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CONTROVERSY, CLOUT, AND COUNTERPOWER: WHY INFLUENCER-ACTIVISTS LIKE VERYDARKMAN THRIVE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA

DALYOP Stephen Choji

dschoji@gmail.com
Institute for Crisis Resolution, Peacebuilding & Conciliation

DR. THADEUS Grace Sofi

sofigrace0@gmail.com
Religion and cultural studies,
Plateau State University Bokkos

Abstract

This paper investigates the emergence and growing influence of controversial Nigerian influencer-activists such as VeryDarkMan (VDM), examining the socio-political, cultural, and technological conditions that enable their rise. Using a qualitative, multi-method approach that includes content analysis, audience engagement review, and public perception surveys, the study reveals how characters like VDM gain legitimacy by filling representational voids left by failed institutions, elite disconnection, and media mistrust. The paper situates VDM within broader theoretical frameworks, including counterpublic theory, affective publics, and the attention economy, to demonstrate how his appeal stems from a potent combination of moral populism, digital spectacle, and perceived authenticity. Findings show that VDM thrives not in opposition to Nigerian democratic decay, but as a product of it, amplified by youth disaffection, algorithmic virality, and public hunger for visible justice. While his rise empowers new forms of grassroots engagement, it also raises ethical concerns around misinformation, performative outrage, and the erosion of deliberative civic culture. The study concludes with actionable, policy-oriented recommendations to balance the growing power of digital influencers with the urgent need for institutional reform, media literacy, and inclusive civic discourse.

Keywords: VeryDarkMan, influencer activism, digital populism, civic trust, Nigeria, attention economy, moral legitimacy, social media politics

Introduction

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed a striking transformation in its civic discourse landscape, driven largely by the disruptive power of social media. Among the most provocative figures to emerge from this space is VeryDarkMan (VDM), a self-styled digital activist whose blunt, confrontational style and fearless commentary have earned him both widespread admiration and fierce criticism. His popularity among Nigeria's youth-dominated online population raises fundamental questions about the changing dynamics of influence, legitimacy, and civic engagement in the digital age.

VDM, like many other influencer-activists, does not belong to any formal institution, political party, or civil society group. Yet his commentary frequently challenges politicians, public

officials, religious leaders, and celebrities, often accusing them of hypocrisy, abuse of power, or moral failure. In doing so, he bypasses traditional gatekeepers of information such as journalists, academics, and clerics, and instead relies on a mix of virality, performative outrage, and direct audience connection to shape public opinion.

This phenomenon is not isolated. It is emerging against the backdrop of Nigeria's enduring governance challenges: institutional corruption, delayed justice, economic precarity, youth unemployment, and declining trust in public institutions. Several Afrobarometer and NOIPolls reports indicate that Nigerians, particularly the younger generation, exhibit diminishing faith in political leaders, the judiciary, the police, and mainstream media. In such a context, voices like VDM's become attractive, not necessarily for their moderation or accuracy, but for their audacity, clarity, and resonance with lived frustrations.

Moreover, the rise of digital technologies and algorithm-driven platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) has made it easier than ever for unconventional figures to garner mass visibility and shape the national conversation. These platforms are not neutral; they reward intensity, controversy, and emotional engagement, qualities that align closely with VDM's style. As a result, his videos trend, spark debates, attract media coverage, and even prompt state responses.

The emergence of influencer-activists like VDM invites critical academic reflection. What societal conditions enable such characters to thrive? How do they negotiate their legitimacy in a crowded digital landscape? What are the implications of their growing influence for Nigeria's democracy, public ethics, and civic culture? Are they filling a void left by decaying institutions, or are they introducing a new era of populist digital vigilantism?

This paper responds to these questions by situating VDM within broader theoretical debates on the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), counterpublics (Fraser, 1990), cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), and the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997). It examines how characters like VDM operate at the intersection of activism, entertainment, and controversy, challenging traditional power while also complicating norms of public accountability. Drawing from content analysis, digital ethnography, and audience perception surveys, the study unpacks the drivers of VDM's popularity and the tensions embedded in his brand of digital resistance.

Ultimately, the paper contends that influencer-activists like VDM are not merely media phenomena, they are political actors in a new kind of public sphere: one that is fast, affective, volatile, and deeply symptomatic of both Nigeria's institutional decline and its ongoing democratic experimentation.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the rise and influence of figures like VeryDarkMan (VDM) in Nigeria, this study employs a multi-layered theoretical lens that combines classical theories of public discourse with contemporary insights from digital culture studies. These frameworks collectively illuminate the interplay between power, legitimacy, audience, and media in shaping digital activism.

