

INTERROGATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL IDENTITIES ON GENZ's CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In Nigeria's complex socio-political context, where religion and politics are deeply intertwined, Gen Z navigates inherited beliefs and contemporary democratic ideals in unique ways. Current scholarship often treats religion and culture as secondary or unchanging, failing to capture how these identities dynamically shape youth political behaviour. This study explores how religious and cultural identities influence the civic and political engagement of Nigeria's Gen Z, a digitally active and demographically significant group. It also addresses the literature gap by examining how Gen Z reinterprets religious and cultural narratives to engage with political systems, governance issues, and social movements. Using literature, journals, case studies and applying relevant theoretical frameworks, the study foregrounds the lived experiences, motivations, and internal conflicts of Nigerian Gen Z. It finds that religious and cultural identities provide moral grounding and community support but can also limit participation when influenced by conservatism, patriarchy, or ethno-religious tensions.

Keywords: Political Sociology, Religious Studies, Cultural Studies, Gen Z Political Engagement, Ethno-Religious Identity in Nigeria

Introduction

Considering the prevailing socio-political issues, often perceived as barriers arising from intertwined social and political factors that hinder investment opportunities and stifle national growth, Obamuyi and Fapetu (as referenced by Chukwuyem & Kidochukwu) identified several key challenges confronting Nigeria. These include insecurity, corruption, poor governance, unemployment, and widespread poverty. Additionally, Chukwuyem and Kidochukwu highlighted Moghalu's perspective, which points to the erosion of national unity and security, weakening of state institutions, the diminishing influence of the elite, rapid population expansion, and the detrimental impact of oil dependence as significant socio-political problems afflicting the country.² It is essential to note that Nigeria's core political conflicts stem from the social misalignment between the Northern and Southern regions of the country. The deeper cause of these social tensions lies within a political framework that has failed to adequately accommodate the nation's ethnic diversity. This flaw was evident in the conduct of politicians during the 1979 elections, where political leaders appeared primarily driven by ethnic and tribal interests. Although the independence movement of the 1950s showed a united front, true national consciousness or patriotism was largely absent. Sadly, this lack of national spirit became embedded in subsequent generations, and the situation remains unchanged today. Olayinka observed that while the 1979 Nigerian Constitution claimed to promote good governance, social welfare, freedom, equality, justice, and national unity, these ideals were not genuinely pursued by the political leadership of the time. This was particularly evident in the events that followed the 1979 presidential elections. Olayinka further noted that Chapter II (Sections 13–22) of the Constitution, which outlines the country's social, political, economic, and educational objectives, unintentionally exposes Nigeria's fragile structure. These goals, intended as guiding principles, have ironically become persistent obstacles to national development. Nigeria remains a complex nation burdened by deep-rooted and inherited problems that push it dangerously close to collapse. Its federal system contains structural weaknesses that could potentially lead to disintegration, similar to what occurred with the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The flawed composition of Nigeria's federal arrangement, combined with the erosion of genuine federalism, continues to destabilize the nation's political system. From its inception, the Nigerian political structure was vulnerable, as even the 1954 Constitution, which introduced power-sharing

¹ E. P. Chukwuyem & O. C. Kidochukwu, "The Nigerian Socio-Economic and Political Landscape: Wither the Chartered Accountants," *Finance and Accounting Research Journal* 4, no. 3 (2022): 85, <https://doi.org/10.51594/farj.v4i3.387>

² Chukwuyem & Kidochukwu, "The Nigerian Socio-Economic and Political Landscape: Wither the Chartered Accountants", 86.

between the regions and the central government, was built upon the fragile foundation of the 1914 amalgamation widely regarded as an artificial construct lacking the strength to sustain lasting stability.³

Nigeria as a nation defined by its religious plurality and cultural heterogeneity, has long experienced a socio-political environment in which civic life is deeply shaped by identity. From the early postcolonial period to contemporary democratic transitions, the interaction between religion, ethnicity, and state governance has remained a central force in shaping citizens' political consciousness and engagement.⁴ Within this context, GenZ are loosely defined as individuals born between the late 1990s and early 2010s.⁵ Technologically adept, globally connected, and increasingly assertive, Nigerian Gen Z youth confront the dual inheritance of entrenched religious-cultural narratives and a rapidly evolving democratic landscape. Despite the growing visibility of young people in civic and political spheres whether through online activism, protest movements such as #EndSARS⁶ there remains a lack of nuanced understanding of how religious and cultural identities inform their civic agency. Existing scholarship often approaches religion and culture as static backdrops or peripheral influences, rather than as active, lived experiences that both shape and are reshaped by youth engagement. In reality, young Nigerians frequently navigate between inherited values rooted in scripture and tradition, and the ideals of democratic citizenship such as rights, inclusion, and accountability. This study seeks to interrogate the influence of religious and cultural identities on Gen Z's civic and political engagement in Nigeria. Specifically, it examines how these identities function as both motivators and inhibitors of active citizenship, and how Gen Z reinterpret religious and cultural frameworks in ways that reflect, resist, or reform the existing socio-political order. Drawing on recent literature, case examples, and social narratives, the paper aims to foreground the voices and

