

DIGITALIZING IDEOLOGY—*HOW SOCIAL MEDIA IS SHAPING YOUTH VALUES AND WORLDVIEWS IN NIGERIA*

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How to cite:

Ewedemi, V. I. & Adam, E. Digitalizing Ideology—How Social Media Is Shaping Youth Values and Worldviews in Nigeria. *Chemchemi International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 12(1), i-j. <https://doi.org/10.33886/cijhs.v12i1.769>

Abstract

In today's digital domain, where connectivity is essential, social media platforms have surpassed mere interaction spaces to become influential instruments that shape ideologies. For African youth, particularly in Nigeria, these platforms profoundly affect their self-perception, values, and worldview. This paper explores how social media influences young people's ideologies, demonstrating how digital content, influencers, and algorithms curate information that both contests and reinforces traditional cultural values while presenting new perspectives. Grounded in theories such as Cultivation Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, and Critical Theory, this study investigates the psychological, social, and technology-related factors driving this transformation. By analysing how youth consume content, the influence of algorithms, and the emergence of ideological bubbles, this paper illuminates how digital media reshapes identity, redefines values, and contributes to cultural polarisation. The study supports improved media literacy, stricter platform regulations, and more effective pedagogical tactics to empower young people in Africa to navigate this rapidly changing ideological landscape.

Keywords: African Youth, Digitalisation, Ideology, Social Cognitive Theory, Social Media.

Introduction

Social media has become an undeniable force in modern life, particularly among young people. Platforms including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X have changed the way we interact, consume information, and shape our identities. What originated as a simple means to connect with friends has evolved into an influential tool that not only mirrors culture but also actively shapes it. For young people, social media is no longer only a source of entertainment; it is a space where they explore their identities, beliefs, and views of the world.

In today's hyper-connected society, social media platforms act as more than just communication tools; they are vital spaces for engagement that absorb and shape ideologies, cultural values, and identities. Social media has transitioned from being a passive backdrop to an active force for cultural and ideological change. These digital spaces continuously expose users to carefully selected content, opinions driven by influencers, and ideologies reinforced by algorithms. While engaging with this content, users may be unconsciously "reprogrammed" by the embedded ideologies in what they watch, read, and share.

A growing body of scholarship highlights the ideological influence of social media. Scholars such as Couldry and Hepp (2017) argue that the media does not simply reflect reality; it also helps construct it. Banet-Weiser (2018) examined how platforms magnify certain ideologies, such as prevalent misogyny, while marginalising dissenting and feminist perspectives. These insights prove particularly important when considering the effect of social media on perceptions of gender, power, and cultural norms.

This study draws on five key theoretical frameworks to understand these processes: Cultivation Theory, which explores how repeated media exposure influences worldviews (Gerbner & Gross, 1976); Social Cognitive Theory, which emphasizes learning through modeled behaviors (Bandura, 2001); Uses and Gratifications Theory, which investigates why people seek specific types of media content (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973); Critical Theory, which interrogates the power relations and ideological biases built into media structures; and Ideology Theory, particularly Althusserian thought, which views media functioning as a tool for sustaining dominant power systems. Using these frameworks, this paper examines how social media affects young people in Nigeria and beyond, focusing on gender roles, feminist resistance, and the normalisation of misogyny in digital spaces. It is vital to explore how social media is influencing the ideologies and values of young people, as its impact should not be understated.

Social media possesses an impressive capacity to mould perceptions and behaviours, often in ways that are not immediately noticeable. As young people spend more time online, they encounter diverse ideologies that often challenge traditional cultural values and norms. Understanding how social media influences this transformation is crucial, as it affects how young people perceive themselves, their relationships, and the world around them. The rise of viral content, influencers, and algorithm-driven recommendations indicates that the information consumed by young people deeply influences their beliefs, attitudes, and overall worldview. Traditional values concerning gender, family, and social roles are often questioned and sometimes redefined by the digital content that young people encounter. In an era of constantly evolving cultural norms, it is vital to examine how social media promotes these changes.