Habermas‟ Public Sphere and Its Discontents

Jürgen Habermas‘s (1989) concept of the *public sphere* is foundational to discussions about rational-critical debate in democratic societies. He envisioned a space where citizens engage in discourse free from domination, ideally enabling democratic will formation. However, in contexts like Nigeria, the public sphere has never been fully inclusive. It is often fragmented by class, religion, ethnicity, and access to communication platforms. Moreover, state interference, elite dominance, and weak institutions erode the ideal of equal participation.

VDM emerges as a counter-response to the perceived failure of this public sphere. His direct, unfiltered commentary rejects the formality and gatekeeping of mainstream media, replacing rational-critical dialogue with affective, populist speech. While Habermas‘s ideal may seem distant in the digital age, his critique of distorted communication remains relevant. VDM‘s popularity reflects not just alternative speech, but a public yearning for authenticity in a system marred by procedural injustice and elite hypocrisy.

Nancy Fraser‟s Counterpublics

Nancy Fraser (1990) critiques the universality assumed in Habermas‘s model, arguing for the recognition of subaltern counterpublics, parallel discursive arenas where marginalized groups formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs. VDM functions within such a counterpublic. His followers are predominantly young, socially frustrated, and digitally native Nigerians who feel excluded from institutional politics and civil discourse.

Fraser‘s concept helps us understand how VDM‘s videos create a participatory space where grievances are aired, norms are challenged, and legitimacy is redefined. His language, often seen as crude or vulgar by elites, resonates within a moral economy that values emotional candour over elite restraint. Here, speech is not sanitized for consensus, it is weaponized for dissent.

Gramsci‟s Cultural Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci‘s (1971) theory of cultural hegemony explains how ruling classes maintain control not just through coercion but by shaping cultural norms and ideologies. In Nigeria, cultural hegemony is maintained through religious authority, political narratives, and media framing. Figures like VDM disrupt this hegemony by challenging its moral assumptions. His critiques of pastors, celebrities, and politicians represent a war of position, a struggle to redefine what counts as truth, justice, and virtue in public life.

Gramsci helps frame VDM not as an isolated voice but as part of a broader ideological contestation. His popularity signals a weakening of dominant narratives and the emergence of competing truth regimes powered by social media virality and peer validation.

Affective Publics and the Attention Economy

Zizi Papacharissi (2015) and Michael Goldhaber (1997) offer frameworks relevant to digital communication: affective publics and the attention economy. Affective publics are mobilized not by facts but by shared feelings, anger, injustice, solidarity. VDM‘s followers constitute

such a public. His videos spark emotional responses, collective indignation, and online mobilization. Goldhaber's notion of attention as the new currency explains why controversial content like VDM's outperforms reasoned debate: digital platforms reward intensity, not nuance.

VDM's success lies in his ability to convert outrage into visibility, and visibility into influence. This raises concerns about performativity and accountability in a system where popularity often substitutes for credibility. Still, these frameworks reveal why affectively charged, morally polarizing content resonates more than technocratic language or procedural deliberation.

These theories provide a scaffold for interpreting VDM's activism not as an aberration, but as a logical outcome of Nigeria's fractured public sphere, elite distrust, and digital culture. They underscore the hybrid nature of his influence, part resistance, part performance, and wholly reflective of a society in search of alternative voices.

Literature Review

The emergence of influencer-activists like VeryDarkMan (VDM) signals an important shift in the nature of public engagement, media credibility, and digital resistance. This section reviews the interdisciplinary literature that frames this phenomenon, drawing from studies in digital activism, influencer culture, media populism, and Nigeria's civic landscape.

Digital Activism in Africa

Digital activism in Africa has often been described as a tool for bypassing traditional gatekeepers and amplifying youth voices (Abidin, 2020; Egbunike & Olorunnisola, 2015). From the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa to #EndSARS in Nigeria, social media has enabled the mobilisation of large populations outside conventional political structures (Adebanwi, 2021; Adebayo, 2020). These platforms offer immediacy, decentralisation, and emotional resonance, which appeal to populations frustrated by bureaucratic inertia and elite dominance.

