddit. Unlike traditional mass media, social media allows ordinary users to participate actively in content production. A young Nigerian does not merely watch a television programme about marriage; the person can post a response, share a meme, join a comment section, follow an influencer, or create an original video.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) define social media as "a group of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, allowing the creation and exchange of user-generated content." This definition is useful because it emphasises participation. Gender norms on social media are not simply transmitted from media organisations to passive audiences; they are continually reinterpreted by users.

**Gender Roles**

Gender roles are culturally defined expectations attached to being male or female. They include beliefs about who should lead, who should provide, who should care for children, who should cook, who should express emotion, who should initiate relationships, and who should occupy public positions of authority. Gender roles are social rather than biological, although they are often presented as natural.

Eagly (1987, p. 12) explains that "gender roles arise from the division of labour between women and men and become embedded in social expectations. In the Nigerian context, these roles may include expectations that men should be providers and decision-makers, while women should be caregivers and custodians of family honour."

**Gender-Role Perception**

Gender-role perception refers to how individuals understand, evaluate, and internalise gender expectations. A young person may perceive men as natural leaders, women as natural caregivers, domestic work as women's responsibility, or paid employment as compatible with motherhood. These perceptions may be traditional, egalitarian, mixed, or fluid.

Changing perceptions do not necessarily mean complete rejection of tradition. A young Nigerian woman may support women's education and employment while still valuing marriage and motherhood. A young Nigerian man may reject domestic violence while still believing that men should lead the home. Social media often produces such hybrid positions rather than simple ideological conversions.

**Nigerian Youths**

In this paper, "Nigerian youths" refers primarily to adolescents and young adults, especially those in secondary schools, universities, vocational training, early employment, or transitional stages between education and adulthood. This group is particularly important because it is highly connected to digital culture and actively negotiating identity, relationships, career aspirations, and family expectations.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Social Learning Theory**

"Social learning theory argues that people learn behaviour by observing others, noting the consequences of their actions, and imitating models they consider attractive, credible, or rewarding" (Bandura, 1986, p. 22). Applied to social media, young Nigerians observe influencers, celebrities, peers, religious leaders, comedians, and activists modelling particular gender behaviours.

For example, a young man who repeatedly sees male influencers praise financial dominance, emotional restraint, and female submission may come to view these traits as desirable masculinity. Conversely, a young woman who follows female professionals, activists, or entrepreneurs may begin to see ambition, financial independence, and public voice as legitimate feminine aspirations.

**Gender Schema Theory**

"Gender schema theory suggests that people develop cognitive frameworks that organise information according to gender" (Bem, 1981, p. 354). These schemas influence what individuals notice, remember, and consider normal. Social media supplies numerous gender cues—images, jokes, advertisements, relationship advice, beauty standards, and success narratives—that can strengthen or reshape these schemas.

A youth who repeatedly encounters content portraying women as emotionally manipulative or men as naturally polygamous may develop a gender schema that treats such assumptions as common sense. On the other hand, exposure to content showing men cooking, caring for children, or expressing vulnerability can challenge rigid schemas.

**Hegemonic Masculinity**

"Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity describes the culturally dominant form of masculinity that legitimises men's dominance over women and subordinate masculinities" (Connell, 1987, p. 183). In Nigerian digital culture, hegemonic masculinity may appear in content that celebrates male sexual conquest, financial control, emotional hardness, religious headship, and authority over women.

However, social media also allows alternative masculinities to gain visibility. Men who cook, care for children, support their wives' careers, reject violence, or discuss mental health can present forms of masculinity that challenge dominance-based expectations.

**Gender Performativity**

Butler (1990, p. 25) argues that "gender is not a fixed essence but is produced through repeated performances of culturally recognised behaviours. Social media intensifies performativity because users consciously present themselves through photographs, captions, clothing, speech, relationship displays, and lifestyle content."