³ Olaniyi Felix Olayinka, "The Law and Constitutional Guarantees in Disciplinary Proceedings in Higher Institutions in Nigeria" Being paper presented at the Training and Capacity Building/ Retreat, for Heads of Departments, The Polytechnic Ibadan, held at MicCom Golf Conference and Resort Ada, Osun State Nigeria, 17 - 19 February 2011. <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Olaniyi-Felix-Olayinka/publication/379332320>

⁴ C. O. Oseghale, "Religion and Political Culture in Nigeria," *Global Online Journal of Academic Research (GOJAR)* 3, no. 2 (2024): 65, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/380596796_Religion_and_Political_Culture_in_Nigeria

⁵ Iriando Wijaya et al., "The Influence of Digital Competence on Generation Z's Political Participation in the City of Jayapura," *Journal of Government and Development* 1, no. 3 (2024): 163, <https://doi.org/10.69816/jgd.v1i3.42588>

⁶ Gina Din, "GenZ demands tangible governance changes" *African Business News*, August 20 2024, <https://african.business/2024/08/politics/gen-z-demands-tangible-governance-changes>

internal tensions of young Nigerians as they engage with politics not merely as voters or activists, but as agents navigating a complex interplay of faith, tradition, and modern statehood. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of democratic participation in Nigeria by situating it within the lived experiences of its youth.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Generation Z: According to Alison, Generation Z refers to individuals in the United States who were born in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While some sources specifically define this group as those born between 1997 and 2012, there is ongoing debate about the exact years that mark this generation, as it is often challenging to draw clear boundaries between generations and their defining cultural moments. Generation Z comes after the millennial generation, also known as Generation Y, which itself followed Generation X, the first generation to be labeled with a letter. After reaching the end of the Latin alphabet, the next group has been named Generation Alpha, beginning the use of Greek letters for generational classification (Alison, 2025)⁷. A generation typically refers to a group of people born within the same time frame who share similar experiences and social influences. In today's workplace, multiple generations such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y coexist, while attention is now shifting toward the rising Generation Z. Although the term 'generation' is widely used to group people by shared backgrounds and historical events, its exact definition often varies among scholars. Jayatissa highlights the work of David Stillman, a well-known generational researcher, who traces the origins of generational naming. According to Stillman, the labeling began with the Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, during a period of soaring birth rates. The generation before them was originally called the "Silent Generation" due to their reputation for being quiet and compliant in the workplace, though history shows they accomplished great feats, including overcoming the Great Depression, participating in World War victories, and witnessing the first moon landing. Recognizing that "Silent" did not accurately represent them, Stillman revived the term "Traditionalists," which had briefly appeared in *Time Magazine* in 1951. In 1991, Generation X entered the scene, shaped by experiences such as single-parent homes, working parents, after-school isolation, and economic uncertainty. Following them, the next cohort was initially labeled Generation Y, but historians Howe and Strauss (as cited by Jayatissa)⁸ later popularized the term "Millennials" in their book *Millennials Rising*, gradually pushing the Gen Y label out of common use. Today, the spotlight is on Generation Z, a tech-savvy cohort that has grown up with rapid technological change as their everyday reality.

⁷ Alison Eldridge, "Generation Z". *Britannica*, June 22 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Generation-Alpha>

⁸ K.A.D.U. Jayatissa, "Generation Z- A New Lifeline: A Systematic Literature Review," *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2023): 179, <https://doi.org/10.4038/sljssh.v3i2.110>

Studies show that over 51% of Gen Zers prefer careers in the technology sector. Dimock (as cited by Jayatissa) points to the 2007 release of the iPhone and the explosion of mobile technologies, Wi-Fi, and fast internet as defining moments for Gen Z. These advancements allowed them constant access to social media and information, shaping their communication styles and worldviews. While researchers are still uncovering how this has influenced their workplace behavior, recent studies reveal that Gen Z holds distinct values, priorities, and habits that set them apart from earlier generations.⁹

Civic Engagement: Civic engagement encompasses a wide range of actions and mindsets focused on active participation in social and political affairs, all aimed at strengthening and sustaining a healthy democratic society (Banyan, n.d.).¹⁰ As noted by Berger (cited by Joakim and Amna), the term *civic engagement* has recently become something of a buzzword, used to describe activities ranging from voting and charitable donations to participating in bowling leagues, political rallies, and protests. Joakim & Amna also referenced Putnam, who is widely credited with popularizing the concept. Putnam emphasized the value of *social capital* as essential for a thriving democracy, focusing more on the idea of “engagement” itself than strictly on its civic or political dimensions. In his analysis of citizen involvement, Putnam considered a broad spectrum of activities including newspaper readership, political participation, social networks, interpersonal trust, and membership in various associations as forms of civic engagement. His key argument was straightforward: higher levels of civic engagement typically align with healthier democracies and more stable market economies.¹¹