However, these same features can foster ―hashtag activism‖ that is episodic, leaderless, and lacking follow-through (Gerbaudo, 2018). The concern is not about mobilisation capacity, but about sustainability, accountability, and coherence of goals. Characters like VDM complicate these dynamics further, they neither lead formal movements nor disappear after peak moments; rather, they maintain a continuous presence as digital personalities shaping public debate through confrontation and spectacle.

Influencer Culture and Authenticity

The literature on influencer culture often highlights the performance of authenticity as a central source of credibility (Duffy, 2020; Abidin, 2018). Unlike institutional actors who are bound by editorial policies or legal codes, influencers build trust through personal exposure, emotional expression, and perceived relatability. VDM's unpolished videos, filmed without elaborate production, often from his bedroom or a casual setting, signify ―realness‖ to his followers. His vulgarity is not a flaw but a badge of sincerity in contrast to the polished deception of elite actors.

Studies such as Edewor (2022) and Adekunle (2022) emphasise that Nigerian digital culture places high value on emotional honesty, spiritual symbolism, and moral framing. These values intersect with influencer activism, allowing figures like VDM to challenge clerics, celebrities, and politicians while being celebrated as truth-speakers.

Media Populism and Disintermediation

VDM's rise also fits within the broader literature on media populism. As Moffitt (2016) explains, populist figures often position themselves as outsiders who —speak truth to power‖ using polarising rhetoric, moral binaries, and crisis framing. In digital populism, influencers do not merely critique institutions, they perform the role of the —people's voice,‖ blurring the line between representation and spectacle.

Chiluwa (2021) and Okunade & Oluduro (2023) note that digital populists in Nigeria often attract audiences alienated from formal politics, religious hypocrisy, and media elitism. Disintermediation, the process of bypassing traditional gatekeepers, means that controversial content can circulate widely without institutional endorsement. VDM's ability to bypass media houses and reach millions directly demonstrates the power of networked visibility in reconfiguring public discourse.

Misinformation, Ethics, and Public Trust

With this new terrain comes ethical ambiguity. Influencers are not held to journalistic standards of verification or fairness, yet they influence public sentiment, shape reputations, and even trigger legal or political consequences. The line between activism and defamation becomes blurred when accusations are made without corroboration.

Scholars such as Ojebuyi & Salawu (2019) argue that this creates a credibility crisis, where virality becomes a proxy for truth. While digital influencers can serve as watchdogs, their unregulated status raises concerns about trial by social media, reputational damage, and mob justice. Fraser's (1990) concept of counterpublics reminds us that while marginal voices deserve amplification, their discursive practices must still be evaluated on ethical grounds.

Nigeria-Specific Studies on Youth and Media

Nigeria's youth population, which comprises over 60% of the population, plays a critical role in shaping digital culture. Afrobarometer (2023) reports a steep decline in trust in police, judiciary, and politicians. As a result, youth increasingly turn to alternative platforms and personalities to understand social events, voice discontent, and demand accountability.

Scholars like Nwafor & Okoye (2021) and Chiluwa (2021) show that the digital space has become a battleground for narrative legitimacy in Nigeria. The cultural economy of outrage, call-out culture, and identity affirmation creates a feedback loop that privileges sensationalism and moral absolutism, conditions under which influencers like VDM thrive.

Synthesis

The reviewed literature reveals that while influencer-activists emerge from specific technological and cultural shifts, their success is underpinned by deeper structural conditions: public distrust, elite unresponsiveness, and the hunger for moral clarity. Yet, this visibility is double-edged, it opens space for subaltern expression, but also for unaccountable populism. Understanding VDM thus requires an approach that goes beyond platform affordances to interrogate the ethical, epistemological, and institutional stakes involved.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, which is suitable for exploring the socio-cultural and political meanings embedded in digital activism, particularly through the lens of influencer-activists like VeryDarkMan (VDM). The research combined content analysis, digital ethnography, and a perception survey to triangulate findings and ensure contextual depth.

Research Design and Rationale

The study is exploratory in nature and grounded in constructivist epistemology, which holds that reality is socially constructed through discourse and perception. Since the research seeks to understand how and why VDM influences public opinion, it emphasises narrative meanings and symbolic acts rather than numerical generalisations. The goal is not to measure impact statistically but to interpret how VDM is positioned, received, and legitimised in the public consciousness.

Data Sources and Sampling

Three primary data sources were employed:

VDM's Digital Content

A purposive sample of 50 video posts was selected from his Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook pages. These were posted between June 2023 and May 2024 and focused on themes such as police brutality, celebrity exposure, governance, corruption, gender issues, and religious hypocrisy.

