Digital Defiance or Digital Despair? Social Media Activism, Objectification, and Fatalism Among Nigerian Youth

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Abstract

In Nigeria's evolving democracy, where structural disenfranchisement and economic fatigue have eroded political trust, young people increasingly turn to digital platforms to perform identity, express dissent, and maintain social visibility. Yet it remains unclear whether this engagement signals meaningful mobilisation or a digitally mediated resignation. Drawing from a diverse sample of 250 fresh graduates, we examined the psychological correlates of this digital political expression. Specifically, we tested whether self-objectification and digital activism predict fatalistic beliefs, and whether fatalism in turn shapes political cynicism and hope. Results showed that self-objectification ($\beta = .43$, $p < .001$) and digital activism ($\beta = .41$, $p < .001$) both significantly predicted fatalistic beliefs, jointly explaining 50% of its variance ($R^2 = .50$, $F(2, 247) = 123.5$, $p < .001$). Fatalism, in turn, was strongly associated with political cynicism ($\beta = .49$, $p < .001$). Mediation analyses confirmed that fatalism partially explained the relationship between both predictors and political attitudes. Gender moderated the effect of activism on hope, with women showing greater disillusionment ($\beta = -.36$, $p < .01$) than men ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .06$). These findings suggest that digital engagement, while expressive, may also entrench a sense of fatalistic resignation. These findings suggest that increased visibility online may not translate into increased empowerment. Instead, digital participation may function as cathartic performance, a way of "yelling into the void", rather than political transformation. Implications are discussed for youths policy, digital literacy, and the future of online political engagement in disenfranchised democracies.

Introduction

In societies where structural disenfranchisement is the norm rather than the exception, political hope is not evenly distributed. Nigeria's history of corruption, elite capture, and generational power recycling persists until the present, and young people have increasingly turned to digital spaces as alternative arenas for expression, resistance, and imagined community (Adebanwi, 2017; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020). Yet even as hashtags like #EndSARS, #RevolutionNow, and #OccupyNigeria signal visible youth agitation, the psychological underpinnings of this activism remain poorly understood. Does digital participation reflect genuine political engagement or a form of resigned spectacle, a cathartic outlet for the politically disillusioned?

In this study, we explore the emotional and cognitive mechanisms that underlie digital political expression in a developing economy and democracy. We centred three psychological constructs: self-objectification, digital activism, and fatalism as possible drivers of political cynicism and diminished hope (Bello, 2023). Self-objectification, long studied in feminist and body-image literature (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), is here extended to include how individuals perceive and perform their identities in digital spaces, curating their appearance and persona for validation, relevance, and survival. In developing countries, economic and social capital are often symbolically performed online (Edewor et al., 2023) and this performativity may intertwine with fatalism, particularly among youth who feel blocked from real political or economic power.

Digital activism in Nigeria gained momentum with the 2014 #BringBackOurGirls campaign, which drew global attention to the mass abduction of schoolgirls and pressured government response (Uwalaka, 2021). This mode of resistance intensified during the 2020 #EndSARS protests, where millions used hashtags, live streams, and crowdfunding tools to coordinate protests and provide legal aid—transforming social media into decentralised command centres (Uwalaka, 2021). The livestream of the Lekki Toll Gate shooting by DJ Switch, which attracted over 150,000 viewers, exemplified how digital tools exposed state violence in real time. The 2022 #EndBadGovernance campaign continued this trend, with activists leveraging social platforms to bypass censorship amid internet shutdowns and harassment (Moreno-Almeida, 2022). These cases are indicative of the democratising power of digital media and its vulnerabilities to repression, misinformation, and abuse.

Fatalism, in this context, is not simply the belief that the future is preordained, but the experiential residue of recurring failure, of voting without effect, of protesting without consequence, of aspiring without access (Bello, 2023). In Nigerian digital life, this manifests as emotional ambivalence: "We listen, but we don't judge." When fatalism increases, hope often wanes. Thus, digital expression may become a spectacle of helplessness, what we call the performance trap.