A key question this paper addresses is: How do social media platforms influence the ideological shifts and worldviews of young people, particularly regarding traditional cultural values and gender norms? This examination focuses on how the content youth consume—whether via influencers, viral trends, or machine-driven recommendations—affects their perspectives on essential social issues. As social media

continues shaping the ideological landscape, it is critical to understand how it alters young people's perceptions of identity, power relations, and social justice. The tension between traditional cultural values and the online narratives encountered by young people makes this investigation crucial for understanding how social media influences the evolution of these values.

Theoretical Frameworks

This paper utilises five interconnected theoretical frameworks to explore the complex and often contradictory effects of social media on youth ideologies. The first framework is Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), which suggests that constant exposure to ideological narratives on social media—such as the “alpha male” mentality or the belief that wealth equates to worth—can distort young people's perceptions of reality. This repeated exposure normalises ideas of male dominance over women, control, and women's forced submission in the context of gender. Such normalisation is not simply passive; it is deeply embedded in societal expectations and influences how young people approach both real-world and digital relationships. In certain African cultures, particularly in Nigeria, notions that promote the subjugation of women and treat females as second-class citizens are prevalent. While there are individuals with opposing views, some youths have started to promote online themes that reinforce women's subjugation, control, and traditional femininity. This recycling of ideology illustrates how patriarchal narratives persist and how social media can serve as accelerators rather than disruptors of negative traditional values.

Additionally, Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2001) argues that youths do not simply passively consume content; they learn by modelling the behaviours of influencers and viral personalities who represent specific worldviews. In Nigeria, influencers who advocate for the idea that submission is a woman's virtue or suggest that feminism threatens “African culture” often attract large, dedicated followings. These influencers shape the beliefs and behaviours of their younger followers, reinforcing these ideas through constant repetition. Instead of adopting the teachings of their parents or family members in the real world, many young people gravitate towards the teachings of strangers who have gained influence, often in a religious context. These influencers lack accountability yet significantly impact the attitudes and belief systems of youth more than traditional social institutions such as churches or schools.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1973) asserts that young people turn to social media to fulfil their emotional, social, and cognitive needs. This theory helps to explain why certain content connects with young Nigerians. For example, posts from influencers like Andrew Tate—a self-proclaimed British misogynist and “manfluencer”—satisfy men's psychological need for dominance and control. In societies where male status feels increasingly insecure due to economic problems, such content functions as a form of affirmation. With more women capable of working and less dependent on men as traditional providers, some men feel threatened and seek validation from influencers who tell them how to preserve their relevance and status. Consequently, social media regularly becomes a coping mechanism for individuals who harbour aggression, justification, and resentment.

Furthermore, a Critical Theory perspective shows that social media platforms are not ideologically neutral; they serve market-driven interests that profit from conflict, virality, and engagement, frequently at the expense of progressive or feminist voices. Feminist creators frequently face shadow-banning or harassment, while misogynistic content is amplified, gaining higher visibility and engagement. By prioritising extreme content, these platforms promote polarised ideologies and silence balanced perspectives in favour of drama, benefiting their algorithms rather than their users.

Finally, Ideology Theory, rooted in the work of Althusser, views ideology as a set of beliefs that serve the interests of the dominant social classes. Social media functions as an ideological tool, subtly promoting beliefs that sustain patriarchy, neoliberalism, and consumerism. For instance, Nigerian relationship blogs and influencers often represent feminist women as undesirable while portraying male-led relationship dynamics as “natural” or “godly.” This ideology is propagated among young men and women who are eager to cling to traditional values rather than adapt to a changing society. Although it may seem like an individual choice, this behaviour results from ideological conditioning reinforced through repeated digital exposure.

Contextual Background: Social Media, Identity, and Values

Over the years, social media has evolved from simple communication tools into powerful platforms that shape youth culture. Early platforms such as Facebook enabled users to connect with friends, while newer platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube focus on visual content and influencer-driven trends. These platforms are not only changing how young people engage with others but also how they understand and express themselves. The shift from text toward short-form and visual video content has accelerated the dissemination of cultural ideas and norms among young people, thereby increasing the intensity and reach of these ideological messages.