- **Audience Engagement and Public Comments**

For each sampled video, the top 20 most liked or replied comments were extracted and analysed to gauge public sentiment, patterns of agreement or dissent, and language use.

- **Google Survey Questionnaire**

A self-administered online survey was distributed to 300 Nigerian youth aged 18–35 across different geo-political zones. Participants were recruited through WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and university forums. The survey included 16 closed- and open-ended questions on awareness of VDM, perceived credibility, moral tone, influence, and socio-political engagement.

- **Data Analysis**

The data were analysed using **thematic analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved:

- **Familiarisation** with video transcripts, comments, and survey responses.
- **Initial coding** to extract recurring ideas or motifs (e.g., ―truth speaker,‖ ―controversial but real,‖ ―clout chaser,‖ ―youth voice‖).
- **Categorisation into broader themes** such as institutional distrust, moral populism, digital affect, and performative activism.
- **Interpretation using theoretical frameworks** drawn from Habermas, Fraser, Gramsci, and Goldhaber.

NVivo software was used for coding and theme visualisation to maintain consistency and transparency in analytical procedures.

Ethical Considerations

Given the public nature of the digital content, ethical concerns were minimal regarding the influencer‘s videos. However, comments and survey responses were anonymised to protect participants' identities. The Google Form included an informed consent section, and participation was voluntary. Care was taken not to misrepresent or cherry-pick comments that served a particular narrative.

Limitations

While the qualitative approach offers depth and insight, it does not claim generalisability across all Nigerian influencer-activists. The study focuses primarily on VDM as a case exemplar, not a representative sample of all digital actors. Additionally, reliance on self-reported survey data may introduce bias or overstatement, especially where strong emotions or loyalty to the influencer are involved. Finally, algorithmic interference in platform visibility could affect the representativeness of selected videos.

This methodology integrates digital content analysis, audience feedback, and survey insight to offer a holistic view of VDM‘s influence. By focusing on both production (what VDM says), reception (how the public responds), and perception (what youth think), the study captures the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of digital influencer activism in contemporary Nigeria.

Analysis of Factors Responsible for VDM‟s Popularity

VeryDarkMan‘s (VDM) emergence as a cultural force in Nigeria is not accidental. His popularity is the outcome of intersecting factors, structural, psychological, technological, and socio-political. This section unpacks these factors to understand how his appeal is constructed, amplified, and sustained.

Public Distrust in Institutions

One of the clearest enablers of VDM's popularity is the deep-seated public distrust in Nigeria's formal institutions. Afrobarometer (2023) and NOIPolls have consistently shown declining trust in the police, judiciary, media, religious institutions, and political elite. For many Nigerians, particularly youth, these institutions are seen as corrupt, hypocritical, inaccessible, or complicit in injustice.

VDM's fierce and direct attacks on these institutions resonate as acts of symbolic justice. He publicly calls out police officers, pastors, celebrities, and politicians in ways that bypass formal accountability channels, reflecting public frustration with the slowness or absence of institutional justice. In a society where many feel voiceless, VDM becomes a surrogate speaker, articulating their pain in raw and relatable terms.

Youth Disenfranchisement and Digital Culture

Nigeria's youth make up over 60% of the population, but remain economically marginalised and politically alienated. This demographic, digitally savvy but disillusioned, constitutes VDM's core audience. He speaks their language, expresses their cynicism, and mocks the establishment with impunity. His use of street slang, sarcasm, pidgin English, and sometimes vulgarity forms an aesthetic of authenticity that connects deeply with urban and peri-urban youth.

VDM's social media pages function as counter-spaces where disillusioned youth can affirm their dissent. Comments such as —He says what we all think‖ or —At least someone is speaking the truth‖ appear frequently under his posts. His credibility derives not from qualifications or affiliations but from affective resonance with the lived realities of his audience.

Emotional Authenticity and Moral Populism

VDM's speech acts are often emotionally charged. His tears, outbursts, anger, and passion are not incidental, they are central to his influence. Digital audiences gravitate towards content that provokes emotional response. Papacharissi (2015) refers to this as the rise of affective publics, where collective feeling becomes a mode of engagement.

VDM positions himself as morally upright, even if emotionally volatile. His videos often begin or end with statements like —I'm doing this because I care,‖ —I can't be bought,‖ or —I fight for the voiceless.‖ This moral populism, —I represent the people against the corrupt elites‖, is a powerful tool for legitimacy in a society where systemic injustice is normalised. He is not asking to be believed based on facts alone, but based on his emotional conviction.