Religious and Cultural Identity: Religious identity refers to the way individuals or groups perceive, experience, and construct their sense of belonging within a religious context, while also being influenced by the psychological, social, political, and devotional aspects of that affiliation. Although no unifying theory of religious identity has been established, its complexity has prompted diverse interpretations from psychological, sociological, political, philosophical, theological, and tradition-based perspectives.¹² Cultural identity describes the sense of belonging and attachment individuals and communities have to a specific culture or cultural group. It is a complex and dynamic concept shaped by diverse factors, including ethnicity, language, traditions, and shared historical experiences. Cultural identity

¹⁰ M. E. Banyan, “Civic Engagement” *Britannica*, n.d., <https://www.britannica.com/topic/civic-engagement>

¹¹ Joakim Ekman & Erik Amna, “Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards A New Typology,” *Human Affairs* 22, (2012): 284, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228419794_Political_participation_and_civic_engagement_Towards_a_new_typology

¹² “Religious Identity” in “Encyclopedia of Identity”, ed. By Ronald L. Jackson II & Michael A. Hogg (Sage Publications, 2025) <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412979306.n203>

identity continuously evolves, influencing how people perceive themselves and engage with the world around them.¹³

Literature Review

Youth Civic Participation in Nigeria

Youth is best understood as a transitional phase between the dependency of childhood and the independence of adulthood. Unlike fixed age groups, youth is a fluid category, though age remains the most practical way to define it, particularly concerning education and employment. Typically, youth refer to individuals who have completed compulsory schooling and are entering the job market. For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines youth as those aged 15 to 24, a definition first introduced by the Secretary-General in his 1981 report on International Youth Year and reaffirmed in subsequent documents. However, the Secretary-General also acknowledged that the concept of youth can vary across different cultural and societal contexts. This age-based definition was later confirmed when the General Assembly adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth in 1995.¹⁴ Youth researchers increasingly define youth based on personal experiences, particularly focusing on an individual's degree of dependency. This dependency is shaped by cultural contexts and can vary widely across societies. It generally refers to the extent to which young people continue to rely on their families for emotional and financial support.¹⁵ The involvement of citizens in political life was central to the development of state civilization in Ancient Greece, particularly exemplified by Athenian democracy. The Classical Direct Democracy (CDD) practiced in Athens emphasized the full participation of interested citizens in shaping public policies and was widely accepted as a true form of democracy. In contrast, the dominant model of democracy in Nigeria from the 20th century has been the Liberal Democratic System (LDS), which is rooted in classical liberal ideals such as individual freedom, citizens' rights, and free-market economics. However, the effectiveness of LDS largely depends on the level of citizen engagement. Procedural Democratic Theory (PDT) argues that citizen participation should be primarily limited to voting and electing representatives, after which the responsibility of governance should rest with those elected officials without constant interference from the public. Elections, in this view, serve as a mechanism to hold potentially corrupt leaders accountable.

¹³ Michaela Manolache, "Religion as Cultural Identity: Addressing Misconceptions and Examining Attitudes," 15 August 2023, Accessed on June 25 2025, <https://different-level.com/religion-as-cultural-identity-addressing-misconceptions-and-examining-attitudes/>

¹⁴ United Nations Youth, "Definition of Youth" Accessed on June 25, 2025, <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>

¹⁵ Furlong Andy, *Youth Studies: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2013), 2-3.

Yet, by the 1980s, there were growing demands for more active and sustained citizen involvement in governance beyond just voting. Proponents of PDT often suggest that ordinary citizens are generally not equipped to participate meaningfully in complex political matters, whereas participatory democracy encourages direct and ongoing civic involvement and promotes a stronger sense of democratic accountability.¹⁶ Nevertheless, procedural democracy is not inherently opposed to genuine democratic principles, nor is participatory democracy free from challenges. Advocates for procedural governance argue that allowing elected representatives to deliberate and make decisions can enhance the relationship between leaders and citizens while fostering civic awareness. Interestingly, as Bariika et al. noted, Vite pointed out that not all citizens desire active political engagement. Some prefer what he described as a “furtive” democratic approach, where they avoid direct political involvement and leave policy-making to their elected officials while focusing on their personal lives. In modern times, where formal political participation is often low even in established democracies, the procedural model appears to more accurately reflect political reality than the idealized vision of participatory democracy.¹⁷

Nearly half of the world's population is under 30, making today's demographic the youngest in history. However, despite their numbers, young people often have limited influence over decisions that shape their future. About 90% of this youth population resides in developing countries. UNESCO (2013) stressed the importance of involving youth in addressing global challenges. In Nigeria, a growing youth population has resulted in a “youth bulge,” driven by continuous population growth. While this presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for economic advancement if governments actively engage young people and capitalize on the demographic dividend, a period where the ratio of dependents to the working population decreases, potentially boosting productivity. Erinle, citing Mattei, emphasized that democratic processes require broad participation from multiple stakeholders to build responsive and sustainable governance. Erinle also referenced Roglic, who argued that the success of democratic efforts depends on their internal components, with political parties and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) playing essential roles in strengthening democracy. According to Kura et al., as cited by Erinle, factors like economic stability, political culture, social cohesion, and institutional strength significantly influence democratic values. Additional factors such as