Contextualising Nigeria

The aftermath of the #EndSARS protests in 2020, and the subsequent Twitter ban from late 2021 until early 2022, mark critical inflection points (BBC News, 2022). Many young Nigerians, already disillusioned by mass unemployment, police brutality, and electoral fraud, began to describe the internet as their only remaining outlet. Yet with platforms censored and reforms stalled, expressions of outrage often became self-parodying or hollow (Akinwale & Onokala 2022). Political posting, it seemed, became more about being seen to care than expecting change. Furthermore, gender plays a critical role in digital political psychology (Nwafor, 2022). Women in Nigeria face compounding risks online, including gendered trolling, moral policing, and reputational threats (Adams, 2024). This may explain why, as our data shows, digital activism correlates more strongly with political hopelessness among women than men.

While research on political engagement among African youth is growing (Resnick & Casale, 2011; Durotoye, 2020), few studies interrogate the emotional architecture of this engagement, particularly the interplay between visibility, identity performance, and disillusionment. Even fewer studies have examined self-objectification and fatalism as part of the same psychosocial ecology, especially in relation to hope and political cynicism. This study fills this gap by testing a novel mediation-moderation model, rooted in a Nigerian sample and informed by a composite theoretical framework (see Figure 1). We aim to clarify the psychological cost of digital political engagement and explore whether online participation fosters or fractures collective hope.
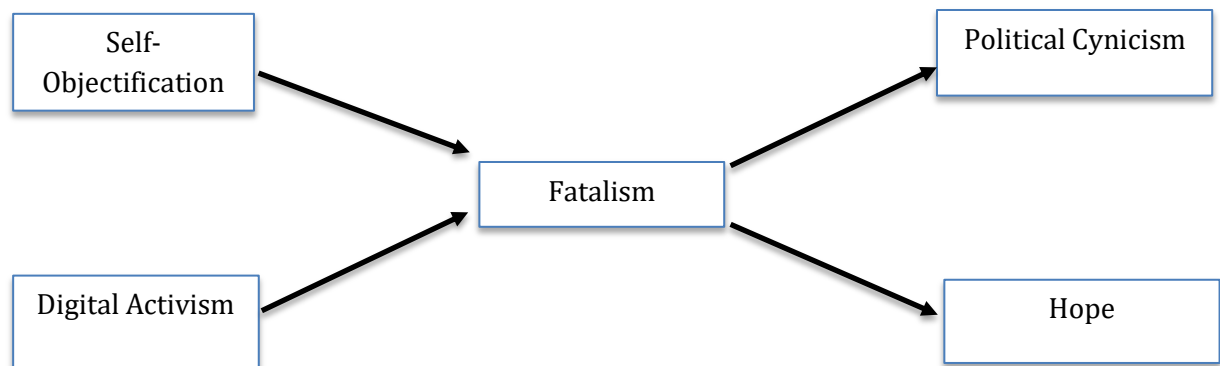

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework: Digital Performance and Political Affect

This framework (see figure 1) models the hypothesised relationships between self-objectification, digital activism, and fatalism, and their downstream effects on political cynicism and hope. Self-objectification and digital activism are posited as dual antecedents of fatalism, which in turn shapes divergent political affects: increased

cynicism and diminished hope. Gender is theorised to moderate the link between digital activism and hope, reflecting gendered differences in political disillusionment. The framework is grounded in Nigerian socio-political context, particularly in the post-#EndSARS digital era where online engagement oscillates between empowerment and emotional exhaustion.

Methods

Participants

A total of 250 Nigerian fresh graduates (aged 20-30 years; $M = 24.1$, $SD = 2.1$) were recruited during their compulsory National Youth Service Corps (NYSC). This group represents one of the most demographically diverse cohorts of young, educated Nigerians, drawn from all six geopolitical zones. Participants self-identified as male (52.4%), female (47.2%), or prefer not to say (0.4%). The sample was predominantly urban (71.6%) and reflected a wide range of ethnic, religious, and regional identities.