Algorithmic Amplification and Platform Dynamics

Social media algorithms reward virality, not necessarily accuracy or nuance. VDM's content is tailor-made for visibility: short, emotional, controversial, and frequent. His videos often go viral within hours, generating thousands of comments, reactions, and reposts.

The more contentious or dramatic the content, the more engagement it receives, pushing it further up in platform visibility. This feedback loop of controversy and amplification creates a cycle of relevance. Even criticism helps his algorithmic reach, making him ―uncancellable‖ in some sense. His opponents often fuel his visibility inadvertently.

Moreover, the platform architecture, particularly TikTok and Instagram Reels, favours creators who post regularly and tap into trending conversations. VDM's consistency and ability to inject himself into ongoing controversies (e.g., celebrity scandals, police brutality cases, or political developments) make him a master of digital timing.

Spectacle, Entertainment, and the Blurring of Roles

While many see VDM as an activist, he is also a performer. His content is highly entertaining, blending sarcasm, mimicry, and visual drama. This creates ambiguity: Is he a comedian, a moral crusader, or a clout chaser? For many viewers, the answer doesn't matter. The blend of activism and spectacle makes him more engaging than traditional activists or journalists.

This fusion of roles, what some call ―infotainment‖, is typical of influencer-activism in the digital age. As Edewor (2022) observes, Nigerian audiences increasingly consume activism through entertainment logics, expecting drama, exposure, and emotional delivery. VDM delivers all of these, making him a compelling figure across platforms.

The Appeal of Outsider Status

VDM constantly positions himself as a lone fighter against the system. He is not sponsored, not affiliated, and often claims to be ―hated by the elites.‖ This outsider narrative taps into deep populist sentiment and helps him retain an image of independence, even when his methods or facts are questioned.

His frequent arrests, bans, and social media shutdowns further reinforce this status, allowing him to perform martyrdom and gain solidarity from followers who view such repression as evidence of his truth-telling.

VDM's popularity is not a fluke; it is structurally conditioned and digitally sustained. He represents a perfect storm of public discontent, youth alienation, emotional performance, and algorithmic logic. Understanding his rise requires more than moral judgement, it demands an analysis of Nigeria's broken civic infrastructure and the digital tools that now substitute for its missing parts.

Implications

The rise of VeryDarkMan (VDM) and similar influencer-activists in Nigeria presents a complex mix of opportunities, risks, and transformations in the country's civic and media landscape. Their emergence is both a symptom of democratic discontent and a signal of new possibilities for citizen engagement. This section explores the layered implications of their popularity across six domains: political discourse, civic activism, media integrity, institutional legitimacy, digital culture, and youth identity formation.

Democratization of Discourse

One of the most immediate and visible implications of VDM's rise is the widening of access to public discourse. Historically, political commentary in Nigeria was dominated by elites—politicians, academics, journalists, and clerics. Social media influencers like VDM have disrupted this monopoly, allowing ordinary citizens to gain massive visibility and speak directly to national issues without institutional endorsement.

This democratization fosters pluralism and decentralises power, making civic space more accessible. VDM's ability to call out powerful figures resonates with marginalised groups who otherwise lack channels for expression. His example shows that critique is no longer the preserve of the privileged.

However, this also raises the risk of epistemic populism, where the loudest or most emotional voice replaces expertise or evidence. While power is decentralised, it is not always wielded responsibly.

Evolution of Activism

VDM represents a new form of digital activism, personalised, media-savvy, and perpetual. Unlike traditional activism that revolves around organisations, movements, or events, VDM's activism is ongoing and personality-driven. His —battles‖ emerge as he reacts to news trends, controversies, or viral stories, making his activism highly adaptable.

This creates a model of influencer-led activism, where public figures use their platforms not just to entertain but to advocate. It holds promise for issue amplification and mobilising public pressure. However, it may also lead to performative outrage, where advocacy is reduced to spectacle, with limited impact on structural change.

Media Ethics and Credibility Crisis

Traditional media are increasingly under pressure to keep up with influencers who attract more engagement and trust among younger audiences. As VDM and others become primary news sources for segments of the population, the role of journalists is being redefined.

This shift has both positive and negative implications. On one hand, it pushes legacy media to be more responsive and less elitist. On the other hand, it creates a credibility crisis, as the lines between fact, opinion, and performance blur. Influencer commentary is not always fact-checked, and the absence of editorial standards may lead to misinformation, defamation, or sensationalism.

