



Social Media and Political Activism during the 2025 Wike-Fubara Power Tussle in Rivers State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: Social media has become central to political communication in Nigeria, offering citizens new avenues for activism. The 2025 Wike-Fubara power tussle in Rivers state provides a vivid case of how digital platforms can shape political discourse.

Objectives: This study investigated the use of social media in mobilisation, narrative framing, and public engagement during the Wike-Fubara power tussle in Rivers.

Method: A mixed method design was adopted, comprising content analysis of 150 purposively selected posts across Twitter(X), Facebook, and WhatsApp; alongside in-depth interviews with political actors, journalists, and civil society representatives.

Results: Findings show that social media amplified public participation, mobilized support, and influenced perception of the crisis. However, the platforms also facilitated misinformation, propaganda, and political polarisation.

Conclusion: The study concludes that social media is both a tool for democratic participation and a risk factor for political instability in Nigeria's sub-national politics.

Unique contribution: The study provides one of the earliest scholarly insights into the Wike-Fubara crisis, extending debates on digital democracy in African sub-national conflicts.

Recommendations: Strengthening digital literacy, enhancing fact checking mechanism, and fostering inclusive online dialogues are critical to harnessing social media's democratic potentials while mitigating the risks.

Keywords: Social media, political activism, Wike-Fubara crisis, Rivers state, digital democracy.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for political communication, citizen mobilisation, and activism across the globe. In Africa and particularly in Nigeria, platforms like Twitter now (X), Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp have become critical channels for shaping political discourse influencing public opinion, and organizing mass movements. From the 2012 #occupyNigeria protests to the globally recognized #EndSARS movement of 2020, social media has played an increasingly central role in Nigeria political life, amplifying citizens voices that are often sidelined in traditional media or formal political institutions. The political environment in Nigeria is often characterized by patronage networks, god fatherism, limited transparency, and low levels of civic engagement, especially at the sub-national level. However, the rise of digital platforms has opened new spaces for public debate, engagement, and resistance. Social media provide a relatively uncensored arena where issues of



governance, corruption, human rights and accountability are vigorously discussed-sometimes with real-world consequences. It is in this context that the 2025 political crisis in Rivers state unfolded.

In early 2025, Rivers state was plunged into a political standoff between the incumbent Governor Siminalayi Fubara and his predecessor Nyesom wike, who is serving as Nigeria's Minister of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). The conflict rooted in a breakdown of their political alliance, quickly escalated into a full-blown power struggle involving members of the state legislature, party loyalists, local government chairperson and security agencies. This political drama was not limited to closed door negotiations or courtroom battles. It spilled vividly onto social media platforms, where both supporters and detractors of the two political figures engaged in fierce debates, protests campaigns and digital activism.

Hash tags such as #standwithFubara, #wikemustGo, and #FreeRivers trended for days, mobilizing thousands of online users, many of whom were youths, civil society actors, and politically active citizens. Twitter spaces were hosted to discuss developments, while viral videos and user-generated content brought national and international attention to the political tension in Rivers state. This seminar investigates the extent to which social media served as a platform for political activism during the Wike-Fubara power tassels. It seeks to analyze how digital tools were used to organize, agitate, and resist political control, particularly in a state known for its volatile political landscape. By focusing on the events of 2025 in Rivers state, this study provides a case specific contribution on the growing body of literature on digital political participation in Nigeria.

More specifically, this study investigates the patterns of social media usage, identifies the major actors involved in the online activism, explores the dominant themes and narratives that shaped digital conversation and assesses political process.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Nigeria's political landscapes, traditional modes of political engagement – such as party meetings, rallies, and mainstream media coverage – have long been the dominant avenues for citizen involvement and elite communication. However, the advent of social media has disrupted this framework by providing citizens with a decentralised, immediate, and interactive space to engage in political discourse, organize movements, and challenge authority.

While digital activism at the national level such as the #EndSARS protest, has received considerable scholarly and media attention, far less is known about how social media functions in state-level political crisis, such as the 2025 Wike-Fubara power tussle in Rivers state. The crisis in Rivers state triggered by a breakdown in the political relationship between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and his predecessor turned -Minister Nyesom Wike, brought the state into national focus.

The ensuing battle over political loyalty, control of the legislature, and the administration of state institutions played out not only in government circles but also across digital platforms. Twitter, facebook, whasApp, and instgaram became vibrant arenas of activism, where supporter and critics of both camps launched hash tags, published counter-narratives, exposed alleged abuse of power, and mobilized for both online and offline protests.



