

## **THE GROWING DIGITAL FOOTPRINT OF NIGERIAN YOUTH PANACEA TO DIGITAL PRESENCE AND ENGAGEMENT**

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### **Abstract**

The expanding digital footprint of Nigerian youth presents both significant opportunities and challenges for personal and national development. This paper examines the rapid growth of digital connectivity among young Nigerians, analyzing its impacts across education, employment, civic engagement, and cultural exchange. While increased internet access and social media usage have created new avenues for learning, entrepreneurship, and political participation, they have also exacerbated issues like the digital divide, cybersecurity threats, misinformation, and potential negative effects on mental health and social skills. The study reviews recent literature and data on internet penetration, smartphone adoption, and social media usage among Nigerian youth. It explores how digital platforms are reshaping education, job seeking, and civic activism, while also considering risks like online radicalization and cyberbullying. Policy recommendations are provided to maximize the benefits of youth digital engagement while mitigating associated risks. These include investing in digital infrastructure, implementing comprehensive digital literacy programs, developing data protection laws, promoting responsible internet use, supporting digital innovation, and addressing online misinformation. By strategically managing the digital footprint of its youth, Nigeria can leverage this engagement to drive socioeconomic development and position itself as a leader in the African digital economy.

**Key words: Digital footprint, digital growth, digital presence and growth**

### **Introduction**

Digital footprint is the trail of data created by an individual's online activities, including social media interactions, internet searches, and digital transactions (Buchanan, Southgate, & Smith, 2017). The social media interactions usually take place on socio media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and Twitter. The digital footprint on these platforms is increasingly shaping the nation's social, economic, and political spheres. In the rapidly evolving digital

landscape of a developing country like Nigeria, where the youth are at the forefront of technological adoption, integration and online presence and engagement.

The expanding digital footprint of Nigerian youth presents significant opportunities for personal and national development, but also poses risks that require careful management and policy interventions. With over 60% of Nigeria's population under the age of 25 (National Population Commission, 2019), recent studies indicate that internet penetration in Nigeria has reached 51% as of 2021, with young people accounting for a significant portion of users (Internet World Stats, 2021). This surge in connectivity, coupled with the proliferation of affordable smartphones, has led to a dramatic expansion of Nigerian youth's digital presence and engagement for economic and social development through the social media.

Social media platforms have become integral to youth culture, with an estimate of 33 million social network users in the country as of 2021 (Statista, 2022). Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and increasingly TikTok, serve as spaces for self-expression, community and information sharing. These digital spaces have become powerful tools for youth activities, as evidenced by the role of social media in organizing online business and training (Statista, 2022).

### **Objectives and Process of Digital Footprint**

1. Education and Skill Development:
2. Entrepreneurship and Employment
3. Civic Engagement

### **Education and Skill Development**

Online learning platforms and resources are making education more accessible, allowing youth to acquire new skills and knowledge beyond traditional institutions. The digital revolution has

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significantly improved access to information and educational resources for Nigerian youth. Oye, Iahad, & Rahim (2017) found that internet access has enhanced learning experiences in Nigerian universities, allowing students to access a wealth of online resources and participate in e-learning platforms. Adebija, Fakomogbon, & Adebija (2019) highlighted the positive impact of mobile learning on Nigerian students, noting that it provides flexibility and personalized learning experiences. The study found that 78% of surveyed students believed mobile learning improved their academic performance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this digital access became even more crucial. Adeoye, Adanikin, & Adanikin (2020) discussed how Nigerian institutions rapidly adopted online learning platforms, demonstrating the potential for digital technologies to ensure educational continuity during crises.



**Figure 1: Foundation unveils program to empower Nigerian Youths with digital skills**

**Source:** <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/06/foundation-unveils-program-to-empower-nigerian-youths-with-digital-skills/>

## Entrepreneurship and Employment

Digital platforms are creating new avenues for young entrepreneurs to start businesses and for job seekers to connect with opportunities in the gig economy and formal sectors. Digital platforms have revolutionized job searching and entrepreneurship for Nigerian youth. Akande (2021) found that social media platforms, particularly LinkedIn, have become essential tools for job seekers in Nigeria, with 67% of surveyed youth reporting they had found job opportunities through these platforms. Afolayan, Ojebode, & Adedeji (2019) highlighted how e-commerce platforms like Jumia and Konga have created opportunities for young Nigerian entrepreneurs to start and scale businesses. The study noted a 34% increase in youth-led online businesses between 2016 and 2018. Furthermore, Olayiwola, Olaniyan, & Oladipo (2020) discussed the rise of the gig economy in Nigeria, facilitated by digital platforms, which has provided flexible income opportunities for many young Nigerians. Digital platforms have become powerful tools for civic engagement and political participation among Nigerian youth.