Erosion of Institutional Legitimacy

VDM's popularity indirectly signals a legitimacy vacuum in Nigeria's key institutions. When individuals consistently turn to social media influencers instead of the police, courts, or formal media for justice, it reveals not just technological preference but institutional collapse.

Repeated patterns of citizens demanding redress through viral videos instead of formal complaints show how state credibility is being supplanted by digital clout. While this creates

temporary visibility for certain issues, it undermines the long-term development of trusted institutions.

Reconfiguration of Digital Citizenship

VDM's model of engagement encourages a form of reactive digital citizenship, one that is shaped by emotion, virality, and immediacy. Civic participation becomes tied to trending hashtags or high-profile controversies, rather than long-term policy advocacy or institutional reform.

This can energise public participation in the short term, especially among politically alienated youth. However, it may also normalise shallow engagement and reduce civic responsibility to entertainment or outrage.

Youth Identity and Cultural Norms

For many Nigerian youths, VDM represents a break from norms of deference and silence. His persona embodies defiance, confidence, and self-assurance. He articulates frustrations that many feel but cannot voice publicly due to class, employment status, or social standing.

Yet, this also raises questions about the normalisation of vulgarity, incivility, and absolutism. If young people see these traits as preconditions for being heard, the quality of future public discourse may be compromised. Role models matter, and VDM's model, while empowering in some ways, may inadvertently promote adversarial and unfiltered speech as the only valid mode of resistance.

The implications of VDM's influence stretch far beyond social media. They touch the very core of Nigeria's civic structure, youth culture, and media system. While his rise reveals exciting possibilities for citizen voice and digital empowerment, it also demands urgent reflection on how to sustain discourse that is both free and responsible, passionate and principled, inclusive and constructive.

Discussion

This study set out to understand why influencer-activists like VeryDarkMan (VDM) thrive in contemporary Nigeria. The findings suggest that VDM is not an isolated phenomenon but a symptomatic figure of a broader social and political reality. His rise reflects deeper systemic transformations in authority, legitimacy, civic expression, and media consumption. This section integrates these findings with theoretical perspectives and situates them within the wider socio-political terrain.

VDM as a Symptom of Institutional Decay

The decline of institutional trust in Nigeria, evident in the judiciary, police, media, and political class, creates a vacuum of authority. VDM fills this vacuum, not because he is the most qualified, but because he is the most visible and emotionally resonant. In this way, his rise aligns with Fraser's (1990) notion of counterpublics, where alternative discourses emerge in response to exclusion from dominant spaces.

Citizens, especially youth, turn to VDM not necessarily for truth in the strict sense, but for moral representation. His commentary, however coarse, articulates feelings of betrayal, disillusionment, and outrage that conventional platforms either sanitize or ignore. This mirrors the *affective turn* in civic discourse, where public engagement is shaped less by logic and more by emotional affinity (Papacharissi, 2015).

Legitimacy through Performance, Not Procedure

Traditional forms of legitimacy, based on credentials, procedures, or institutional backing, are increasingly being replaced by performative legitimacy in the digital age. VDM's authenticity is performed through tears, outbursts, and blunt language. This signals a new kind of truth-telling: one grounded in perceived sincerity rather than verifiable fact.

This shift parallels Gramsci's (1971**)** insight that hegemonic control includes cultural and emotional dimensions. VDM contests the cultural hegemony of elites not just by what he says, but by how he says it. His speech disrupts norms of deference, civility, and expertise, replacing them with immediacy, emotion, and spectacle. This may seem anti-intellectual, but it reflects a broader demand for visceral honesty in public life.

Attention Economy and Algorithmic Reward

VDM's rise cannot be separated from the algorithmic architecture of platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. As Goldhaber (1997) posited, attention has become a new form of capital in the digital age. Platforms reward visibility, not nuance. As a result, content that is emotionally charged, controversial, or confrontational gains more traction.

VDM understands and leverages this logic. His videos are brief, punchy, and dramatic, ideal for sharing and commenting. Even negative reactions contribute to his visibility, creating a paradox where outrage fuels influence. This logic explains why efforts to silence or counter him often backfire, further entrenching his digital footprint.

Implications for Democratic Engagement

VDM embodies a new model of political participation: post-institutional digital resistance. Unlike traditional activism that channels energy through protests, petitions, or civil society organisations, VDM's activism is mediated through self-produced digital content and individual virality.