Social media has dramatically changed how young people engage with culture, identity, and resistance. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok have become powerful spaces for feminist expression. For instance, Nigerian feminists have used hashtags such as #ArewaMeToo, #EndSARS, and #NoMeansNo to challenge patriarchal systems and expose gender-based violence. These digital movements reflect a major shift in youth engagement, giving young women and queer individuals a platform to stand up to power. In fact, these platforms have facilitated the emergence of a new generation of activists and activism. They enable marginalised voices to mobilise support and build solidarity networks that were previously difficult to establish in traditional offline spaces. The scale and organisation of recent (2024, 2025) anti-government protests by Gen Z youth in Kenya and Nigeria strongly attest to this phenomenon.

However, these platforms also serve as breeding grounds for ideological pushback. Feminism’s call for gender equality is often met with derision, tone policing, and digital harassment, especially on platforms dominated by male-driven discourse. This backlash is frequently disguised as “balance” or “truth-telling,” but its fundamental goal is ideological: to reinforce male dominance under the guise of restoring order. Young women who challenge male-dominated norms online are often labelled as “bitter,” “unmarriageable,” or “Westernised.” These labels aim to silence dissent and maintain established gender hierarchies. The attacks faced online reflect not only personal views but also collective efforts to delegitimise feminist narratives and preserve existing social power structures.

From a Critical Theory standpoint, these dynamics expose the underlying power structures behind these platforms, which are not ideologically neutral. Algorithms are designed to reward content that promotes social hierarchies, including those based on gender. Influencers who advocate for patriarchal ideologies are often monetised and amplified, while grassroots feminist voices are more likely to face shadow banning or be derailed by coordinated trolling. This algorithmic prejudice reflects broader capitalist motivations, in which sensationalism and conflict drive greater engagement and revenue, often at the expense of societal equity.

Social Media: A Two-Edged Sword

Social media has the potential to shift cultural narratives significantly, but it operates as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it enables youth voices; on the other, it reinforces dominant ideologies. This paradox creates a contested space in which youth culture is continuously reshaped and affected by both algorithmic logic and human choices. In the digital world, ideology becomes both decentralised and influential. In contrast to traditional media, which typically delivers ideological messages in a top-down manner, social media allows for participatory content creation. However, this democratisation is paradoxically hierarchical—what gains visibility is determined by platform algorithms that tend to prioritise sensational, emotionally charged, and divisive content. Extremes are amplified, fostering polarisation and reducing the space for nuanced conversations on complex social topics.

As Banet-Weiser (2018) points out, online misogyny is not an isolated or fringe issue; it is mainstreamed through humour, lifestyle content, and pseudo-intellectual arguments that frame gender equality as unreasonable or foreign. This creates a dangerous ecosystem where young men, in particular, are socialised into both subtle and overt forms of misogyny, frequently under the guise of “truth,” “masculine empowerment,” or “cultural preservation.”

Meanwhile, women are expected to defend their rights to autonomy, expression, and safety in spaces that were originally intended to be empowering. Outnumbered and lacking support from the female community, empowered women often struggle, especially when facing fellow women who support patriarchal views and criticise those with strong feminist voices. These dynamics highlight the complications within gendered online communities and how internalised patriarchy can hinder women’s progress. This ideological tension influences not only individual identities but also wider cultural norms and political attitudes. As youth engage in content that fluctuates between feminist resistance and anti-feminist backlash, their worldviews become fragmented, caught between traditional expectations, the effect of digital content, and their evolving personal beliefs. This constant back-and-forth in ideological perspectives remains crucial for understanding how young people’s values are being transformed in real time.