Despite this surge in digital political activism, there remains a significant gap in empirical understanding of the extent, nature, and consequences of such activism.

Furthermore, while social media may appear inclusive, access and influence are often skewed in favour of urban, tech-savvy populations-potentially excluding rural voices, from the digital conversation. There is also the problem of echo chambers and political polarization, where individuals engage only with content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, thereby undermining meaningful democratic dialogue. Another overlooked challenge is the weaponization of social media during political crises. The Wike –Fubara tussle was marred by online attacks, cyber-bulling, doctored videos, and targeted smear campaigns. Yet, these dimensions of digital political conflict are rarely captured in policy discussions or academic literature focused on governance and political participation in Nigeria. This study, therefore, sought to address these gaps by examining how social media platforms were used during the 2025 Rivers state political crisis, what narratives were constructed and circulated, and what impact this digital activism had on political outcomes, public perception, and democratic engagement in the state.

Understanding this phenomenon is critical for informing policy, enhancing democratic participation, and guiding future political communication strategies at both state and national levels.

OBJECTIVES

The broad objective of this study is to examine the use of social media in facilitating political activism during the 2025 power tussle between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and former Governor Nyesom Wike in Rivers state, Nigeria. The study aims to explore how digital platforms were used to shape political discourse, mobilize supporters, and influence both public opinion and political outcomes during the crisis.

However, the study sets out the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the major social media platforms used during the Wike-Fubara political crisis in Rivers state.
2. To analyze the nature and content of political messages circulated on social media during the crisis.
3. To examine the role of key actors- such as social media influencers, journalists, civil society organizations, and political stakeholders – in driving online political activism.
4. To evaluate the impact of social media activism on public opinion, civic participation, and political awareness during the Wike-Fubara conflict.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Boyd and Ellison (2007) defined social media as online services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profiles, articulates a list of connections, and view their network within a bounded system. Political activism on the other hand, involves actions taken by individuals or groups to promote, oppose or influence political decisions or social change. This includes protest, advocacy, civil disobedience, and in the digital age, online campaigns. Micah White (2010) says Digital political activism, often called “clicktivism” refers to the use of digital



tools for organizing movements, sharing political messages, and influencing public discourse. In the same vein, power tussle refers to a political conflict involving the struggle for authority, control, and influence over political structures. In the context of Rivers state, the 2025 conflict between Governor Siminalayi Fubara and former Governor Wike represents a classic example of an intra-party power struggle amplified through both conventional and digital media platforms.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

This study is guided by two key theories: Public Sphere Theory (Jurgen Habermas, 1962) and Uses and gratification Theory (Blumler and Katz, 1974). Habermas' public sphere theory posits that democracy thrives when citizens engage in rational –critical debates in public forums. Social media, in contemporary societies, serves as an extension of this public sphere-providing platform for free expression, deliberation, and political engagement beyond state-controlled institutions. In the Wike-Fubara crisis, social media functioned as a digital public square where citizens, civil society, and political actors expressed views, challenged authority, and debated governance issues in real-time.

Uses and gratification Theory (Blumler and Katz, 1974) on the other hand argues that audiences are active users of media who select platforms based on their needs-such as information, entertainment, social connection or self-expression. During political conflict users may turn to specific platform. (eg Twitter for trending news, WhatsApp for community discussions) that best meet their political and communicative needs. In the context of the Rivers state political crisis, this theory helps explain why individuals and groups gravitated toward certain platforms for political engagement, mobilization, or expression of allegiance.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

A number of empirical studies have examined the role of social media in political engagement, especially in African democracies. Olorunnisola and Martin (2021) analyzed the #EndSARS protests and concluded that Twitter provided Nigerian youths with a platform to mobilize, shape narratives, and bypass traditional media. The study emphasized the decentralized and participatory nature of digital activism. Adeyanju (2022) examined social media usage in the 2019 kogi and Edo gubernatorial elections. The study found that digital platform were used to report electoral malpractice and mobilize support but also highlighted the challenges of fake news and misinformation. Nwachukwu (2024) focused specifically on Rivers state and found that Twitter significantly influenced youth political participation, especially during governance disputes and elections. However, the study was limited to general political engagement and did not cover crises or intra-party conflict.

Ikpe (2018) explored political violence and governance in the Nigeria Delta and found that media (including emerging digital tools) played a role in shaping public perception of political legitimacy especially in resource-contested state like Rivers. These studies collectively suggest that social media plays a crucial role in political mobilization especially in regions with limited access to transparent mainstream media or weak democratic institutions.



METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design complemented by content analysis. The descriptive design enabled the researcher to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on how individuals and groups engaged in political activism through social media during the 2025 Wike-Fubara political conflict in Rivers State. This approach was appropriate because it allowed for the systematic collection of information from a sample of the population to describe current conditions and attitudes.

Population of the Study

The population of the study were active social media Users of Twitter/X, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram in Rivers State, including civil society members, political observers and online influencers. Others were journalists and media practitioners who reported and commented on the political crisis, as well as political actors, such as party affiliates and youth leaders involved in online advocacy. Given the nature of social media, the study also included participants outside Rivers state whose social media engagements significantly influenced or reflected the discourse on the Wike-Fubara power tussle.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

The study adopted purposive sampling technique to select respondents who were actively involved in social media discussions during the 2025 power tussle. A total of 150 respondents were selected for the survey, and 10 key informants (journalists, digital activists, political aides, and civil society representatives) were interviewed for deeper insights.

Instrument for Data Collection

Three main instruments were used: Structured Questionnaire which consisted of closed-ended questions which measured frequency and type of social media used, level of political engagement, perceived influence of social media on political opinion and activism, and finally, the risks and benefits experienced during the conflicts. A semi structured interview guide was used to gather detailed insights from selected key informants. Itl focused on the observations about the online behaviours of the public and political actors, and the impacts and threats linked to digital perceptions during the crisis. Content Analysis – Posts, tweets, videos, and hash tags (e.g. #FubaraVsWike #saveRiversState, etc) shared between January and June 2025 were sampled and analyzed to determine dominant narratives, sentiments, and strategies used in online activism.

Method of data Analysis

Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using statistical package for the social science (SPSS) software. Descriptive statistics such as frequency tables, percentages, and mean scores were used to summarize responses. Qualitative Data from interviews and content analysis were also analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying and coding pattern or recurring themes. NVivo software were used to sort responses into categories such as: Mobilization strategies, public sentiment, online misinformation, and influence on political outcomes.



Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

To ensure validity, the instruments were reviewed by experts in mass communication and political science to confirm that the questions are clear, relevant, and cover the study objectives. Reliability was tested through a pilot study involving 10 respondents. The internal consistency of the questionnaire were measured using cronbach's Alpha, with a benchmark of 0.70 and above considered reliable.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to strict ethical guidelines. Respondents were informed of their rights to confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Informed consent were obtained from all participants. Sensitive data and identities were protected to avoid harm, especially given the political sensitivity of the topic.

RESULT

Demographic profile of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	78	56.5
	Female	60	43.5
Age	18-25	48	34.8
	26-35	61	44.2
	36-45	21	15.2
	46-above	8	5.8
Occupation	Students	45	32.6
	Civil savants	26	18.8
	Self employed	42	30.4
	Media /activists/CSO	25	18.2
Social media Platform used Most	Twitter (x)	62	44.9
	Facebook	38	27.5
	WhatsApp	22	15.9
	Instagram	16	11.6

Research Question 1: What platforms were predominantly used for political activism during the Wike-Fubara power tussle?

The survey data shows that Twitter (x) was the most used platform for real-time updates, hash tag campaigns (e.g, #justiceforFubara, #WikeOut) and citizen commentary.

Interviews confirm that Twitter was the battle field for influences and political aids. WhatsApp was used for grassroots mobilization, especially among youth groups and political supporters, while facebook provided long-term discussions and group coordination.



Research Question 2: How did citizens engage in political activism on social media during the crisis?

Types of digital Engagement	Frequency	Percentage (%)
- Posting opinion or videos	85	61.6
- Retweeting /sharing Political content	102	73.9
- Creating political memes	41	29.7
- Participating in hash tag Trend	96	69.6
- Joining online forums/groups	58	42.0

Interviewees noted that activism was mainly issue-based, centered around loyalty, constitutional questions, and governance legitimacy. Many respondents believed they were amplifying or “fighting suppression” through digital engagement.

Research Question 3: What impact did social media activism have on political awareness and mobilization?

A total of 78.3% of respondents agreed that social media increased their understanding of the power tussle. 65.2% said it encouraged them to participate in political discussions; 49.3% reported that it influenced their political alignment or sympathy. Interview data reveals that online activism shaped the political narrative, especially during conflicting press briefings and legislative confrontations. Content analysis further shows spikes in social media activity during key events.

Research Question 4: What were the risks and challenges associated with digital political activism during the crisis?