Procedure

Data collection occurred in 2024 during supervised, non-instructional hours using paper-and-pencil surveys administered in NYSC camps across Nigeria. Participants were informed about the study's aims, data handling procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained prior to participation. No personal identifiers were collected, and no incentives were offered. Ethical approval was granted by the appropriate institutional review board, and the study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research with human participants.

Measures

Self-Objectification

Measured using a 6-item adapted version of the Self-Objectification Questionnaire (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; adapted by Calogero, 2012). Items assessed body surveillance, appearance monitoring, and self-perception as an object of external evaluation. *Example item:* "I often think about how my body looks to others", *α = .86*

DigitalActivism

A 5-item scale constructed to capture the extent and emotional tone of political expression on social media. Items included expressions of protest, sharing political content, and perceived risks or rewards. *Example item:* "I express my political frustrations more freely online than in real life", *α = .81.*

Fatalism

Adapted from previously validated scales (Straughan & Seow, 1998), this 6-item measure gauged perceptions of powerlessness, inevitability, and resignation in the face of political problems. *Example item:* "No matter who we vote for, things won't really change in Nigeria", *α = .89.*

Political Cynicism

A 4-item scale adapted from Caprara et al. (2009), reflecting distrust in leaders, institutions, and political sincerity. *Example item:* "Most politicians are only out for themselves", *α = .84.*

Hope

Measured with 5 items from the Political Hope Scale (adapted for the Nigerian context), capturing optimism and perceived political agency. *Example item:* "I still believe my generation can make Nigeria better", *α = .78.*

Demographics

Participants provided gender, age, region of origin, and whether they had participated in any political protests (e.g., #EndSARS, student strikes).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using SPSS 28. Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were computed first. Multiple regression was used to examine predictors of fatalism, followed by mediation analyses using PROCESS macro (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples to test indirect effects of self-objectification and digital activism on political cynicism and hope via fatalism. Finally, moderation analyses (Model 1) were run to examine whether gender moderated the relationship between digital activism and hope.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are presented in Table 1. On average, participants reported moderate to high levels of self-objectification (M = 3.82, SD = 0.56), digital activism (M = 3.74, SD = 0.61), and fatalism (M = 3.48, SD = 0.59). Political cynicism was moderately high (M = 3.67, SD = 0.64), while political hope was somewhat lower (M = 3.02, SD = 0.68). All variables were significantly correlated in the expected directions.

Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Key Variables (N = 250)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Self-Objectification	3.82	0.56	–				
2. Digital Activism	3.74	0.61	.54**	–			
3. Fatalism	3.48	0.59	.61**	.60**	–		
4. Political Cynicism	3.67	0.64	.45**	.41**	.68**	–	
5. Political Hope	3.02	0.68	–.43**	–.48**	–.63**	–.59**	–

Note: N = 250. $p < .01$ for all correlations.

Predictors of Fatalism

A multiple regression analysis tested whether self-objectification and digital activism predicted fatalism. The model was significant, $F(2, 247) = 123.5$, $p < .001$, explaining 50% of the variance in fatalism ($R^2 = .50$). Both predictors were significant via Self-objectification: $\beta = .43$, $p < .001$ and Digital activism: $\beta = .41$, $p < .001$

Table 2: Multiple Regression Predicting Fatalism from Self-Objectification and Digital Activism

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Self-Objectification	0.41	0.06	.43	6.83	<.001
Digital Activism	0.38	0.06	.41	6.33	<.001

Note: $R^2 = .50$. F(2, 247) = 123.5, $p < .001$.