For Nigerian youth, social media consumption goes beyond mere curiosity or entertainment; economic and social pressures, as well as the search for identity, deeply influence it. Influencers, both local and global, have gained immense visibility, providing accessible pathways to wealth, fame, and influence. Figures like Andrew Tate, John Doe, AjeboDanny, Wizarab, and SheddydKing have amassed large followings by promoting misogynistic views as “truths” about gender and success. In Nigeria, influencers subtly or overtly push traditional, patriarchal beliefs disguised as “relationship advice” or “masculinity coaching.” This trend aligns with Social Cognitive Theory, which suggests that young people, especially adolescents and young adults, learn behaviours and values by observing and mimicking those perceived as successful or authoritative. In this context, influencers act as virtual mentors, molding how young men understand gender roles, power dynamics, and women’s autonomy.

Over time, young people begin internalising views that frame all women as manipulative, hypergamous, and naturally subordinate to men—except for those raised by strong fathers who believe in patriarchy. While feminist discourse continues to gain traction, it faces challenges in defining and redefining what feminism truly stands for.

Nevertheless, Cultivation Theory offers another perspective. The more these narratives are repeated—often amplified by algorithmic feedback loops—the more normalised they become. Misogynistic tropes, when continuously presented and rewarded with likes, shares, and virality, start to feel like common sense. Social media platforms are not just reflecting what young people believe; they are actively shaping their beliefs by prioritising content that triggers strong emotional responses, such as outrage, moral panic, and gender-based antagonism.

Uses and Gratifications Theory provides insight into why this content is so compelling. Many young Nigerian men, disillusioned by economic problems and political marginalisation, turn to these influencers for a feeling of control and clarity in a fast-changing world. The rise of “alpha male” and “red pill” ideology online fulfils psychological and emotional needs by giving explanations for personal failures that shift blame onto feminism, promote dominance, and reject vulnerability. This kind of content does not merely fill a gap; it provides a sense of certainty, control, and superiority in a society where traditional male roles are becoming increasingly uncertain.

Algorithms, Echo Chambers, and Ideological Polarisation

Social media platforms prioritise attention over ideological balance, often amplifying content that elicits strong emotional reactions such as outrage, humour, or fear. Sites like X, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram frequently promote extreme, attention-grabbing ideologies without presenting critical perspectives or counter-narratives. In Nigeria, this leads to the widespread exposure of controversial content related to gender roles, relationships, and masculinity.

Algorithms act as invisible gatekeepers, curating users’ feeds based on their previous behaviours and preferences, which reinforces existing beliefs (Gillespie, 2014). From the perspective of Cultivation Theory, frequent exposure to these ideologies gradually normalises them. Young people who regularly encounter content portraying women negatively or framing feminism as destructive start to internalise these ideas as truths. Additionally, influencers who promote get-rich-quick schemes and display a lavish lifestyle are idolised by both young men and women. Their content encourages followers to solicit funds and emulate this lifestyle, leading them to believe they can achieve wealth without hard work or traditional paths. This constant exposure diminishes critical thinking, making it increasingly difficult to challenge rigid, gendered assumptions.

Furthermore, insular groups have become the default online environment for many Nigerian youths, limiting their exposure to different viewpoints. Algorithms isolate users in “filter bubbles,” where they are primarily exposed to opinions that align with their own. As these young people view content that reinforces traditional gender roles and promotes male dominance, platforms continuously feed them similar material, producing a consistent, deeply biased ideological environment. This situation creates challenges for democratic discourse and gender equality. Feminist viewpoints are often marginalised or dismissed as foreign or anti-African, while social media fosters closed networks that promote reinforcement rather than reflection.

Social Cognitive Theory explains how youths mimic and adopt behaviours from influencers who present misogynistic ideologies as aspirational and logical. These figures often mix ideological content with displays of wealth and social dominance, making misogyny a lifestyle to aspire to.

Currently, digital misogyny has increased markedly through ideological bubbles or “echo chambers.”

Influencers depict women as incapable of love, suggesting that men have been deceived over the years. They frame feminism as a threat to social values, family structures, and male authority. In conservative societies like Nigeria, these accounts resonate powerfully, encouraging women to revert to customary notions of femininity that emphasise being soft, submissive, and entirely led by men.

