

Social Media as a Determinant of Awareness, Knowledge, and Acceptance of Intersex Persons in Nigeria

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Abstract

Social media platforms have reshaped global communication by enabling rapid information exchange, opinion formation, and social mobilisation. For intersex persons, who have long experienced invisibility, misunderstanding, and medicalised stigma, these platforms offer new possibilities for visibility, awareness creation, and public engagement. This paper examines how social media influences awareness, knowledge, and acceptance of intersex persons, with particular attention to the Nigerian context. Drawing on social constructivist theory and the uses and gratifications framework, the study reviews and synthesises existing literature from international and African scholarship to explore how platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok shape societal perceptions of intersex identities. The review shows that digital spaces provide avenues for amplifying intersex voices, fostering peer support, and challenging discriminatory narratives, while also presenting risks related to misinformation, online harassment, and the limited visibility of minority content. The paper adopts a conceptual review approach to examine these dynamics and highlights the importance of inclusive, strategic, and rights-based digital engagement that can support broader social acceptance and reduce prejudice.

Keywords: Social Media, Intersex Persons, Awareness, Knowledge, Acceptance, Digital Advocacy

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Introduction

Over the last decade, social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *X*, *Instagram*, *TikTok* and *YouTube* have become central infrastructures for public discourse. For marginalised populations whose experiences are routinely excluded from mainstream media, these platforms often serve as catalytic spaces for self-representation, advocacy and the circulation of evidence-based information. Intersex persons, defined as individuals born with sex characteristics that do not fit typical binary classifications of female or male bodies, have long been rendered invisible or pathologised within medical, legal and cultural systems (OHCHR, n.d.; OHCHR, 2020). Scholarship shows that so-called “normalising” surgical interventions on intersex children are rooted in social rather than medical necessity and produce significant long-term psychosocial and bodily consequences (Carpenter, 2018; Rooney et al., 2024).

Although global discourse on intersex rights has expanded, intersex experiences in many national contexts, including Nigeria and several African countries, remain poorly understood and rarely discussed in public forums. Limited public knowledge creates fertile ground for misinformation, stigma and rights-restricting practices. Social media has the potential to address these gaps by increasing awareness through the visibility of intersex realities and rights, by strengthening knowledge through accurate and accessible information, and by fostering acceptance through attitudinal openness and social inclusion. At the same time, digital platforms also introduce new risks, including health misinformation and targeted harassment, which may reinforce existing prejudices if left unchallenged (Suárez-Lledó and Álvarez-Galvez, 2021).

Despite the growing body of international research on intersex issues, there is limited scholarship examining how social media shapes public perceptions of intersex persons in Nigeria and across Africa. This gap is significant because digital platforms increasingly structure how people learn about bodily diversity, engage with rights-based narratives and form attitudes toward minority groups. Understanding these dynamics is therefore essential for designing informed advocacy, policy interventions and public education strategies.

This paper addresses this gap by synthesising existing literature to examine how social media influences awareness, knowledge and acceptance of intersex persons, with particular attention to the Nigerian context. The analysis is guided by three questions:

1. How do social media platforms contribute to the visibility and public recognition of intersex persons?
2. In what ways do these platforms facilitate the sharing of accurate information and peer-to-peer learning about intersex bodies, rights and experiences?
3. How do narratives circulated online shape attitudes, empathy and broader social acceptance?

The discussion draws from global and Africa-focused scholarship and uses Nigeria as a central reference point. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for strengthening rights-based digital engagement and linking online advocacy to broader societal and institutional change.

Social Media and Awareness

Awareness, in its simplest form, involves recognising that intersex persons exist, possess inherent rights, and encounter distinctive social and health challenges. Historically, medical gatekeeping and rigid binary classifications confined intersex experiences to specialised clinical settings, limiting public understanding and contributing to widespread invisibility (Carpenter, 2020). Social media has begun to disrupt this longstanding opacity by enabling intersex persons, allies, clinicians and scholars to articulate their realities outside traditional institutional boundaries.