¹⁶ Bariika Nornubari Vite et al., “Youth Political Participation in Nigeria: A Theoretical Synthesis,” *US-China Education Review B* 10, no. 4 (2020): 157-158
<http://dx.doi.org/10.17265/2161-6248/2020.04.002>

¹⁷ Bariika Nornubari Vite et al., “Youth Political Participation in Nigeria: A Theoretical Synthesis”, 159- 160

elite consensus and the positioning of various demographic groups, including youth, women, and minorities, are crucial for inclusive governance.¹⁸

Erinle noted that youth and women form the majority in many populations worldwide, and the inclusivity of a democracy is strongly tied to how these groups engage politically. Erinle noted that some scholars believe many young Nigerians remain politically disengaged because the political system often fails to address the issues that matter most to them. Others argue that deep-rooted ethnic divisions may obstruct the efforts of young leaders to build national unity and suggest that political participation is limited to voting or seeking public office. However, Erinle challenged this narrow perspective, pointing out that young people in other countries have successfully attained significant leadership positions, proving that youth can hold substantial political power. Contrary to the view of disengagement, Erinle observed that young Nigerians are becoming increasingly interested in political participation, particularly as global attention continues to focus on their role in shaping democratic processes. Furthermore, Erinle mentioned that according to a scholar creating supportive environments is essential to fostering greater youth involvement in politics.¹⁹ While political participation has declined globally since the early 2000s, youth involvement has consistently lagged behind other groups. Yet, the 2023 general elections in Ogun State showed a promising shift. Youth played a significant role in mobilizing support for their preferred candidates, including traveling from other regions to participate. Their enthusiasm was evident through activities like distributing souvenirs, offering free airtime, forming prayer groups, and visiting rural communities. This high level of youth engagement marked a significant change in political participation patterns in the state, with increasing voter registration and active involvement suggesting a potential long-term transformation in Nigeria's democratic landscape.²⁰

Role of Religion in Nigerian Political Life

The connection between religion and politics remains a significant topic within political philosophy. In Nigeria, particularly in the post-independence period, religion has played a substantial role in shaping political affairs. Regardless of the perspective one adopts, it is undeniable that religion and politics are deeply intertwined in the Nigerian context.

¹⁸ M. O. Erinle, "Youth Inclusion and Political Participation in Nigeria's 2023 Elections," *International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)* 4, no. 2 (2025): 447-449, https://ijhssm.org/issue_dcp/Youth%20Inclusion%20And%20Political%20Participation%20In%20Nigeria%20s%202023%20Election.pdf

¹⁹ M. O. Erinle, "Youth Inclusion and Political Participation in Nigeria's 2023 Elections", 447-449

²⁰ M. O. Erinle, "Youth Inclusion and Political Participation in Nigeria's 2023 Elections", 450

This close interaction has sparked considerable scholarly debate, with many researchers agreeing that religion holds a complex and often contradictory influence on Nigeria's national progress, development, and stability. Therefore, examining the extent and manner of religion's involvement in politics is a relevant inquiry, which largely depends on the importance Nigerians place on their religious beliefs.²¹ Religion has long been a central force in Nigeria, shaping not only personal beliefs but also the nation's political landscape. In Nigeria, religion influences virtually every aspect of life; politics, economy, social relationships, education, and even societal psychology. The country is home to three dominant religions: African Traditional Religion (ATR), Islam, and Christianity, all of which, in their ideologies and practices, allow significant overlap between religious and political life. In traditional Nigerian society, particularly among the Yoruba, politics and religion were deeply intertwined. Political leadership was seen as a divine trust, where the king (Oba) ruled as a representative of *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being. Decisions such as selecting an Oba required consulting the Ifa oracle, showing the inseparable link between governance and spiritual authority a connection that persists today.

In Islam, religion is not confined to personal belief but is a complete way of life, governing political, economic, and social conduct. Islamic teachings from the Quran, the Hadith, and the life of Prophet Muhammad, who served as both a spiritual and political leader, continue to guide Muslim communities. Islam thus naturally integrates faith and governance. Some scholars argue that Islam does not separate religion from politics; instead, all spheres of life, including law, economy, and education, are seen as parts of the Islamic religious framework. Christianity, on the other hand, presents a more complex interaction with politics in Nigeria. While some Christian communities tend to distance themselves from political affairs, many Christians actively participate in politics, holding significant positions across the country. Scholars, such as Ichapele and Omosor,²² Peyton Connor,²³ Lovin²⁴ and others suggest that Christianity, though often seen

²¹ A. A. Ibraheem, "The Role of Religion in Nigeria Politics for Sustainable Development," *Conference on Islam in Nigeria (COIN)* 11 (2022): 251, https://iwf.com.ng/2022_conference_papers/materials_2022/COIN_pp_251-262.pdf