Mediation Analyses

Mediation analyses using PROCESS (Model 4, 5,000 bootstrap samples) confirmed that fatalism partially mediated the relationship between both predictors and the outcome variables. The indirect effect of self-objectification on political cynicism via fatalism was significant (β = .31, 95% CI [.21, .41]), as was the effect on political hope (β = –.29, 95% CI [–.40, –.19]). Similarly, the indirect effect of digital activism on cynicism (β = .30, 95% CI [.20, .40]) and hope (β = –.28, 95% CI [–.39, –.18]) was statistically significant.
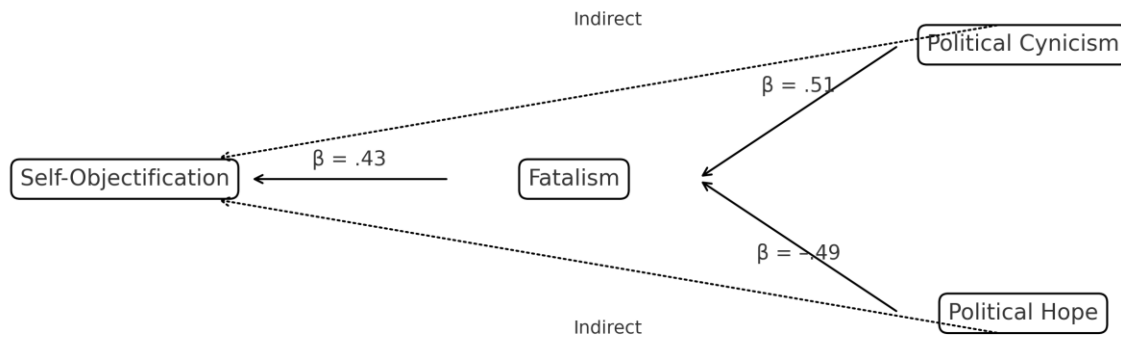
Figure 2: Conceptual Model of the Pathways from Self-Objectification and Digital Activism to Political Disillusionment via Fatalism

Moderation by Gender

A moderation analysis tested whether gender moderated the relationship between digital activism and political hope. The interaction was significant: $\beta = -.19$, $p = .02$. Simple slope analyses showed that the negative association between activism and hope was stronger among **women** ($\beta = -.36$, $p < .01$) than men ($\beta = -.18$, $p = .06$). These results are visualised in Figure 3 below.
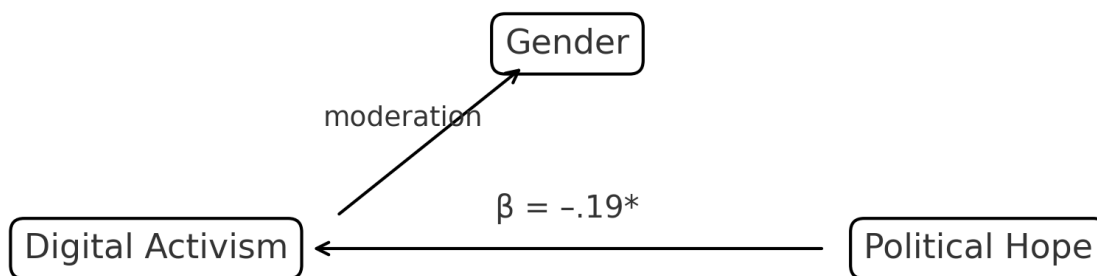

Figure 3: Moderation of Digital Activism on Political Hope by Gender

Qualitative Findings

Of the 250 participants, 198 (79.2%) provided open-ended responses. Thematic analysis revealed two dominant narratives:

Yelling into the Void: Digital activism was often seen as emotionally necessary but politically futile. Participants described "posting so I don't go crazy" or "Dragging "these people" on Twitter is like therapy."

Bravado and Resignation: While many portrayed themselves as fearless online, they simultaneously expressed a deep sense of helplessness. Some noted: "We act tough online, but deep down, we know nothing good is happening."

Discussion

This study examined how self-objectification and digital activism relate to fatalistic beliefs, and how these, in turn, shape political hope and cynicism among Nigerian youth navigating a politically volatile, digitally censored landscape. Findings suggest that online political expression, though often celebrated as emancipatory, is entangled with disillusionment, psychological detachment, and perceived powerlessness.