Perceived Risk	Frequency	Percentage %
Fear of harassment or arrest	64	46.4
Exposure to fake news	93	67.4
Online trolling / cyber bullying	55	39.9
Digital surveillance	29	21.0

Key informants confirmed that political loyalists and bots often trolled dissenting voices, and misinformation was rampant, often with fake statements or edited videos attributed to both parties.

CONCLUSION

The 2025 Wike-Fubara power tussle serves as a case study of how social media can redefine political participation and activism in Nigeria’s democratic landscape. The study concludes that Social media was not just a communication tool but a space for resistance, expression, and political identity. Online activism played a critical role in framing narratives, pressuring stakeholders, and informing public perceptions. The presence of citizens’ voices in digital spaces created alternative channels of legitimacy and opposition, especially where traditional media were seen as biased or constrained. However, the spread of false information, posed challenges to the democratic potential of social media. The study underscores the need for digital literacy, ethical engagement, and media regulation to harness the power of the social media positively, especially during political crises.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Promote digital literacy and critical media skills: Government and civil society organisations should collaborate to provide digital education campaigns that teach citizens how to verify information, avoid propaganda and engage responsibly online.
2. Encourage ethical political communication: Political actors, their media teams, and supporters should be trained in ethical digital conduct to reduce the spread of hate speech, personal attacks, and misinformation during political disputes.
3. Strengthen Fact-Checking Mechanisms: Media organizations and tech platforms should enhance fact-checking systems, especially during political crises, and make corrections visible and timely to reduce the influence of misleading narratives.
4. Protect the Digital Rights of Activists and Users: Government agencies should respect freedom of expression while ensuring that activists and ordinary citizens are protected from harassment, surveillance, or unlawful arrests related to their online political views.

GAP IN LITERATURE AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

Despite growing scholarship on digital activism in Nigeria, three main gaps remain: Most existing studies focus on national protests or elections. Few have critically examined how social media operates in state-level power struggles such as the Wike-Fubara conflict in Rivers state. Again, not many studies have measured the impact of social media activism on political outcomes, public opinion shifts, or civic action-especially at the local level. Lastly, the roles of disinformation, cyber bullying, digital exclusion, and political propaganda remain underexplored, despite their increasing presence in digital political engagement in Nigeria. This study is significant in multiple dimensions:- Academic, practical, political, social and technological. As political –discourse increasingly migrates to digital spaces, understanding the dynamics of social media and political activism at the sub national level becomes critical. The 2025 Wike-Fubara power tussle in Rivers state presents a rare case of intra-party political conflict unfolding under the full glare of social media platforms, making it a fertile ground for academic inquiry and public reflection.

In the area of academic, it fills a vital gap in political communication and media studies and literature, particularly in the Nigerian context. While existing studies have addressed the use of social media in national-level political protests (e.g #EndSARS), few have analyzed the role of digital activism in localized political crises such as those at the state or intra-party level. The study contributes to the body of knowledge on how social media shapes power negotiations citizen engagement and public opinion in multi-level democratic systems. It will also serve as a reference material for future scholars, media practitioners and researchers interested in digital politics in Africa.

Again, by examining how social media was used to mobilize, inform, and influence public engagement during the Wike-Fubara power tussle, the study will shed light on the evolving relationship between technology and democracy in Nigeria. It will offer insights into how citizens use digital tools to demand accountability, challenge political dominance, and express solidarity or resistance. The findings of this study could also benefit policy makers, such as electoral bodies, and government agencies on the need to develop more responsive, inclusive,



and transparent strategies for managing political communication in the digital age. The study may also guide the regulation of digital spaces –balancing the need to protect freedom of expression while curbing misinformation, hate speech, and digital manipulation.

For journalists and media houses, the study offers insights into how digital media narratives form, evolve, and influence real-world political outcomes. It highlights the importance of fact-checking, ethical reporting, and professional journalism in counter, falsehoods and giving voice to underrepresented perspectives during political crises. The study also provides practical knowledge for political actors, civil society organizations, and advocacy groups on the strategies, potentials and risks of using social media for political activism. It offers a blue print for leveraging digital platforms for issue-based campaigns, civic education, and community mobilization during governance conflicts.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the participants used in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions.

Nwawoke Jonah conceived the study, including the design, Agbo Chibueze Blessed collated the data, while Ovuoba Abraham Chukwudi and Nwuzor Stephen handled the analysis and Ken Adibe Nwafor handled the initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Availability of data and materials.

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

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