A young Nigerian woman may perform femininity through makeup, modesty, romance, or domestic skill. A young man may perform masculinity through fitness, fashion, wealth display, humour, or public confidence. These performances can reproduce norms, but they can also disrupt them when users deliberately present nontraditional gender expressions.

**Networked Publics**

boyd (2014, p. 8) describes "networked publics as publics that are restructured by networked technologies, characterised by persistence, searchability, replicability, and scalability. This framework is especially relevant to Nigerian youth culture because a single TikTok video or X post about gender can remain online, be searched, be copied, and reach a vast audience."

The scalability of social media means that gender debates are no longer confined to family compounds, churches, mosques, classrooms, or campus hostels. They become public conversations involving strangers, celebrities, activists, critics, and international audiences.

**Social Media Platforms and Gender Discourse in Nigeria**

**WhatsApp**

WhatsApp is central to Nigerian digital communication because it supports private chats, group conversations, broadcasts, voice notes, and status updates. Family groups, church groups, school groups, alumni groups, and friendship groups frequently circulate messages about marriage, gender roles, sexuality, parenting, and morality.

WhatsApp can reinforce conservative gender expectations when users forward messages that present women's submission as the key to successful marriage or men's providerhood as non-negotiable. At the same time, WhatsApp can support gender awareness when users share information about domestic violence, legal rights, reproductive health, or women's leadership.

The platform's semi-private nature is important. Youths may express views in WhatsApp groups that they would hesitate to post publicly on X or Instagram. This can create intimate spaces for peer influence, but it can also enable the rapid spread of unverified or highly gendered messages.

**Facebook**

Facebook remains widely used across different age groups and social classes in Nigeria. It hosts long-form posts, discussion groups, religious pages, news pages, and community forums. Gender debates on Facebook often involve marriage, bride price, infidelity, parenting, women's financial independence, and male authority.

Facebook's mixed-age audience makes it particularly important. Young users may encounter the views of parents, older relatives, religious leaders, and community elders alongside youth-oriented content. This can expose them to a broader range of gender perspectives, but it can also intensify generational conflict.

**Instagram**

Instagram is highly visual and lifestyle-oriented. It is influential in shaping ideals of beauty, romance, success, fashion, fitness, and relationship display. For many Nigerian youths, Instagram presents aspirational images of femininity and masculinity: the stylish woman, the wealthy man, the couple on vacation, the fitness model, the entrepreneur, or the celebrity family.

These images can broaden aspirations by showcasing women in business, technology, entertainment, and public leadership. However, Instagram can also promote narrow beauty standards, consumerism, and the idea that a woman's value lies in appearance or a man's value lies in wealth.

**TikTok**

TikTok has become especially influential among younger Nigerians because of its short videos, trends, sounds, humour, and algorithmic recommendations. Gender content on TikTok includes relationship advice, comedy skits, dance trends, beauty tutorials, feminist commentary, religious messages, and debates about masculinity.

TikTok's algorithm can create echo chambers. A user who watches one video about "provider men" may soon receive more videos on similar themes. This can make a particular gender ideology appear more widespread and acceptable than it actually is.

"Research on Nigerian online discourse shows that gender roles are actively negotiated through social media humour and "cruise" culture, with influencers promoting competing messages about male responsibility, female financial dependence, and relationship expectations" (Adewale, 2025, p. 4). This demonstrates that entertainment is not separate from gender politics; comedy and viral content can carry serious ideological messages.

**X (Formerly Twitter)**

X is a major platform for public debate in Nigeria. Hashtags, quote posts, threads, and trending topics allow young users to discuss politics, feminism, religion, sexuality, celebrity culture, and gender-based violence.

Nigerian feminist communities have used X to organise conversations around sexual harassment, domestic violence, victim-blaming, and women's rights.

X can therefore function as a digital public sphere. It enables marginalised voices to challenge dominant narratives and connect with wider audiences. However, it is also a hostile space for many women and gender-nonconforming users, who may face harassment, threats, sexualised abuse, and coordinated backlash.

