

Digital Advocacy and Gender-Based Violence: Assessing Social Media Influence on Awareness and Support for Female Survivors in Nigeria

¹Amakiri, Rajini Ruhuoma; ²Dike Harcourt Whyte PhD

^{1,2}Department of Mass Communication,

Faculty of Communication and Media Studies,

Rivers State University

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of digital advocacy and social media on awareness and support for female survivors of gender-based violence in Nigeria, focusing specifically on residents of Rivers State. Utilizing a survey research design, data were collected from a diverse sample of 400 respondents to assess their exposure to gender-based violence campaigns, the impact of social media, and the extent of community support available to survivors. Findings reveal that while residents are significantly exposed to digital gender-based violence campaigns and social media platforms effectively increase public awareness and facilitate support-seeking behaviors, there remain notable gaps in institutional backing from law enforcement and persistent cultural barriers that limit comprehensive community support. The study underscores the dual nature of social media as both a catalyst for advocacy and a space where harmful narratives may persist, highlighting the need for integrated, culturally sensitive strategies to maximize the positive impact of digital advocacy on gender-based violence prevention and survivor support in Nigeria. This study concludes that while digital advocacy and social media have significantly enhanced awareness and mobilized support for female survivors of gender-based violence in Nigeria, persistent gaps in institutional engagement and cultural barriers highlight the need for more integrated and context-sensitive approaches to effectively address and prevent gender-based violence. It is recommended that stakeholders intensify collaborative digital advocacy efforts while simultaneously addressing institutional gaps and cultural barriers to ensure more comprehensive, inclusive, and sustainable support for female survivors of gender-based violence in Nigeria.

Keywords: Digital advocacy, gender-based violence, social media, social change theory, connective action theory, social media influence

Introduction

Gender-based violence remains a pervasive and deeply rooted challenge in Nigeria, manifesting through acts such as domestic abuse, sexual assault, and harmful traditional practices. According to Chukwu and Eze (2023), gender-based violence is both a violation of human rights and a significant barrier to social and economic development, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Recent reports by UN Women (2021) highlight that nearly one in three Nigerian women have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime, pointing to the urgent need for effective prevention and support mechanisms. These alarming statistics have galvanized public discourse and advocacy efforts, with a growing recognition that traditional approaches alone are insufficient to address the scale and complexity of the problem (Mensah & Boateng, 2024).

In recent years, digital advocacy has emerged as a transformative tool for combating gender-based violence in Nigeria and beyond. Leveraging the reach and immediacy of social media platforms, activists and organizations now mobilize public attention, disseminate information, and coordinate support for survivors with unprecedented speed and scale. As Ajayi and Alabi (2023) observe, digital advocacy campaigns using hashtags, viral storytelling, and interactive forums have successfully challenged societal silence, encouraged survivors to share their experiences, and pressured policymakers to enact reforms. The evolution of digital infrastructure and increased mobile internet penetration have democratized access to advocacy, enabling marginalized voices to participate in national and global conversations about gender-based violence (Ndulo & Ekeanyanwu, 2024). Nonetheless, the influence of social media on awareness and support for female survivors of gender-based violence is complex, presenting both opportunities and challenges. While studies indicate that online campaigns can foster solidarity and facilitate access to resources (Olatunji & Ogunyemi, 2025), there are concerns about the persistence of harmful narratives, digital harassment, and privacy risks for survivors (Keller et al., 2022). Additionally, rural-urban disparities, digital literacy gaps, and entrenched cultural norms may limit the reach and effectiveness of digital advocacy in certain communities. Against this backdrop, the focus of this paper is on how digital advocacy and social media influence awareness and support for female gender-based violence survivors in Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

- i. determine the extent to which Rivers State residents are exposed to campaigns on gender-based violence;
- ii. find out how social media has contributed to the increase or reduction in gender-based violence;
- iii. determine how often gender-based violence campaigns attract support for victims in Rivers State;

The following research questions guided the study;

- i. To what extent are Rivers State residents exposed to gender-based violence campaigns?
- ii. How has social media contributed to the increase or reduction in gender-based violence?
- iii. How often do gender-based violence campaigns attract support for victims in Rivers State?