From a Critical Theory perspective, it is evident that platforms benefit from polarisation. Misogynistic content generates high engagement due to its shock value and controversy, increasing its likelihood of being amplified by algorithms that prioritise virality. In contrast, feminist content is often flagged, reported, or excluded from comment sections, making meaningful online conversations more challenging to maintain.

The Ideology Theory further shows that these patterns are not accidental; they reflect power structures that present dominant worldviews as “natural” while labelling others as deviant. Social media does not simply host ideological conflicts; it actively perpetuates and monetises them, creating a system in which patriarchal values are reinforced under the guise of free speech and cultural authenticity.

In Nigeria, these dynamics play out in localised forms. Communities like “Trad Twitter,” “Naija Relationship TikTok,” and “Christian Marriage YouTube” promote patriarchal values, creating interconnected spaces where misogyny is normalised. These ideologies, often disguised by religious or cultural language, reinforce the belief that men must control women for society to function. For young Nigerian feminists, these spaces can be hostile. Their exclusion from dominant digital narratives reflects the real-world marginalisation of women, demonstrating how digital culture is far more than a mirror of society and actively shapes and perpetuates social realities.

Masculinity, Feminism, and Digital Power

Social media has changed how youth identity is formed, creating both opportunities and risks. Young people are increasingly turning to digital platforms for guidance, self-expression, and social connection. Influencers, often seen as role models, impart behaviours that youth internalise and accept as truth as they try to navigate the complexities of the world. As a result, men may adopt traits associated with traditional masculinity, while women might internalise submissive or hyper-feminine roles. These platforms repeatedly promote a version of masculinity that emphasises control, while women are often taught to embody beauty and submission or to harbour disdain for men. Both dynamics reinforce patriarchal values, restricting young women’s autonomy. Media representation not only depicts social conventions but also deliberately shapes gender roles (Gallagher, 2001). These developing values correspond to existing power structures, reinforcing patriarchal norms that limit women’s autonomy, perpetuated by both men and women.

In Nigeria, some influencers promote traditional patriarchal gender roles, positioning men as leaders and women as supporters in relationships. This messaging, which once resided within family and church settings, now has a much broader reach, making it progressively harder for women to challenge these norms and assert their autonomy. Furthermore, when women attempt to counter these ideologies, some female influencers ultimately advocate for the destruction of all men and encourage women to reject marriage or the notion of motherhood. However, patriarchal ideologies have proven far more resilient and pervasive than the misandrist perspectives that challenge modern beliefs and influence the youth.

Despite the prevalence of both patriarchal and misandrist ideologies, feminist counter-narratives are emerging. Movements like #WifeNotSlave and #IAmNotYourMate illustrate how digital spaces can

challenge traditional gender norms. Although these counter-narratives are often marginalised, they highlight the transformative potential of social media in disrupting established power structures. Feminist discourse within these platforms demonstrates that ideological change is possible, even within restrictive content ecosystems.

In retrospect, social media has generated a globalised culture that blends regional and international ideologies, often leading to cultural uniformity. In Nigeria, this creates tension between traditional values and Westernised content, particularly around gender, politics, and family. While young people are empowered to assert their identities, they encounter cultural fragmentation as feminist views challenge male-dominated norms, resulting in generational conflicts. Social media, particularly feminist discourse, undermines traditional Nigerian gender roles that position women in subordinate family roles. Influencers and movements expose young women to alternatives such as gender equality and sexual autonomy, directly conflicting with the notion that women should prioritise family. Patriarchal groups resist these shifts by framing feminism as a foreign threat to cultural values.

The divide between traditional values and progressive ideals is widening, with social media amplifying this polarisation. Algorithms frequently prioritise sensationalised, divisive content, occasionally rewarding anti-feminist rhetoric and hyper-masculine discourse. This polarisation leads to ideological clashes, especially concerning women's roles in public life and the power struggle over social conventions. While social media provides a platform for feminist resistance, it also facilitates gendered surveillance and control. Misogynistic movements, such as those advocating the "Red Pill" ideology, use these platforms to propagate toxic stereotypes. Additionally, misandrists have positioned themselves under the banner of feminism to promote a message of man-hating. Both extreme perspectives unite to undermine the true origins of feminism.