**YouTube**

YouTube supports longer content, including sermons, podcasts, interviews, documentaries, vlogs, relationship advice, and educational videos. Nigerian youths may encounter both progressive and conservative gender content on the platform. A user may watch a feminist lecture, a pastor's teaching on submission, a relationship podcast, or a documentary about women in leadership.

YouTube's long-form format allows more nuanced discussion than short-video platforms. However, recommendation systems can still lead users toward sensational or ideologically consistent content.

**How Social Media Changes Gender Perceptions**

**Exposure to Alternative Models**

One of the most important effects of social media is exposure. Nigerian youths can see women as engineers, pilots, politicians, athletes, tech founders, doctors, farmers, activists, and religious leaders. They can also see men as caregivers, chefs, fashion enthusiasts, nurses, teachers, and advocates against gender-based violence.

This visibility matters because gender-role perceptions are often sustained by limited examples. When young people repeatedly see only men as leaders and women as caregivers, those roles appear natural. Social media disrupts this limitation by making counter-examples visible.

"A study of female undergraduates in Nigerian universities found that engagement with gender-related campaigns challenged traditional norms, enhanced self-confidence, and encouraged gender-related advocacy" (Okafor & Eze, 2025, p. 112). This suggests that social media can serve as a source of gender consciousness, especially for young women navigating patriarchal expectations.

**Globalisation of Gender Ideas**

Social media connects Nigerian youths to global feminist movements, LGBTQ+ visibility, men's rights discourse, religious conservatism, and international celebrity culture. A young Nigerian may encounter African feminism, Black feminist thought, Western liberal feminism, Islamic perspectives on gender, Christian teachings on marriage, and online anti-feminist movements.

This global exposure can expand vocabulary and political imagination. Words such as "consent," "patriarchy," "misogyny," "intersectionality," and "gender-based violence" become part of youth discourse. However, global content may also be interpreted selectively or translated into local contexts in ways that create misunderstanding.

For instance, some Nigerian youths may associate feminism with hatred of men because anti-feminist content frames it that way. Others may adopt feminist language without engaging with the structural issues of poverty, religion, ethnicity, and family obligation that shape Nigerian gender relations.

**Peer Influence and Identity Formation**

Youths are particularly sensitive to peer approval. Social media makes peer norms highly visible through likes, comments, shares, follower counts, and viral trends. A young person may adjust gender expression to gain acceptance or avoid ridicule.

For young women, peer visibility may encourage confidence, self-presentation, entrepreneurship, and activism. For young men, it may encourage competition around wealth, sexual success, physical appearance, or dominance. In both cases, social media turns gender identity into a public performance.

boyd (2014, p. 8) notes that "networked publics are shaped by persistence, searchability, replicability, and scalability. These features make youth gender performances more consequential because they can be archived, judged, shared, and used to construct reputations."

**Redefinition of Marriage and Relationships**

Social media has intensified debates about marriage among Nigerian youths. Traditional expectations often emphasise male providerhood, female submission, fertility, family approval, and religious obligation. Digital discourse complicates these expectations by introducing discussions about compatibility, emotional labour, consent, financial partnership, childlessness, divorce, and women's autonomy.

Some online content promotes egalitarian partnership, encouraging men and women to share decision-making, income responsibilities, and domestic labour. Other content promotes transactional relationship models, in which men are expected to provide money and women are expected to offer beauty, sexual availability, or emotional service.

The concept of "billing culture," often discussed in Nigerian online spaces, illustrates this tension. Some content frames women's financial expectations from men as normal or strategic, while critics argue that it reinforces female dependence and male control. Online debates therefore reveal competing visions of intimacy: partnership versus provision, equality versus hierarchy, romance versus material security.