While democratic rituals persist, widespread voter disenfranchisement implies that youth increasingly engage online to express frustration (Roberts et al., 2023). Data revealed that digital activism positively predicted fatalism, confirming that increased visibility online does not necessarily translate to belief in political change. While this finding may seem counterintuitive, it reflects the post-#EndSARS atmosphere in which online mobilisation (e.g., Twitter protests) was met with real-world crackdowns, culminating in a government-imposed Twitter ban (BBC News, 2022). This contextual backdrop likely fuels performative despair, where individuals express discontent online not as a call to action, but as a cathartic rehearsal of powerlessness.

Self-objectification also emerged as a significant predictor of both fatalism and political cynicism, consistent with prior research linking self-surveillance to diminished agency and increased compliance (Calogero & Tylka, 2014; Moradi & Huang, 2008). For Nigerian youth negotiating hyper-visible platforms where appearance, status, and virality dominate, political engagement may take the form of stylised lament rather than mobilisation. This suggests that self-objectification extends beyond body image, it becomes a strategy of survival in a society where visibility is currency, but voice rarely yields reform.

The mediating role of fatalism was robust across models, amplifying its centrality in the political psychology of disenfranchised groups. Youth who felt disempowered by their social conditions (e.g., corruption, lack of political will) were more likely to display diminished hope and increased cynicism. This is consistent with research showing that perceived lack of control fosters political disengagement (Furnham, 2003; Kay & Jost, 2003). Yet, rather than apathy, this fatalism seems saturated with resentful awareness, a painful clarity that the system is rigged, but a refusal to disengage entirely, instead turning to digital platforms for symbolic protest.

Our moderation analyses revealed that women, more than men, experienced a decline in political hope when engaging in digital activism. This gendered pattern may reflect broader societal norms that place a double burden on women: to be both visible and careful, expressive but not radical. It resonates with literature showing that women in patriarchal societies often navigate limited expressive bandwidth, where political assertiveness is subtly punished or dismissed (Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015). Hence, the toll of digital activism may be heavier for women, not in terms of effort, but in emotional return.

These findings have significant implications for youth engagement policies and digital literacy interventions in postcolonial democracies. First, promoting digital activism without addressing structural disenfranchisement may inadvertently deepen political detachment. Second, civic education should address emotional literacy, helping youth distinguish catharsis from advocacy, and validating emotional responses while building pathways for action. Lastly, the pervasive role of objectification suggests that platform design, content algorithms, and influencer culture are not politically neutral. Public policy must therefore consider how digital environments reinforce psychological disengagement, particularly for marginalised youth.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is cross-sectional, limiting causal inferences. The use of self-report measures, while appropriate for psychological constructs, may be influenced by social desirability. The sample, although diverse, is limited to new graduates of universities and other degree-equivalent awarding institutions and may not generalise to non-graduate youth. Future research should use longitudinal or experimental methods to explore whether targeted interventions (e.g., digital civic training, narrative reframing) can reduce fatalism and bolster political efficacy.

Another valuable direction involves exploring non-verbal digital dissent, such as memes, humour, and visual satire, as mechanisms of protest. Research might also compare Nigerian youth with those in similar postcolonial democracies facing platform censorship, such as Uganda or India, to examine whether these dynamics are culturally bound or globally emergent.

Conclusion

This study reveals a troubling paradox: in a postcolonial democracy marked by deep structural disenfranchisement, digital activism among Nigerian youth, especially women, may offer visibility, but not necessarily hope. Self-objectification and fatalistic beliefs appear to transform online engagement into a coping mechanism rather than a lever for real political change. These findings challenge optimistic accounts of digital participation and underscore the need for public policies that go beyond digital literacy to address

systemic exclusion and psychological despair. Future interventions should engage with both the affective and structural dimensions of youth disillusionment.

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