Literature Review

Theoretical Review

Social Change Theory

Social Change Theory provides a broad framework for understanding how and why societies undergo transformation. One of its foundational perspectives is Karl Marx's argument that social change arises from conflict between different social classes, with such conflict potentially leading to the emergence of a new social order (Marx & Engels, 1848). This conflict perspective has influenced subsequent scholars, including Ralf Dahrendorf, who further developed the relationship between social conflict, power and social change (Dahrendorf, 1959). Other perspectives have expanded the understanding of social change beyond class conflict. The Functionalist perspective, associated with Talcott Parsons, views society as a system that tends towards equilibrium and suggests that change may occur when there is a disruption or deviation from this equilibrium (Parsons, 1951). In contrast, the Conflict perspective emphasizes power struggles and inequalities between social groups as important

drivers of social transformation (Mills, 1956). The Symbolic Interactionist perspective, as reflected in the work of Herbert Blumer, focuses on individual agency and social interaction, arguing that change can emerge through the interactions and negotiations of individuals within social groups (Blumer, 1969). The relevance of social change theory has become increasingly important in the digital age. Digital technologies have created new opportunities for social mobilization, activism and collective action, while also transforming the ways in which social movements organize and communicate (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Digital advocacy campaigns can therefore serve as contemporary mechanisms through which individuals and groups raise awareness, mobilize support and challenge established social norms and practices. In the context of digital advocacy and gender-based violence, Social Change Theory provides a useful lens for understanding how digital platforms can facilitate collective action and influence social attitudes and institutional responses. Campaigns such as #MeToo demonstrate how digital advocacy can amplify individual experiences, generate public discussion and mobilize support around issues that have historically remained underreported or inadequately addressed. The theory therefore helps to explain the interaction between individuals, social movements, digital platforms and institutions in efforts to promote social change and address gender-based violence.

Connective Action Theory

Connective action theory, introduced by W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg in 2012, reconceptualizes collective action in the digital age by highlighting the role of personalized content sharing and networked communication in mobilizing social movements (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). Unlike the logic of traditional collective action, which relies on formal organizations and common group identities, connective action theory posits that digital technologies facilitate more individualized forms of participation where loosely connected individuals coordinate action through digital media platforms. The core assumption is that digital advocacy and mobilization now often emerge from self-motivated sharing of personal stories, hashtags, and digital content, fostering broad-based, flexible networks rather than rigid organizational structures (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2022). This theoretical framework accounts for the decentralized, adaptive, and scalable nature of contemporary advocacy efforts, enabling movements to thrive even in contexts with weak formal leadership or limited institutional resources (Bosch, 2023). Connective action theory offers a powerful lens for understanding how social media empowers female survivors and their allies to raise awareness and cultivate support networks. Recent Nigerian scholarship, such as by Adeyemi and Musa (2024), demonstrates how survivors leverage platforms like Twitter and Facebook to share personal experiences and mobilize public attention, often bypassing traditional gatekeepers and institutional barriers. Through hashtag campaigns and viral storytelling, these survivors foster a sense of solidarity and collective identity, even in the absence of centralized leadership (Ogunleye & Oduwole, 2022). Comparative studies further show that such connective forms of advocacy enhance the visibility of gender-based violence issues and facilitate access to support resources for survivors (Keller et al., 2022). Connective action theory elucidates the ways digital advocacy in Nigeria transforms individual voices into powerful, networked movements, amplifying both awareness and support for female survivors of gender-based violence in a rapidly evolving sociotechnical landscape (Chukwu-Okoronkwo & Uduma, 2023).