**Visibility of Gender-Based Violence**

Social media has increased awareness of gender-based violence in Nigeria. Cases of sexual assault, domestic violence, harassment, cyberstalking, and intimate partner abuse can attract national attention when shared online. Survivors and advocates use platforms to name abuse, challenge victim-blaming, and demand accountability.

"UN Women's evaluation synthesis found that campaigns using social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram were particularly effective in raising public awareness, especially when conducted in local languages and supported by local influencers" (UN Women, 2023, p. 24). This finding is relevant to Nigeria, where digital campaigns can complement community-based advocacy.

However, online visibility also carries risks. Survivors may be disbelieved, blamed, harassed, or pressured to withdraw complaints. Social media may raise awareness without necessarily producing justice or changing offline power relations.

**Economic Aspirations and the "Soft Life" Discourse**

Nigerian social media is saturated with aspirational content: luxury lifestyles, business success, travel, fashion, relationships, and financial freedom. The popular phrase "soft life" captures a desire for comfort and escape from economic hardship. Gender enters this discourse because men and women are often judged differently in relation to money.

Young men may feel pressure to display wealth, provide financially, and avoid being perceived as inadequate. Young women may be encouraged to seek financial security through relationships, entrepreneurship, marriage, or public visibility. These pressures can reinforce traditional provider expectations even while appearing modern.

At the same time, social media has created opportunities for young Nigerian women to build businesses, personal brands, and income streams through content creation, fashion, beauty, tutoring, digital marketing, and online sales. This can strengthen perceptions of women as economically capable and independent.

**How Social Media Reinforces Traditional Gender Norms**

**Amplification of Patriarchal Voices**

Social media does not only circulate progressive ideas. It also gives visibility to individuals and communities that defend male authority, female submission, polygamy, restrictive dress codes, and control of women's sexuality. Religious sermons, cultural commentary, relationship coaches, and anti-feminist influencers can reach large audiences.

This amplification matters because traditional norms may appear renewed and modern when expressed through digital formats. A patriarchal message delivered through a polished TikTok video, a viral podcast clip, or a well-designed Instagram post may feel more persuasive than the same message delivered in a family setting.

**Misogyny and Online Harassment**

Women who speak publicly about feminism, politics, sexuality, or gender equality often face online abuse. This may include insults, sexualised comments, threats, body-shaming, accusations of immorality, and attempts to silence them. Such harassment can discourage young women from participating in public discourse.

Research on gender stereotypes and social media in African contexts notes that social media can reinforce conventional gender norms, objectify women, limit diverse gender representation, and contribute to cyberbullying and online harassment (Musa, 2024, p. 7). This suggests that digital spaces can reproduce offline gender hierarchies.

**Commodification of Femininity**

Social media often rewards women's physical appearance, sexual attractiveness, domestic skill, and relationship desirability. Beauty filters, fashion trends, fitness content, and influencer culture can create narrow standards of feminine success. Young women may feel pressure to become visually appealing, romantically desirable, and constantly available for public display.

This commodification can coexist with empowerment. A woman may use beauty content to build a business or express creativity, but the same content may also reinforce the idea that women's worth depends on appearance. The meaning depends on context, audience, and the degree of choice available to the content creator.

**Masculinity as Financial Performance**

For young Nigerian men, social media often links masculinity to money. Content celebrating expensive cars, designer clothing, nightlife, gifts to girlfriends, and lavish weddings can make financial provision appear central to manhood. This can be especially damaging in a context of youth unemployment and economic insecurity.

Men who cannot meet these expectations may experience shame, anxiety, or resentment. Some may adopt aggressive or controlling behaviour to assert authority. Others may reject relationships altogether or embrace online ideologies that blame women for economic frustration.

**Romanticisation of Submission**

Some Nigerian digital content presents female submission as natural, religious, or necessary for successful relationships. Such content may portray assertive women as disrespectful, feminist women as bitter, and men's authority as divinely ordered. These messages can discourage young women from negotiating boundaries or pursuing leadership.