**Figure 2: Display of Goods and Services on Instagram page for Advertisement**

Sources: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C7Q2KqHCj6v/>



**Figure 3: Display of Goods and Services on Instagram page for Advertisement**

Sources: <https://www.instagram.com/p/C7Q2KqHCj6v/>

### Cultural Exchange

The internet facilitates cross-cultural interactions, allowing Nigerian youth to engage with global trends while also showcasing Nigerian culture to the world. However, this digital revolution is not without its challenges. Issues such as the digital divide, cybersecurity threats, and the spread of misinformation pose significant risks to young Nigerians navigating the online world. Digital platforms have connected Nigerian youth to global peers and cultures in unprecedented ways. Adetoro, Oyebode, & Ademuyiwa (2020) explored how social media has facilitated cultural



exchange among Nigerian youth, with 82% of surveyed participants reporting increased awareness and appreciation of other cultures through online interactions.



**Figure 4: Nigeria-China Culture Exchange fetes Lagos school kids**

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### **Rapid Growth of Digital Economy as it relates to Growing Digital Footprint of Nigerian Youth**

The rapid growth of digital connectivity among Nigerian youth has been a subject of significant research in recent years. Studies consistently show an upward trend in internet penetration and smartphone ownership, particularly among the younger population. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC, 2021), internet subscriptions in Nigeria reached 154.3 million as of December 2020, with a penetration rate of 90.0% among the youth population aged 15-24. This represents a substantial increase from previous years, indicating the accelerating pace of digital adoption. Smartphone ownership, a key driver of internet connectivity, has also seen remarkable growth. A study by Pew Research Center (Silver & Johnson, 2018) found that smartphone ownership in Nigeria increased from 28% in 2015 to 39% in 2017, with the highest rates among young adults. More recent data from GSMA (2020) suggests that smartphone

adoption in Nigeria reached 50% by 2020, with projections to hit 68% by 2025. The rapid growth in connectivity has fueled widespread social media usage, particularly among urban youth. Kemp (2021), in the "Digital 2021: Nigeria" report, states that there were 33.0 million social media users in Nigeria as of January 2021, representing 15.8% of the total population. The report also notes that the number of social media users increased by 6.0 million (+22%) between 2020 and 2021. Facebook remains the most popular social media platform in Nigeria. Statista (2021) reports that as of December 2020, Nigeria had 29.87 million Facebook users, with the majority being young adults. Instagram and Twitter also have significant user bases among Nigerian youth. According to NapoleonCat (2021), Nigeria had 8.1 million Instagram users as of February 2021, with 34.4% of the audience aged between 18 and 24. Twitter usage in Nigeria, while not as widespread as Facebook, is particularly influential among urban youth and in shaping public discourse. A study by Abubakar et al. (2017) found that Twitter was a preferred platform for political engagement among Nigerian youth, especially during election periods. The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated digital adoption and social media usage. Olijo (2020) notes that the lockdowns and social distancing measures led to increased internet usage and social media engagement among Nigerian youth, as they turned to digital platforms for education, entertainment, and social connection. However, it's important to note that while growth is rapid, disparities persist. Gillwald, Mothobi & Rademan (2019), in a study on digital inequality in Africa, highlight that urban youth in Nigeria have significantly higher rates of internet access and social media usage compared to their rural counterparts, pointing to an ongoing digital divide. Literature consistently demonstrates rapid growth in digital connectivity and social media usage among Nigerian youth, particularly in urban areas. This trend is driven by increasing smartphone ownership, improving internet infrastructure, and the growing importance of digital platforms in daily life. However, challenges

related to digital inequality remain, suggesting a need for targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to digital opportunities.

### **Challenges of Digital Footprint**

This digital revolution is not without its challenges. Issues such as the digital divide, cybersecurity threats, and the spread of misinformation pose significant risks to young Nigerians navigating the online world (Adesina, Oyewole, & Ogunleye 2020). As such, understanding and managing the digital footprint of Nigerian youth has become a critical concern for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in the country's development. The digital divide threatens to exacerbate existing socioeconomic inequalities, as youth in rural or low-income areas may have limited access to the opportunities afforded by digital connectivity. Cybersecurity concerns are paramount, with young Nigerians often vulnerable to online fraud, identity theft, and cyberbullying. The spread of misinformation and "fake news" through social media platforms poses another significant challenge, potentially influencing young people's perceptions and decision-making in harmful ways. Privacy issues also loom large, as many youths may not fully understand the implications of their digital footprint or how their data can be used by third parties. The lack of comprehensive data protection laws in Nigeria further compounds this issue. As such, understanding and managing the digital footprint of Nigerian youth has become a critical concern for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in the country's development. There is a pressing need for digital literacy programs that go beyond basic computer skills to include critical thinking, information verification, and online safety practices. Policy interventions are necessary to address these challenges while maximizing the potential benefits of youth digital engagement. This may include



investments in digital infrastructure to bridge the urban-rural divide, the implementation of robust data protection laws, and the integration of digital literacy into school curricula.