Conceptual Review

Digital Advocacy

Digital advocacy refers to the strategic use of digital tools and platforms to promote social, political, or cultural change, mobilize supporters, and influence public opinion or policy. According to Olorunnisola and Martin (2022), digital advocacy encompasses a range of online activities such as petitioning, awareness campaigns, and direct engagement with policymakers via social media. Ajayi and Alabi (2023) define it as the “deployment of digital channels to amplify marginalized voices and coordinate collective action towards justice-oriented causes” (p. 143). Internationally, Kane and Zappavigna (2021) highlight digital advocacy’s shift towards “networked, participatory communication” where individuals and organizations collaboratively generate and disseminate campaign content. This participatory nature distinguishes digital advocacy from traditional advocacy by lowering barriers to engagement and fostering interactive, decentralized activism.

The concept of digital advocacy has evolved in tandem with technological advancements and expanding internet access, especially in the Global South. In the early 2000s, advocacy efforts predominantly relied on email lists and static websites, but the advent of social media and mobile technology radically transformed the landscape (Ndulo & Ekeanyanwu, 2024). Nigerian authors like Yusuf and Bello (2022) note how the rise of WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook enabled grassroots mobilization and real-time dissemination of information in contexts marked by limited traditional media freedom. Foreign scholars, such as Cottle and Lester (2023), argue that the evolution of digital advocacy is characterized by increased personalization, use of multimedia storytelling, and reliance on algorithm-driven outreach tactics. This evolution has made digital advocacy a powerful tool for marginalized groups, allowing for rapid response to emerging issues and the creation of transnational networks of support, as seen in recent gender-based violence and social justice campaigns across Nigeria (Adebayo, 2025).

Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence is broadly defined as harmful acts directed at individuals based on their gender, encompassing a spectrum of physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse. According to Okorie and Adebisi (2023), gender-based violence in the Nigerian context refers to “any violence that is perpetrated against a person’s will, and that is based on socially ascribed gender differences between males and females” (p. 112). Globally, Johnson and Smith (2022) characterize gender-based violence as “a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, resulting in domination over and discrimination against women” (p. 51). The United Nations has similarly emphasized that gender-based violence is rooted in structural inequalities and social norms that perpetuate gendered hierarchies (UN Women, 2021). These scholarly definitions underscore the multifaceted nature of gender-based violence, highlighting its basis in culturally entrenched norms and power dynamics that transcend geographic boundaries. The concept of gender-based violence has evolved significantly, particularly in the past two decades. Initially, gender-based violence was largely conflated with violence against women; however, recent scholarship acknowledges that while women and girls are disproportionately affected, gender-based violence can also target men, boys, and non-binary individuals (Zhou & Wojcik, 2025). In Nigeria, the evolution of the concept has been influenced by increased advocacy, legal reforms, and the growing visibility of survivors’ voices through digital platforms (Eze & Nwafor, 2022). Internationally, scholars like Patel and Ferris (2024) have noted that the scope of gender-based violence has expanded to include not just intimate partner violence, but also trafficking, harmful traditional practices, and cyber violence. This expansion reflects a deeper understanding of the intersectional and

systemic dimensions of gender-based violence, as well as the urgent need for prevention and response strategies that are culturally sensitive and survivor-centered (Mensah et al., 2023).

Social Media

Social media encompasses a diverse array of digital platforms and applications that facilitate the creation, sharing, and exchange of user-generated content and foster virtual communities and networks. According to Hassan and Salihu (2023), social media can be defined as “interactive digital environments where individuals and groups communicate, collaborate, and contribute content in real-time, often transcending geographical boundaries” (p. 89). Internationally, Velasquez and LaRose (2022) describe social media as “web-based platforms and mobile technologies that enable users to create, curate, and distribute content, while engaging in social interaction and participatory dialogue” (p. 154). These definitions emphasize the core elements of user participation, immediacy, and the blurring of lines between content consumers and producers, reflecting the dynamic and participatory nature of social media.