However, it is important not to assume that all religious or cultural content is inherently oppressive. Many young Nigerians interpret religious teachings in ways that emphasise mutual respect, love, responsibility, and partnership. The issue is not religion itself but the use of religious authority to justify unequal power.

**Gender, Religion, and Social Media**

Religion is a powerful influence on gender perceptions in Nigeria. Christianity and Islam shape many young people's understanding of marriage, sexuality, family leadership, modesty, and moral conduct. Social media has expanded religious influence by allowing pastors, imams, evangelists, and religious influencers to reach audiences beyond physical congregations.

Religious content can promote gender equality when it emphasises mutual love, dignity, protection from abuse, and shared responsibility. It can also reinforce hierarchy when it presents male headship and female submission as fixed divine requirements.

For Nigerian youths, religious social media may be especially persuasive because it combines spiritual authority with emotional reassurance. A young person facing economic uncertainty, relationship pressure, or family conflict may find comfort in clear gender rules. Social media therefore does not merely secularise gender norms; it can also digitise and intensify religious gender discourse.

**Gender, Ethnicity, and Regional Difference**

Nigeria's ethnic and regional diversity means that social media's influence is not uniform. Gender expectations in Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa-Fulani, Ijaw, Tiv, Efik, and other communities may differ in emphasis, although patriarchal patterns are widespread.

Social media can create pan-Nigerian youth conversations, but it can also expose regional and ethnic differences. A debate about bride price, widowhood practices, polygamy, or women's inheritance rights may reveal contrasting cultural assumptions. Young Nigerians may use social media to defend their cultural practices, critique them, or negotiate hybrid positions.

Language is also important. Gender discourse in English may reach educated urban youths more easily, while content in Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other languages may reach wider audiences. Local-language content can make gender advocacy more accessible, but it can also carry culturally specific assumptions about respectability and authority.

**Social Media, Feminism, and Youth Activism**

Nigerian digital feminism has become increasingly visible. Young women use social media to discuss sexual harassment, workplace discrimination, domestic violence, reproductive rights, political representation, and everyday sexism. Hashtags, viral threads, and online communities allow feminist ideas to circulate beyond university campuses and urban centres.

Social media feminism is significant because it makes private experiences public. A young woman who experiences harassment may find language for her experience, discover that others share it, and receive support from an online community. This can transform isolated personal pain into collective awareness.

However, digital feminism also faces criticism. Some Nigerians view it as elitist, foreign, anti-family, or disconnected from the concerns of less privileged women. Others argue that online activism can become performative, focusing on visibility rather than structural change. These criticisms are important, but they should not dismiss the real consciousness-raising function of digital feminist spaces.

**Masculinity in Nigerian Digital Culture**

Social media has become a major site for the construction of masculinity among Nigerian youths. Male influencers, comedians, fitness creators, relationship coaches, musicians, and religious teachers offer competing models of what it means to be a man.

One dominant model presents men as providers, protectors, decision-makers, and emotionally restrained figures. Another model emphasises financial success, sexual confidence, physical fitness, and social dominance. A third model, less visible but increasingly present, promotes responsible partnership, emotional openness, caregiving, and respect for women.

The tension among these models is evident in online debates about male responsibility. Some content encourages young men to work hard, avoid dependence, and value women who support them. Other content encourages resentment toward women, frames relationships as competitive transactions, or presents feminism as an attack on men.

These competing messages show that masculinity is not disappearing; it is being renegotiated. Nigerian youths are not simply accepting or rejecting masculinity. They are deciding which version of masculinity to perform, defend, or challenge.

**Femininity, Body Image, and Respectability**

Social media strongly influences how young Nigerian women understand femininity. Beauty standards, fashion trends, fitness culture, makeup tutorials, and celebrity images shape ideals of the female body. These ideals may privilege light skin, slimness, curviness, long hair, expensive clothing, or sexual attractiveness, depending on the platform and audience.