This raises a dilemma. On one hand, his model enables broader participation, especially for those disillusioned with formal politics. On the other hand, it risks replacing democratic deliberation with moral absolutism and personality cults. The blurring of fact and opinion, activism and entertainment, critique and slander, complicates notions of civic responsibility.

The Paradox of Power without Accountability

Despite his anti-establishment posture, VDM exercises considerable discursive power. He shapes public perception, initiates debates, and pressures elites. Yet he operates outside the structures of accountability that constrain journalists, academics, or public officials.

This aligns with what some scholars call "counterpower without counterbalance". While it is important to democratise voice, it is equally important to consider mechanisms for ethical self-regulation among influential figures. Without such mechanisms, digital activism risks mimicking the very authoritarianism it seeks to resist.

Influence Beyond Nigeria

Although VDM's appeal is rooted in Nigerian realities, his influence mirrors a global trend: the rise of populist influencers who blend activism with entertainment. From Andrew Tate in the UK to Nas Daily in the Middle East and Kangana Ranaut in India, social media has enabled a new class of digital demagogues and disruptors.

What sets VDM apart is his moral framing. His rhetoric is not merely nationalist or personal, it is often cast in moral and religious tones, invoking God, truth, justice, and the people. This moral register gives him broader appeal among religiously-inclined Nigerian audiences and complicates efforts to frame him as merely a ―troublemaker.‖

VDM's rise is not an anomaly, it is a reflection of Nigeria's political exhaustion, digital awakening, and moral yearning. He thrives because the public sphere is broken, institutional legitimacy is weak, and emotional resonance has overtaken procedural rigour. Whether he is ultimately a force for good or harm depends not only on his conduct but on how society responds to the void he fills, through reform, repression, or reimagination.

Conclusion

The rise of influencer-activists like VeryDarkMan (VDM) in Nigeria is not a fleeting trend; it is a profound reflection of systemic discontent, cultural transformation, and the remaking of the public sphere in the digital age. This paper has explored how characters like VDM thrive at the intersection of failed institutional legitimacy, digitally mediated visibility, emotional resonance, and moral populism. By situating VDM within theoretical frameworks, ranging from Habermas's public sphere and Fraser's counterpublics to Gramsci's cultural hegemony and Goldhaber's attention economy, the study demonstrates that such figures emerge not in spite of democracy, but as a consequence of its distortions.

VDM's influence is best understood as a complex combination of protest and performance. He is not merely an activist or an entertainer, he is both. His content dramatizes social grievances and provides emotional relief in a society where justice is often delayed or denied. He articulates, in raw terms, what many Nigerians feel but cannot express in public. For his followers, he is not a perfect man, but a necessary one, an imperfect vessel for expressing shared pain, anger, and hope.

However, this very role comes with tensions. VDM bypasses gatekeeping mechanisms that ensure verification, moderation, or accountability. In the absence of editorial checks or ethical constraints, his influence, while empowering, can also veer into misinformation, character defamation, and populist absolutism. The paper warns against romanticising digital influencer-activism without confronting its risks, particularly the erosion of deliberative culture, epistemic rigour, and ethical discourse.

The implications are wide-ranging. Politically, VDM's prominence challenges elites to engage more directly with grassroots concerns. Socially, it shows a hunger for authenticity and justice that institutions have failed to meet. Culturally, it reveals how new norms of engagement are being forged, not in universities or parliaments, but in viral videos, comment sections, and digital communities. Media-wise, it forces a rethinking of credibility, visibility, and the role of emotional expression in shaping public narratives.

More broadly, the paper aligns with UN Sustainable Development Goal 16, which promotes peace, justice, and strong institutions, by highlighting the urgent need to rebuild trust in governance, invest in youth civic education, and create platforms for inclusive dialogue. The rise of VDM is not just about one man's journey to clout; it is about what happens when systems fail and society turns to the loudest voice in the room for clarity, relief, or retribution.

Ultimately, this study does not take a normative position on whether VDM is a hero or a hazard. Rather, it argues that he is a mirror, reflecting Nigeria's fractured civic order, the aspirations of its digitally active youth, and the global shift towards personality-driven public discourse. The responsibility now lies not just with VDM or those who critique him, but with Nigerian institutions, civil society, and citizens to engage with the structural voids he exposes.