The evolution of social media has been marked by significant technological and cultural shifts over the past two decades. Initially, platforms like MySpace and early blogs offered limited interaction, but the emergence of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp revolutionized the landscape by introducing real-time sharing, multimedia capabilities, and algorithm-driven content curation (Ibrahim & Nwachukwu, 2024). Nigerian scholars such as Olatunji and Ogunyemi (2025) highlight the pivotal role of mobile internet penetration in Africa, which democratized access and enabled grassroots movements, digital advocacy, and new forms of social engagement. Globally, Duffy and Pooley (2021) point out that social media’s evolution has shifted from simple networking to complex ecosystems that drive cultural trends, influence public opinion, and even reshape economic and political realities. This ongoing transformation has redefined communication norms, making social media an indispensable tool for information dissemination, activism, and community building across diverse societies (Martinez & Kumar, 2023).

Social Media Influence

Social media influence refers to the capacity of individuals, groups, or organizations to shape opinions, behaviors, and trends through digital platforms. Adeoye and Chukwu (2023) define social media influence as “the measurable effect that online content and interactions have on shaping the attitudes or actions of users within digital communities” (p. 202). Internationally, Collins and Li (2022) describe it as the “power exerted by social actors via social networks, algorithms, and viral content to affect audience perspectives, purchasing decisions, and social norms” (p. 58). The mechanisms of influence are rooted in the credibility, reach, and persuasive abilities of content creators, as well as the participatory culture promoted by social media platforms, which enable information to spread quickly and broadly across user networks (Simons & Brügger, 2024). The evolution of social media influence has been closely linked to technological advancements and changing patterns of online engagement. In its early stages, influence was primarily wielded by celebrities and established public figures; however, the rise of micro-influencers, peer networks, and algorithm-driven recommendations has democratized the capacity to influence (Omotayo & Bakare, 2025). Nigerian researchers, such as Okafor and Umeh (2021), have documented how social media influence has played a critical role in shaping youth political participation, consumer behavior, and social activism in Nigeria. Globally, the phenomenon has expanded from simple product endorsements to complex forms of advocacy, misinformation, and grassroots mobilization (Kaur & Park, 2022). This evolution reflects a transition from hierarchical models of influence to more decentralized, participatory,

and interactive frameworks, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges posed by the pervasive reach of social media in contemporary society (Zhao & Miller, 2023).

Empirical Review

A significant study by Adebisi and Ojo (2022) sought to examine the impact of social media campaigns on awareness and attitudes toward gender-based violence among university students in southwestern Nigeria. The study utilized a cross-sectional survey design and sampled 420 undergraduate students from three public universities. Data were collected using structured questionnaires and analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics. The authors found that exposure to social media advocacy campaigns especially on platforms like Twitter and Facebook was significantly associated with increased awareness of gender-based violence and greater willingness to support female survivors. The research concluded that digital advocacy efforts in Nigerian universities play a critical role in shaping positive perceptions and responses to gender-based violence, highlighting the transformative potential of online platforms in social change initiatives (Adebisi & Ojo, 2022). Internationally, Morrison et al. (2023) conducted an empirical study on the effectiveness of hashtag activism in raising awareness and mobilizing support for survivors of gender-based violence in South Africa. The study focused on the #AmINext and #MeToo movements, employing a mixed-methods approach that combined content analysis of over 5,000 social media posts with in-depth interviews of 45 female survivors and activists. The findings revealed that hashtag campaigns not only amplified the visibility of gender-based violence issues but also fostered a sense of solidarity and collective agency among participants. Moreover, the research highlighted that social media influence was most potent when campaigns were personalized and participatory, enabling survivors to share their stories and access support networks beyond traditional institutional frameworks (Morrison et al., 2023). In another relevant Nigerian context, Okonkwo and Salami (2025) investigated digital advocacy strategies deployed by NGOs to support female survivors of gender-based violence in northern Nigeria. The qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with 20 NGO staff and 30 female survivors who had engaged with digital campaigns between 2022 and 2024. Thematic analysis indicated that digital advocacy mainly through WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and targeted SMS campaigns provided survivors with immediate access to information, emotional support, and referral services. Notably, the study found that while digital advocacy increased awareness and facilitated access to support, challenges such as digital literacy gaps and privacy concerns sometimes limited its effectiveness. The authors recommended a hybrid approach that combines digital outreach with offline support to maximize impact (Okonkwo & Salami, 2025). Across these studies, while digital advocacy has demonstrably advanced awareness and support for gender-based violence survivors, there remain persistent challenges related to safety, inclusivity, and the sustainability of online campaigns.