Such standards can affect self-esteem and encourage comparison. Young women may feel pressure to alter their appearance, purchase products, or seek validation through likes and comments. Beauty culture can therefore become a site of both creativity and insecurity.

Respectability is another major theme. Online discussions often police women's clothing, sexual behaviour, drinking, nightlife, friendship choices, and public speech. A woman may be praised as "wife material" for modesty and domestic skill, or criticised as immoral for expressing sexuality or independence.

These judgements reveal a continuing association between femininity and moral responsibility. Social media does not eliminate this association; it makes it more visible and more widely debated.

**Education, Employment, and Gender Aspirations**

Social media can influence youths' educational and career aspirations by presenting role models and information about opportunities. Young women may see female engineers, lawyers, tech professionals, politicians, and entrepreneurs, which can challenge the assumption that certain careers are masculine. Young men may encounter men in caregiving professions or creative industries, challenging the idea that men must pursue only dominant or high-income roles.

Social media also provides practical resources: scholarship information, business tutorials, professional networking, job advertisements, and mentorship content. These resources can support gender equality by expanding access to opportunity.

However, digital inequality matters. Youths with reliable internet access, devices, digital skills, and social capital benefit more from these opportunities than those without them. Rural youths, poorer youths, and those with limited digital literacy may be excluded from the most empowering aspects of social media.

**Family, Parenting, and Intergenerational Change**

Social media often creates tension between youths and older family members. Parents may view online gender discourse as disrespectful, immoral, or foreign. Youths may view parental expectations as outdated or restrictive. These tensions are especially visible around dating, marriage, women's autonomy, dress, and obedience.

Yet social media can also support intergenerational dialogue. Parents, religious leaders, and community elders now participate in online conversations. Some use digital platforms to promote healthy relationships, condemn violence, and encourage shared responsibility. The outcome depends on whether digital spaces enable respectful dialogue or simply intensify polarisation.

**Risks and Limitations of Social Media Influence**

**Misinformation**

Gender-related misinformation spreads rapidly online. False claims about feminism, marriage, sexuality, reproductive health, and gender-based violence can shape youth attitudes. Because social media rewards engagement, sensational content may receive more attention than careful analysis.

**Echo Chambers**

Algorithms may show users content similar to what they already engage with. A youth who watches anti-feminist videos may receive more anti-feminist videos, making one perspective appear universal. This can harden attitudes rather than encourage reflection.

**Digital Divide**

Not all Nigerian youths have equal access to social media. Differences in income, location, gender, disability, education, and connectivity shape who can participate in digital gender discourse. Social media may therefore empower already privileged youths while leaving others behind.

**Performative Activism**

Online support for gender equality may not translate into offline behaviour. A young person may share feminist posts while still practising controlling behaviour in a relationship. Digital visibility does not guarantee ethical conduct.

**Commercialisation**

Influencers may promote gender messages for attention, followers, or profit. Relationship advice, beauty content, and lifestyle posts may be shaped more by market incentives than by genuine concern for youth wellbeing.

**Empirical Evidence from Nigerian Studies**

Recent Nigerian research provides useful evidence of social media's influence on gender perceptions. "A study conducted in Oyo State examined the influence of social media on knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to gender equality. Its findings indicated that residents became highly knowledgeable about gender equality through platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and LinkedIn" (Adeyemi et al., 2023, p. 45).

Another study focused on female undergraduates in Nigerian universities and found that exposure to gender-related campaigns challenged traditional norms, enhanced self-confidence, and encouraged advocacy. "The study also found that the impact was mediated by institutional climate and socio-cultural context, meaning that supportive university environments strengthened the internalisation of egalitarian ideals" (Okafor et al., 2025, p. 112).