If VDM and his kind are thriving, it is because something else is failing. That ―something‖ must be addressed, not through censorship or disdain, but through inclusive reform, digital literacy, and reimagined civic frameworks. Only then can Nigeria build a democratic culture where truth is not shouted into a phone but pursued in dialogue, policy, and justice.

Recommendations

To respond constructively to the phenomenon of influencer-activists like VeryDarkMan (VDM), Nigeria must go beyond moral panic or censorship. The popularity of such figures reveals not just a crisis of behaviour but a crisis of trust, access, and legitimacy. As such, the following recommendations are proposed for multiple stakeholders: government institutions, media regulators, civil society, digital platforms, and the broader Nigerian public.

Institutional Reforms for Restoring Trust

- **Fast-Track Justice and Complaint Resolution**: The government must improve the efficiency and transparency of grievance-handling institutions, such as the police complaints commission, judiciary, and anti-corruption agencies. Many people turn to influencers like VDM not because they prefer drama, but because formal channels are too slow, corrupt, or silent.
- **Youth Inclusion in Governance**: Create institutionalised platforms (such as Youth Observatories, Digital Listening Forums, and Advisory Councils) where young people can engage government actors regularly, not just during election cycles. This reduces the reliance on informal voices to speak on behalf of the youth.
- **Ethics Reforms in Public Service and Religious Institutions**: Institutions must be held to higher ethical standards and public accountability. VDM thrives, in part, because of the

perceived impunity of pastors, politicians, and celebrities. Internal ethics committees and independent oversight must become functional and visible.

Strengthening Media Regulation and Digital Policy

- **Update Regulatory Frameworks for Influencer-Activism**: The Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), National Orientation Agency (NOA), and National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) should develop digital media literacy and influencer engagement guidelines. Rather than silencing digital activists, the goal should be to professionalise the space and promote civic responsibility.
- **Introduce a Voluntary Code of Conduct for Influencers**: Collaborate with civil society and media organisations to develop a *Digital Influencer Ethics Charter* that outlines standards on defamation, fact-checking, sponsored content disclosure, and responsible speech.
- **Empower Fact-Checking Organisations**: Support and publicise independent fact-checking platforms (such as Dubawa, Africa Check, and FactCheckHub) to verify viral claims made by influencers. Their findings should be promoted through national media, helping audiences to distinguish between factual critique and unfounded accusations.

Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy

- **Embed Media and Information Literacy in School Curricula**: The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) should work with civil society to introduce modules that teach digital responsibility, ethical speech, and critical thinking in secondary and tertiary institutions.
- **Community-Based Digital Literacy Campaigns**: Civil society groups and youth-focused NGOs should organise town halls, radio shows, and social media campaigns that educate the public on how to engage influencers constructively, avoid mob justice, and verify claims before acting.
- **Promote Digital Dialogue Spaces**: Establish moderated online forums or national conversation platforms, possibly coordinated by the NOA or the Ministry of Youth and Sports Development, where grievances can be aired, debated, and escalated to policymakers without reliance on viral personalities.

Civil Society and NGO Engagement

- **Mentorship and Support for Ethical Influencers**: Identify and support young influencers who are committed to fact-based, principled civic engagement. Provide capacity-building grants, fellowships, or training on law, ethics, and advocacy.
- **Create Safe Whistleblower Channels**: Develop anonymous, tech-enabled reporting

systems where citizens can report abuse, injustice, or corruption. This would reduce the dependence on high-profile figures to ―expose‖ wrongdoing.

- **Build Alliances Between Civil Society and Digital Creators**: Organisations working on governance, accountability, and justice should partner with influencers to co-create campaigns that blend credibility with reach.

Platform Accountability

- **Engage Social Media Companies**: Encourage Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram to localise their community guidelines enforcement. Platforms must strike a balance between protecting freedom of expression and curbing hate speech or harassment.
- **Transparency in Algorithmic Curation**: Civil society coalitions should pressure platforms to publish transparency reports showing how content is amplified, flagged, or demoted, particularly around socially sensitive issues.

The influencer-activist phenomenon in Nigeria, epitomised by VDM, is a wake-up call, not a threat. It reveals the failures of existing systems and the urgency for reforms that prioritise access, justice, and dignity. The challenge is to respond not with repression but with innovation, creating a media and civic environment where influence is earned through integrity, not outrage.

Rather than silencing loud voices, Nigeria must create more responsive institutions, more inclusive conversations, and more credible alternatives. Only then can the country reclaim its public space, not by force, but by trust.

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