²² Godwin Omodunefe Ichapele and Festus Osom Omosor, "The Influence of Emperor Constantine on the Present Day Church: A Case Study of Anglican Diocese of Ughelli" *NIU Journal of Social Sciences: Nexus International University* (2024) 10(2): 311–319

²³ Peyton Connor, "Christianization in the Roman Empire: Politics, Culture, and Architecture During the Reign of Emperor Constantine I" (2024). *History*. 1. <https://scholarship.rollins.edu/honors-in-the-major-history/1>

²⁴ Robin W. Lovin, "Authority, Legitimacy and Sovereignty: Religion and Politics in the Roman Empire before Constantine" *Studies in Christian Ethics* Volume 29, Issue 2. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0953946815623133>

as detached from politics, historically allowed for political engagement, as seen in the influence of the Church during the Roman Empire, especially under Constantine. Biblical teachings, such as Jesus' instruction to respect governing authorities (Matthew 22:17-20), support this involvement. From the foundations of Nigeria's three major religions, politics and religion have always been closely linked. Both domains rely on the cooperation between the divine and the human, with the success of governance often tied to adherence to religious principles and ethics. Political theorists recognize that humans are naturally political beings, just as they are inherently religious. This dual nature often leads to the politicization of religion and the religionization of politics in Nigeria. This blending, however, has consequences. The merging of religion and politics has contributed to the loss of religion's sacredness and has deepened the perception of politics as corrupt and manipulative. In Nigeria's postcolonial state, religion and politics have become tools for political elites to divide the populace, consolidate power, and control national resources. For example, following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the then Northern Premier, Sir Ahmadu Bello, actively promoted Islam in the north, sparking fear among Christians and ATR practitioners of religious domination. Over time, religion has become an essential element in political campaigns, and it is widely believed that no one can successfully pursue political office in Nigeria without projecting a strong religious identity. Politicians continue to use religion to pursue their goals, marginalize opponents, and legitimize their authority. This has intensified the rivalry between the two dominant faiths, Islam and Christianity, as both struggle for political influence. Despite the numerous scholarly attempts to define religion, its meaning remains contested. Yet, it is evident that religion has always played a vital role in human history, commanding significant influence over people's lives and shaping societies from ancient times to the present.²⁵

Religious affiliation plays a significant role in shaping political party strategies and candidate selection in Nigeria. The nation is broadly divided along religious lines, with a Muslim-majority north and a Christian-majority south, making religion a key factor in political decision-making. In the 2023 elections, the All-Progressive Congress (APC) sparked national debate by fielding a Muslim-Muslim ticket with Bola Ahmed Tinubu and Kashim Shettima. This move was designed to strengthen the party's support in the northern regions but raised concerns about religious inclusivity and national unity. The APC's approach underlined how deeply religious considerations influence electoral strategies, with parties often balancing faith and regional interests to secure votes.

²⁵ Ambrose Obodoeze Ogueche (PhD) et al., "The Role of Religion in the Politics of Nigerian Society," *Sapientia Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies (SGOJAHDS)* 3, no. 2 (2020): 390-392

<https://www.sgojahds.com/index.php/SGOJAHDS/article/view/91/96>

Similarly, Peter Obi's shift from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) to the Labour Party reflected the complex intersection of religion and regional identity in Nigerian politics. As a Christian from the southeast, Obi sought to harness the support of Christian voters and those disillusioned with the traditional two-party dominance. His candidacy presented a platform that appealed to both religious and regional sentiments, offering an alternative to the predominantly Muslim candidates from the APC and PDP.²⁶

Cultural Identity and Political Behavior

Identity is a complex, multi-dimensional concept that reflects how individuals see themselves and their place in society. It is influenced by personal experiences, cultural expectations, and historical contexts. One of the most significant aspects of identity is cultural identity, which shapes how people and communities connect with shared traditions, values, and practices that foster a sense of belonging. Betul explains that, according to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, cultural identity refers to "the fact of belonging to, or feeling that you belong to, a particular culture." Additionally, Hogg and Abrams describe it as people's understanding of who they are, the kind of people they see themselves as, and how they relate to others. Culture and identity are inherently connected, as cultural beliefs, values, practices, and texts naturally contribute to shaping individual and group identities. However, no cultural group is entirely uniform. Human beings have a deep, instinctive tendency to form subgroups, a behavior that is evident even in the animal kingdom and rooted in evolutionary history. For example, within Islam, there are multiple expressions of Muslim identity such as Sunni, Shia, and Sufi traditions each with unique practices and interpretations, despite sharing core beliefs. Cultural identities often lack the emotional intensity of national, racial, or ethnic identities, which are typically more compelling because they are seen as naturally occurring rather than constructed. People may not readily risk their lives for culture alone, but they are often willing to defend their nation, ethnicity, or other deeply imagined communities they perceive as inherently meaningful.