Research on Nigerian online discourse has also shown that gender roles are negotiated through humour, influencer culture, and social media "cruise." "One discourse analysis found that popular online narratives promoted competing visions of masculinity and femininity, with some voices encouraging male responsibility and others normalising female financial dependence on men" (Adewale, 2025, p. 4).

These studies suggest that social media's effect is conditional rather than automatic. It can educate, empower, and mobilise, but its influence is mediated by content type, audience identity, institutional support, and broader social norms.

The evidence points to a complex relationship between social media and gender-role change. Social media expands the range of gender identities and relationships that Nigerian youths can imagine. It gives young people access to feminist ideas, diverse role models, rights-based information, and transnational conversations. It also enables them to question practices that previous generations may have accepted without debate.

At the same time, social media intensifies gender conflict. Because gender is tied to family, religion, sexuality, money, and status, debates online can become emotionally charged. Young men and women may encounter content that portrays the other gender as manipulative, greedy, immoral, or oppressive. Such content can deepen mistrust rather than promote equality.

The key issue is not whether Nigerian youths use social media, but what kinds of gender narratives they encounter and how they interpret them. A young person who follows thoughtful educators, activists, and professionals may develop more egalitarian views. A young person immersed in misogynistic or materialistic content may develop more rigid views.

Offline conditions remain decisive. Social media may encourage a young woman to pursue education and financial independence, but she may still face family pressure to marry early or prioritise domestic duties. Social media may encourage a young man to reject violence, but he may still face peer pressure to prove dominance. Digital change must therefore be understood alongside economic, religious, familial, and institutional realities.

**Recommendations**

**For Schools and Universities**

Educational institutions should integrate digital literacy and gender education into curricula. Students should be taught how to evaluate online sources, recognise stereotypes, understand consent, identify misinformation, and engage respectfully in online debates.

Universities should also create safe reporting systems for sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Digital awareness campaigns should be paired with concrete institutional support.

**For Parents and Guardians**

Parents should engage youths in conversations about online gender content rather than simply prohibiting social media use. Open discussion can help young people distinguish between empowering content, harmful stereotypes, and commercialised relationship advice.

**For Religious and Community Leaders**

Religious and community leaders should promote interpretations of gender that emphasise dignity, mutual responsibility, nonviolence, and shared decision-making. They can use their digital influence to challenge abuse and support survivors.

**For Civil Society and Advocacy Organisations**

Civil society organisations should create engaging, locally relevant digital content in English, Pidgin, and major Nigerian languages. Campaigns should involve youth creators, influencers, survivors, and community leaders.

**For Policymakers**

Government agencies should support digital inclusion, online safety, and gender-based violence prevention. Policies should address cyberharassment, data access, digital skills training, and accountability for online abuse.

**For Social Media Platforms**

Platforms should improve reporting systems, reduce the visibility of harassing content, support credible educational content, and avoid amplifying sensational gender antagonism. Algorithmic transparency and stronger moderation can make digital spaces safer for young users.

## Conclusion

Social media is reshaping how contemporary Nigerian youths perceive gender roles. It has made patriarchal assumptions more visible and contestable, while also providing new avenues for their reinforcement. Through WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X, and YouTube, young Nigerians encounter competing messages about providerhood, submission, independence, beauty, sexuality, marriage, caregiving, leadership, and authority.

The most accurate conclusion is that social media produces gender contestation rather than a single direction of change. It can expose youths to egalitarian ideas and empower them to challenge injustice, but it can also amplify misogyny, commodify femininity, pressure men into financial performance, and romanticise hierarchy. Its impact depends on digital literacy, platform design, content quality, peer networks, family expectations, religion, economic conditions, and institutional support.

For Nigerian society, the challenge is not to reject social media but to use it intentionally. Schools, families, religious institutions, civil society, policymakers, and platforms must help young people develop the critical capacity to engage with gender content responsibly. If this is done, social media can become a powerful tool for building more equitable gender relations among Nigerian youths.

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