Oloruntobi (2019) analyzed the role of social media in the 2019 Nigerian general elections, noting that platforms like Twitter and Facebook were instrumental in mobilizing youth voters and facilitating political discourse. The #EndSARS movement in 2020 further demonstrated the power of digital platforms for youth activism. Dambo, Ersoy, Auwal, & Olorunsola. (2021) examined how Nigerian youth used social media to organize protests, share information, and engage with international audiences during the movement.

### **Policy Recommendations in relation to the Growing Digital Footprint of Nigerian Youth**

The expanding digital footprint of Nigerian youth presents both significant opportunities and challenges, necessitating thoughtful policy interventions to maximize benefits while mitigating risks. To address these issues comprehensively, a multi-faceted approach is required, focusing on infrastructure development, education, legal frameworks, and social support systems. Bridging the digital divide between urban and rural youth is crucial. This requires substantial investment in digital infrastructure, particularly in underserved areas. Government initiatives should incentivize telecommunication companies to extend broadband access to rural regions, potentially through public-private partnerships. Additionally, the implementation of community-owned networks could provide affordable internet access in areas where traditional ISPs may not find it economically viable to operate. Education plays a pivotal role in preparing Nigerian youth for the digital age. Comprehensive digital literacy programs should be integrated into the national curriculum, going beyond basic computer skills to include critical thinking, information verification, online safety, and responsible digital citizenship. These programs could be

supplemented by peer-led initiatives, leveraging the expertise of tech-savvy students to train their peers in a cost-effective and culturally relevant manner. To address privacy concerns and combat cybercrime, robust data protection legislation is essential.

This should include the establishment of an independent data protection authority with strong enforcement powers. Special provisions for protecting minors online, such as stricter consent requirements for data collection and processing, should be incorporated into these laws. Furthermore, a national cybersecurity awareness campaign targeting young internet users could help promote safe online practices and reduce vulnerability to cyber threats. Supporting digital entrepreneurship and innovation is crucial for harnessing the economic potential of Nigeria's digital youth. Policies could include the establishment of digital innovation hubs in educational institutions, providing resources and mentorship for young entrepreneurs.

Tax incentives for youth-led digital startups and the creation of a national fund to provide seed capital for innovative digital projects could further stimulate growth in this sector. Addressing the spread of misinformation and the potential for online radicalization requires a coordinated effort. The establishment of a national fact-checking network, collaborating with social media platforms to flag and reduce the spread of false information, could be an effective strategy. Additionally, developing counter-narrative programs that use social media to promote messages of social cohesion and critical thinking could help combat online radicalization. Promoting digital well-being is essential to mitigate the potential negative impacts of excessive digital engagement on mental health and social skills. This could involve incorporating digital well-being modules into school curricula, teaching students about healthy technology use and the importance of offline

activities. Developing national guidelines on screen time for different age groups, coupled with a public awareness campaign, could help promote a balanced approach to digital engagement.

Implementing these policy recommendations would require collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, private sector entities, and civil society organizations. Regular evaluation and adaptation of these policies will be necessary to keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital landscape. By taking a comprehensive approach to managing the digital footprint of Nigerian youth, the country can harness the innovative potential of its young population while safeguarding their well-being in the digital age.

## **Conclusion**

The digital footprint of Nigerian youth represents a potent catalyst for national progress and individual empowerment, but its full potential can only be realized through careful nurturing, strategic regulation, and proactive policy implementation. As Nigeria stands at the crossroads of digital transformation, the engagement of its youth in the digital sphere offers unprecedented opportunities for socio-economic development, innovation, and global competitiveness. By addressing the multifaceted challenges – from the digital divide and cybersecurity threats to misinformation and potential negative impacts on mental health – Nigeria can create a robust and inclusive digital ecosystem. This approach requires a delicate balance between fostering innovation and ensuring protection, between encouraging digital exploration and promoting responsible use. Leveraging the opportunities presented by this digital engagement can propel Nigeria to the forefront of the African digital revolution. The entrepreneurial spirit of Nigerian youth, combined with improved digital access and literacy, can drive the growth of a vibrant digital economy. This could lead to the emergence of homegrown tech solutions addressing local

challenges, the creation of new job markets, and increased participation in the global digital marketplace.

### **Recommendations**

The expanding digital footprint of Nigerian youth presents both significant opportunities and challenges, necessitating a comprehensive policy approach to maximize benefits while mitigating risks. The study recommended that in digital infrastructure to bridge the urban-rural divide, implementing comprehensive digital literacy programs in schools, developing robust data protection laws, promoting responsible internet use and cybersecurity awareness, supporting digital entrepreneurship and innovation, addressing online misinformation and radicalization, and promoting digital well-being. These policies aim to create an inclusive digital ecosystem that fosters innovation, protects users, and drives socio-economic development. By strategically addressing challenges and leveraging opportunities, Nigeria can harness the power of youth digital engagement to position itself as a leader in the global digital economy, transforming the country into a hub of digital innovation and empowering its youth to become architects of a digitally enabled future. Regular evaluation and adaptation of these policies will be crucial to keep pace with the rapidly evolving digital landscape and ensure long-term success in managing the digital footprint of Nigerian youth.

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