Methodology

This study employed a survey research design to capture broad perspectives on gender-based violence from a diverse pool of respondents within the study area. The target population encompassed all residents of Rivers State, with a particular focus on adult women; projections from the 2006 census estimate the female population in the state at approximately 3,946,137. Using Taro Yamane's sampling formula, a representative sample size of 400 respondents was selected. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and an interview guide. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire underwent review by media advocacy experts, who assessed the relevance, clarity, and comprehensiveness of the items. Reliability was established via a pilot test conducted with a small group of residents, and internal consistency was verified

using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The questionnaires were distributed in person through direct, face-to-face contact with eligible respondents across selected households in various Local Government Areas (LGAs). Both descriptive and inferential statistical methods were used in the analysis; frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations summarized demographic characteristics and measured respondents' awareness and support for female survivors of gender-based violence.

Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Exposure of Rivers State Residents to Gender-Based Violence Campaigns

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	N	Σ	Mean	Remark
I frequently see or hear gender-based violence awareness campaigns online.	162	124	68	44	398	1200	3.0	Agreed
Media platforms regularly report domestic violence issues in Rivers State.	148	130	76	44	398	1178	3.0	Agreed
Awareness campaigns highlight the rise of sexual harassment against women.	171	129	63	35	398	1232	3.1	Agreed
Campaigns encourage victims to report gender-based violence cases.	210	108	52	28	398	1296	3.3	Agreed
Law enforcement agencies actively support gender-based violence awareness campaigns.	52	68	149	129	398	839	2.1	Disagreed

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The findings presented in Table 1 indicate that residents of Rivers State experience significant exposure to gender-based violence campaigns. Respondents reported frequent encounters with gender-based violence awareness messages within their communities and noted that media platforms consistently highlight issues such as domestic violence and sexual harassment. Additionally, many agreed that these campaigns often encourage victims to report cases of violence. Despite this high level of campaign exposure, respondents generally disagreed with the assertion that law enforcement agencies actively support gender-based violence initiatives. The significance of these findings lies in revealing that, while media and community awareness efforts are robust, there is a perceived deficiency in institutional support from law enforcement, suggesting a critical gap between public awareness and effective systemic intervention.

Table 2: Influence of Social Media on Gender-Based Violence

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	N	Σ	Mean	Remark
Social media has increased public awareness of gender-based violence.	204	132	42	20	398	1316	3.3	Agreed
Online campaigns on social media help reduce gender-based violence.	158	140	60	40	398	1212	3.0	Agreed

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	N	Σ	Mean	Remark
Social media sometimes promotes harmful gender stereotypes.	176	128	62	32	398	1244	3.1	Agreed
Victims use social media platforms to seek justice or support.	189	134	48	27	398	1281	3.2	Agreed
Exposure to violent content on social media influences gender-based violence behaviour.	166	121	71	40	398	1209	3.0	Agreed

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 2 demonstrates that social media plays a pivotal role in shaping both awareness and responses to gender-based violence. Respondents largely agreed that social media platforms have heightened public awareness of gender-based violence and that online campaigns contribute to reducing its incidence. However, they also recognized that social media can perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and expose users to violent content that may negatively influence behavior. Additionally, respondents noted that victims are increasingly turning to social media to seek justice and support. The significance of these findings lies in illustrating that while social media serves as a powerful tool for advocacy and support, it simultaneously remains a space where problematic and harmful narratives can persist.