Political behavior refers to any individual or collective action that influences political processes or outcomes, whether through formal participation like voting, activism, and membership in interest groups, or through informal and

²⁶ Caleb Ezech & Esther Okechukwu, "The Role of Religion in Nigerian Politics: A Case Study of the 2023 Elections," *ResearchGate* (2024) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382109038_Title_The_Role_of_Religion_in_Nigerian_Politics_A_Case_Study_of_the_2023_Elections

²⁷ B. A. Kocak, "Cultural Identity: Migration Narratives in European Media: Teaching, Learning and Reflecting," (2023), <https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/migramedia/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Cultural-Identity.pdf>

²⁸ John E. Joseph, "Cultural Identity in The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics," *ResearchGate* (2012), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319588838_Cultural_Identity

often unlawful activities such as coups, terrorism, and rebellions. It also encompasses the study of how people think, feel, and act in relation to politics. The primary goal of political behavior studies is to objectively analyze political actions using methods such as sampling, statistical analysis, and interviews, with a particular focus on individuals and groups as key political actors. Discussions in this field aim to clarify the connection between citizens' political actions and the broader democratic process. As such, political behavior now covers a wide range of topics, including political attitudes, non-electoral participation like protests, resistance, social movements, political apathy, extremism, and their implications for political representation and systems. According to Nurudeen, Eldersveld, and Katz are of the opinion that political behavior emphasizes individuals and groups as the central units of analysis, focusing more on actions and decisions rather than on formal political structures like the executive, legislature, or judiciary. Traditionally, political science was largely institutional, legalistic, and normative, which made it difficult to fully understand how people behaved in political settings. The push to bridge this gap led to the emergence of the "behavioral revolution" in political studies.

Review of Existing Literature: Identifying Gaps and Limitations

The existing body of literature on youth civic participation and political behavior in Nigeria has offered valuable insights into the country's complex socio-political dynamics. However, a critical examination reveals several key limitations that constrain a holistic understanding of the subject, particularly concerning Generation Z (Gen Z). These gaps include the overgeneralization of youth, the insufficient focus on Gen Z as a distinct cohort, and the absence of integrated analysis bridging religion, culture, and civic life.

Overgeneralization of Youth

One of the most prominent limitations in the existing scholarship is the tendency to overgeneralize youth as a single, homogenous group. Much of the literature applies broad categorizations that conflate varying youth experiences across generations, social contexts, and cultural settings. For example, youth are often presented as a unified demographic block without adequately distinguishing between their unique socio-political motivations, cultural exposures, or technological fluencies. This generalization risks erasing the nuanced differences between older and younger youth, rural and urban populations, and between those actively engaged in civic life and those who remain politically disengaged. As a result, there is a tendency to assume that all

²⁹ Nurudeen Olalekan Orunbon, "Introduction To Political Behaviour," *ResearchGate* (2022) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361318010_INTRODUCTION_TO_POLITICAL

young people share the same level of political interest, cultural alignment, and civic motivations, which simplifies a much more layered reality.

Lack of Focus on Generation Z

Although the reviewed literature acknowledges youth civic engagement in Nigeria, it rarely isolates Generation Z as a distinct analytical category. Gen Z's lived experiences, shaped by the digital age, globalization, and exposure to rapid socio-political change, differ significantly from those of previous generations. The dominant focus on youth in general terms fails to capture Gen Z's unique forms of activism, such as their digital engagement through social media, decentralized protest strategies, and reinterpretation of cultural and religious identities. Movements like #EndSARS, which were largely driven by Gen Z, highlight the need to pay closer attention to this cohort's distinctive political behavior, which does not fit neatly into the patterns described in the broader youth participation models. Ignoring these generational nuances limits the ability of scholars to fully explain the emerging civic identities and political strategies of Nigerian Gen Z.

Absence of Intersection between Religion, Culture, and Civic Life

Another critical gap in the literature is the insufficient exploration of the intersection between religion, culture, and civic participation in the context of Nigerian Gen Z. While studies on religion and political behavior have documented the influence of religious identities on voting patterns and party affiliations, they often treat religion and culture as static or background factors rather than as active, evolving forces that shape and are reshaped by young people's civic choices. Moreover, many existing works tend to silo religion, culture, and civic life, without recognizing how these domains interact and sometimes conflict in shaping Gen Z's political engagement. For Nigerian Gen Z, navigating inherited religious and cultural values alongside modern democratic ideals is not a passive process; it is an active negotiation that profoundly influences their civic behavior. The lack of integrated analysis leaves unexplored the ways in which Gen Z youth reinterpret religious teachings, resist cultural constraints, or challenge established ethno-religious structures to create new forms of political participation.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach, designed to explore how religion and culture shape the civic and political engagement of Nigerian Generation Z (Gen Z). The research is aimed at addressing the current gaps by focusing specifically on Gen Z's lived experiences with special attention to their religious and cultural identities.

Data Collection Method

Structured Questionnaire: Online questionnaires was shared using google form because of distance barrier and accessibility. Data analysis using percentages is carried out and thematic analysis by coding answers. The data used for this research work is a primary data administered to Nigerian Youths in selected states in Nigeria. The states sampled are Kwara, Lagos and Abuja. These states are purposively selected considering the youths involvement in politics.