Recommendations

Social media presents both opportunities and challenges in reshaping Nigerian cultural norms. It allows young people to contest traditional values but also deepens cultural divisions and sustains patriarchal ideologies. As feminist movements gain traction, social media platforms must take responsibility for fostering balanced discourse, while individuals must participate critically to resist ideological manipulation and promote social justice.

One critical strategy is to foster critical media literacy, educating young people on how social media shapes their perceptions, behaviours, and values. By furnishing youth with the tools to analyse content, they can avoid internalising damaging ideologies, particularly concerning gender, power, and identity. Media literacy teaches young people that social media is not neutral; it is intended to promote specific content. Encouraging critical consumption of media allows youth to resist harmful portrayals of gender roles and challenge narratives such as toxic masculinity and the objectification of women.

Media literacy should be embedded into daily digital practices, encouraging young people to engage with progressive content and create media that reflects their values. While media literacy is essential, social media platforms need to take greater responsibility for regulating content and curbing toxic doctrines. Services like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok often incentivise sensationalised and misogynistic content that can negatively influence young people's values. A collective approach to addressing this issue involves improving content moderation systems, developing more inclusive algorithms, and establishing policies that combat misogyny and hate speech. These platforms should also promote educational content on

gender equality and amplify different voices to create a more inclusive environment. By prioritising positive and inclusive content, social media can become a platform for social change and help disrupt damaging ideologies.

Additionally, parents and educators serve a key role in guiding young people through the complexities of social media. Given the early introduction that youths have to digital content, parents should cultivate a frank conversation about its possible impact on gender, power relations, and relationships. By setting guidelines for media usage and encouraging critical thinking, parents can help youths navigate content that aligns with their values. Educators should also integrate gender studies and media literacy in their curricula to help students build critical thinking skills. Teaching students about the history of feminism and the effects of patriarchy will empower them to evaluate critically digital content and resist toxic influences.

Furthermore, supporting and amplifying feminist movements online is a powerful way to challenge misogynistic ideologies. Feminism offers a critical lens by which to scrutinise and confront the gendered power structures perpetuated by social media. Platforms should create spaces for feminist activism to thrive, such as campaigns and joint projects that combat online harassment and promote gender equality. In Nigeria, where patriarchal structures exercise significant control over women's lives, online feminist activism functions as a tool for resistance and empowerment. The success of movements like #EndSARS showcases the capacity of digital spaces to drive social change. Supporting these movements can help challenge misogynistic ideologies and advance equality. While social media has a substantial influence on young people's values and worldviews, concerted efforts can mitigate its harmful effects. A combination of critical media literacy, platform accountability, parental guidance, and the empowerment of feminist movements can help create a balanced digital environment. As social media continues to shape future generations, it is essential to promote positive change and confront toxic ideologies.

Conclusion

This article illustrates that social media is a powerful force in moulding youth culture and ideological values. It affects everything from self-image and relationships to power relations and political beliefs. The algorithms behind social media create closed circles where ideologies are not merely reinforced but also magnified. Misogynistic views, often promoted by influencers advocating regressive ideas about masculinity and gender roles, spread widely. This is particularly dangerous as these views often go unchallenged in digital spaces where young people are most impressionable. However, the impact of social media is not entirely negative. While it has the potential to reinforce harmful gender norms, it also provides a platform for challenging these accounts. Feminist movements and other social equity initiatives leverage social media to empower young people, encouraging them to question power structures, combat gender-based violence, and advocate for equality. With critical media literacy, platform accountability, and ongoing feminist activism, Nigerians are able to transform social media into a space that cultivates inclusivity and empowerment. A multifaceted approach is needed to address digital ideological reprogramming. Social media platforms have to take greater responsibility for the content they promote, curbing destructive ideologies while amplifying progressive ones. Parents, educators, and youths themselves must be empowered to interact critically with digital content, learning to identify and challenge regressive ideologies. Further research and action are needed to equip the next generation with the tools to engage with and resist toxic online ideologies critically.

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