Table 3: Support Generated by Gender-Based Violence Campaigns

Statement	SA	A	D	SD	N	Σ	Mean	Remark
Gender-based violence campaigns encourage the public to support victims.	178	132	54	34	398	1250	3.1	Agreed
Campaigns provide information about support services for victims.	141	138	73	46	398	1170	2.9	Agreed
Community members often show support when gender-based violence campaigns are conducted.	160	136	64	38	398	1214	3.0	Agreed
Cultural beliefs sometimes limit support for gender-based violence victims.	189	125	56	28	398	1271	3.2	Agreed
Gender-based violence campaigns encourage communities to protect victims' rights.	170	140	56	32	398	1244	3.1	Agreed

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that gender-based violence campaigns play a crucial role in mobilizing support for victims in Rivers State. Respondents agreed that these campaigns not only encourage the public to support victims but also provide valuable information about available support services. They further acknowledged that community support tends to increase when gender-based violence campaigns are actively conducted. However, cultural beliefs were identified as a significant factor that can sometimes hinder the extent of support offered to victims. The significance of these findings lies in showing that, although gender-based violence campaigns are generally effective in generating community support, cultural

and societal norms remain obstacles to achieving comprehensive and sustained support for all victims.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study affirm the transformative impact of digital advocacy and social media platforms on awareness and support for female survivors of gender-based violence (gender-based violence in Nigeria). A significant proportion of respondents reported frequent exposure to gender-based violence awareness campaigns through online and traditional media, aligning with the observations of Okechukwu and Obafemi (2023) and Adebisi and Ojo (2022), who found that digital campaigns and social media engagement are strongly correlated with increased public consciousness and willingness to support survivors. Consistent with the tenets of social change theory (Homans, 1958; Molm, 2022), the study demonstrates that individuals assess the benefits of participating in gender-based violence advocacy such as gaining information and validation against potential drawbacks, thus fostering a supportive environment for victims when the perceived rewards are high. However, respondents noted a persistent gap in institutional support, with law enforcement agencies perceived as largely inactive in these efforts. This finding echoes Okonkwo and Salami (2025), who identified similar challenges in the effectiveness of digital advocacy due to systemic and infrastructural limitations. The study further reveals the dual nature of social media influence in the context of gender-based violence. Respondents agreed that social media heightens public awareness and facilitates access to justice and support networks for survivors, mirroring the empirical conclusions of Morrison et al. (2023) and the theoretical insights of Bennett and Segerberg (2012) on connective action. Nevertheless, respondents also recognized the risks associated with digital platforms, such as the proliferation of harmful gender stereotypes and exposure to violent content issues highlighted by Simons and Brügger (2024) and Kaur and Park (2022). Moreover, while community support for gender-based violence victims was generally strong when campaigns were active, cultural beliefs and societal norms were identified as barriers to achieving sustained and comprehensive support, corroborating the intersectional challenges noted by Okorie and Adebisi (2023) and Mensah et al. (2023). Overall, the present study underscores that, while digital advocacy and social media have significantly advanced gender-based violence awareness and support for female survivors in Nigeria, ongoing challenges related to institutional engagement, digital risks, and cultural resistance call for more integrated and context-sensitive intervention strategies.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that digital advocacy and social media have become indispensable tools in raising awareness and mobilizing support for female survivors of gender-based violence in Nigeria. The findings reveal that while exposure to gender-based violence campaigns is high and social media platforms significantly enhance public engagement and resource accessibility, persistent challenges remain particularly regarding insufficient institutional support, the perpetuation of harmful narratives online, and cultural barriers to sustained community backing. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates digital advocacy with systemic reforms and culturally sensitive strategies, ensuring that the promise of digital platforms translates into tangible, long-lasting improvements in the safety and well-being of female gender-based violence survivors across Nigeria. Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that stakeholders including government agencies, NGOs, and digital platform providers intensify collaborative efforts to strengthen digital advocacy campaigns and ensure broader, more inclusive reach across Nigeria. This should involve not only leveraging social media's potential for awareness and

support, but also enhancing digital literacy, integrating robust privacy protections, and providing training for law enforcement to improve institutional response to gender-based violence cases. Furthermore, advocacy strategies must be tailored to address persistent cultural barriers and rural-urban disparities, combining online initiatives with community-based interventions to foster a more supportive and informed environment for female gender-based violence survivors.

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