Sample Size

It is impossible to administer questionnaire to all youths of the selected states, a number of 300 copies of questionnaire were administered by the researcher in order to ensure proper administration and a number of 295 people answered the questionnaire and were retrieved containing 29 questions (21 questions sampling their Agree-Disagree-Not sure perception, 3 questions for the Yes/No Section and 5 open-ended questions).

Analytical Approach

The study will apply:

Thematic Content Analysis: This will involve coding social media posts, and case study materials, interviews on civic experiences will be combined to build cohesive narratives that illustrate Gen Z's internal negotiations between religion, culture, and civic life to identify recurring themes such as religious influence, cultural negotiation, activism patterns, political apathy, and expressions of civic agency.

Thematic Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The data obtained from 295 Nigerian Gen Z respondents across Kwara, Lagos, and Abuja reveal multidimensional intersections between religion, culture, and civic engagement. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative responses, five major themes emerged:

1. Religion as a Moral Compass for Civic Responsibility

The analysis demonstrates that religion remains a critical factor shaping Gen Z's political consciousness and civic orientation. A significant proportion of respondents (63.7%) affirmed that their religious beliefs influence how they perceive political leaders and governance, while 66.1% agreed that religious leaders should guide followers on political matters. Similarly, 67.8% believed their religion encourages civic duties such as voting, advocacy, and social justice.

Qualitative responses deepen this observation. Many participants described religion as a *moral compass* that frames their understanding of justice, integrity, and service. Statements such as “*My Christian faith teaches me to value justice, integrity, and service*” and “*My religion preaches righteousness and fairness*” reveal that respondents view civic participation as a moral obligation.

Religion, therefore, functions not merely as a belief system but as a motivational force for social accountability. However, a subset of responses also expressed tension between religious doctrine and political activism. For instance, some participants noted that religious institutions often discourage overt political expression, viewing politics as “dirty” or “worldly.” This ambivalence highlights what scholars describe as Nigeria's enduring “sacralization of politics,” where faith both mobilizes and restrains civic agency. Overall, the findings suggest that religion serves as both an enabler and regulator of Gen Z's engagement providing ethical grounding while occasionally curbing assertive political involvement.

2. Cultural Identity as a Source of Empowerment and Restraint

Culture emerged as another defining influence on youth political engagement. About 67.5% of respondents affirmed that their cultural background influences their political beliefs and participation, and 97.9% agreed that traditional or cultural leaders should promote good governance. Respondents also acknowledged that cultural expectations sometimes discourage youth from participating in politics (67.1%). From the qualitative narratives, cultural identity was portrayed as both *a foundation for belonging* and *a barrier to participation*. Several respondents highlighted that their culture promotes “fairness,” “respect for elders,” and “responsibility to one's community,” reinforcing positive civic values. Others, however, described cultural norms as restrictive particularly regarding hierarchy, age, and gender expectations that limit youth voices. One participant noted, “*I hesitate calling out badly-behaved elders because our culture teaches us to respect them.*”

This duality reveals that while cultural identity shapes Gen Z's civic orientation positively through values of honesty, collective responsibility, and social harmony, it also reproduces traditional hierarchies that can discourage open political dissent. The findings affirm that Nigeria's cultural framework continues to function as a moral but conservative force in youth political participation.

3. Digital Platforms as New Arenas for Civic and Political Expression

A central discovery in this study is the transformative role of digital platforms in redefining youth engagement. About 67.8% of respondents agreed that social media has increased their awareness of governance and political issues, and 64.1% acknowledged it as a safer space for expressing political opinions. All respondents (100%) recognized that social media influencers and online communities play a major role in mobilizing Gen Z for civic action. This finding reflects the technological consciousness of the generation. Qualitative insights point to social media as a democratizing tool; a space where young Nigerians bypass institutional hierarchies to mobilize peers, challenge injustice, and amplify political narratives.

As one respondent observed, “*Gen Z is challenging silence and passivity by using digital platforms to question norms and demand accountability.*”

However, digital engagement remains unevenly translated into physical activism. While 35.6% reported participating in online campaigns such as #EndSARS, only 44.1% transitioned from online engagement to physical action like protests or community programs. This indicates that while digital platforms catalyze awareness and mobilization, structural fears such as repression, safety, and disillusionment continue to constrain offline participation. The theme underscores the emergence of *digital citizenship* as a distinct form of political expression within Nigerian civic culture.

4. Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Political Attitudes

An important insight is the complex interaction between religion and culture in shaping political decision-making. The data show that 46.1% of respondents acknowledged that religion and culture can both motivate and restrict political participation, while 67.8% agreed that Nigerian politics exploits these values to manipulate citizens. Interestingly, 60.3% of postgraduates and 58.6% of graduates opposed the complete separation of religion and culture from politics, suggesting that higher education does not necessarily foster secularism but rather promotes an integrated understanding of moral and political life. Respondents described this relationship as *interdependent yet contested*. Many see religion and culture as ethical anchors necessary for accountability and justice, while others perceive them as instruments of political manipulation. One respondent wrote, “*Gen Z is boldly calling out those who use religion and culture to manipulate political decisions.*”

This dual perception reveals an evolving consciousness among young Nigerians; one that acknowledges the moral value of religion and culture but resists their politicization. The findings therefore highlight a paradigm shift from inherited conformity to critical discernment where Gen Z seeks to reconcile faith-based morality with democratic ideals of transparency and equity.

5. Emerging Gen Z Paradigm: Redefining Faith, Culture, and Politics

The most striking theme emerging from this research is the redefinition of socio-religious and cultural paradigms by Gen Z. Over 71.2% of respondents believe that their generation is reshaping religion and culture in more inclusive and democratic ways. Open-ended responses frequently referenced “transparency,” “accountability,” “awareness,” and “truth-telling,” particularly through social media. This generational reorientation reflects what scholars identify as *civichybridity*; a blending of traditional values with modern democratic consciousness.

Gen Z respondents envision a society where faith inspires ethical leadership, culture fosters unity, and digital networks amplify participation. They are neither rejecting their heritage nor embracing secularism; instead, they are transforming inherited norms into instruments of social change.

Challenges remain, however. Respondents cited obstacles such as intolerance, intimidation, and bias within religious and cultural settings. Yet, they also proposed constructive solutions ranging from civic education, mentorship, and intergenerational dialogue to institutional reforms within faith and cultural organizations. The call for “safe spaces for dialogue” and “teaching civic values alongside faith and culture” reflects a growing aspiration for participatory reform within Nigeria's identity-based structures.

Summary of Discussion

Overall, the thematic analysis indicates that religion, culture, and technology are not isolated determinants but intersecting forces shaping Gen Z's civic agency. Religion provides moral grounding, culture offers belonging and continuity, and digital platforms empower expression and mobilization. However, the enduring challenge lies in negotiating the tension between moral authority and political autonomy. This generation's attitudes signify an epistemic shift from passive inheritance to active reinterpretation. Gen Z Nigerians are using their religious and cultural frameworks not merely as markers of identity but as tools for reimagining governance, justice, and civic participation in a pluralistic democracy. Their engagement embodies the negotiation “between Scripture and the State,” revealing a generation poised to transform Nigeria's civic landscape through moral conviction, cultural creativity, and digital activism.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that religion, culture, and digital technology remain central forces shaping Generation Z's civic and political engagement in Nigeria. Religion continues to serve as a moral and ethical compass guiding participation in governance, while culture provides both identity and belonging. However, both can simultaneously reinforce traditional hierarchies that inhibit open political discourse. The emergence of digital platforms as new civic spaces demonstrates how Nigerian Gen Zs are redefining engagement moving from passive observation to digital activism that questions authority, mobilizes communities, and demands accountability. Although this activism has not yet fully translated into consistent offline political transformation, it has succeeded in amplifying awareness, creating alternative spaces of discourse, and inspiring moral reawakening among young Nigerians.

Overall, the study concludes that Generation Z's civic consciousness is hybrid in nature: a fusion of moral conviction, cultural reinterpretation, and technological empowerment. Rather than rejecting their religious or cultural heritage, Gen Zs reinterpret these frameworks to align with contemporary democratic values of inclusion, transparency, and justice. Their agency thus lies not merely in protest but in the gradual reshaping of Nigeria's socio-political narrative through ethical awareness and digital connectivity.

Recommendations

- 1. Integration of Civic Education in Religious and Cultural Platforms:** Faith-based and traditional institutions should incorporate civic and political education into their teachings to nurture informed participation. Sermons, youth fellowships, and cultural events can be used to discuss governance, justice, and ethical leadership.
- 2. Bridging Digital and Physical Activism:** Stakeholders should design programs that translate online activism into tangible community actions such as policy dialogues, voter sensitization, and volunteer governance initiatives to deepen Gen Z's impact beyond social media.
- 3. Cultural Reorientation for Inclusive Leadership:** Cultural and religious leaders should actively dismantle hierarchical barriers that silence youth voices. Emphasizing merit, transparency, and inclusivity will encourage intergenerational collaboration and strengthen Nigeria's democratic culture.
- 4. Strengthening Media Literacy and Critical Thinking:** Governmental and non-governmental organizations should invest in youth-focused digital literacy programs to counter misinformation and improve civic awareness, ensuring that Gen Zs engage critically with online political narratives.
- 5. Institutional Reforms for Youth Participation:** Policymakers should provide legal and institutional incentives including youth quotas in decision-making bodies and funding for youth-led initiatives to transform Gen Z enthusiasm into structured civic engagement.
- 6. Research and Policy Advocacy:** Future research should extend beyond Lagos, Abuja, and Kwara to include Eastern and Northern states for broader national representation. Additionally, examining Gen Z's stance toward corruption, electoral malpractice, and governance accountability will deepen understanding of their transformative potential.

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