Evidence from Nigeria illustrates that digital platforms can draw attention to topics that remain sensitive, silenced or deemed inappropriate within mainstream media. For example, a SAGE Open content analysis of Nigerian conversations on homosexuality shows that X/Twitter can simultaneously challenge and reproduce prevailing cultural norms while serving as a space where marginalised groups mobilise counter-publics (Oyeleye and Omozuwa, 2021). Although this study focuses on homosexuality rather than intersex status, it offers relevant conceptual insight: in restrictive contexts, digital platforms provide alternative spaces where minority issues can gain visibility that conventional media would otherwise limit. A recent discourse-analytic study of pro-gay Nigerian tweets similarly demonstrates how hashtags such as #EndHomophobiaInNigeria consolidate attention and frame rights-based narratives within Nigerian digital spheres (Oyelere and Odebunmi, 2025). These mechanisms are directly transferable to intersex visibility, even if intersex-specific online activity is far less documented.

Indeed, one of the clearest challenges in the Nigerian and broader African context is the scarcity of publicly indexed intersex social media campaigns. This absence is itself analytically important: where visibility is low, misinformation and stigma flourish, further underscoring the need for deliberate, rights-based digital engagement. While direct examples from Nigeria remain limited, intersex advocacy at the global level provides a template for how awareness can be constructed online. Annual digital campaigns such as Intersex Awareness Day (26 October) and Intersex Solidarity Day (8 November) rely on hashtags including #IntersexAwarenessDay, #EndIntersexSurgery, #ProtectIntersexKids, and #IntersexJustice. These hashtags routinely generate explainers, personal testimonies, visual infographics, and short-form educational videos that circulate widely on *X*, *Instagram* and *TikTok*. Although participation varies by region, these campaigns demonstrate how online tools can transform private or marginalised experiences into collective visibility.

Broader African research on digital LGBTIQ+ engagement further demonstrates the visibility-producing potential of social media. A 2024 article in the *Journal of Social Issues* notes that online networks support LGBTIQ+ persons across selected African countries by facilitating community building, providing psychosocial support, and amplifying claims for recognition despite persistent legal and cultural constraints (Asante et al., 2024). Even though intersex identities are analytically distinct from sexual orientation and, in many cases, gender identity, the communication dynamics observed offer useful parallels for understanding how intersex issues may gain traction in similar digital ecosystems.

Importantly, awareness is supported by institutional norm entrepreneurship. The OHCHR Technical Note on the Human Rights of Intersex People (2023) offers concise, authoritative language on bodily autonomy, non-discrimination and the prohibition of medically unnecessary surgeries. Such resources circulate effectively on social media because they provide users and advocates with credible reference points for awareness posts, threads, and videos. The availability of digestible human-rights-based materials increases the likelihood that intersex topics gain visibility framed within international standards rather than sensationalised narratives.

However, awareness has limitations. Visibility alone does not guarantee understanding. Communication research consistently shows that attention without credible framing can reinforce stigma, encourage sensationalism, or trigger moral panic. For awareness to translate into genuine public understanding, a second layer is essential.

Social Media and Knowledge

Knowledge involves more than surface-level awareness; it refers to an accurate and contextualised understanding of intersex variations, healthcare pathways, legal protections and lived experiences. Social media has become a central location where such knowledge is produced, circulated and contested. In contrast to traditional Nigerian media, which rarely provides detailed or rights-aligned information on intersex issues, social platforms offer a space where users actively seek and satisfy their informational needs. From a Uses and Gratifications perspective, individuals turn to these platforms to obtain explanations, clarifications and community-validated insights that are often unavailable in mainstream health communication.

Across platforms, a wide range of formats supports knowledge acquisition. Short explainers, livestream question-and-answer sessions, long-form YouTube lectures by clinicians and scholars, and shareable infographics simplify complex themes while retaining scientific grounding. Peer-reviewed literature highlights a tension that directly affects these knowledge practices. On one hand, digital networks make it possible to reach stigmatised or hard-to-access populations at scale. Large research programmes and health organisations have effectively used targeted social ads, private community groups and participatory digital campaigns to disseminate accurate health information to minoritised youth and adults (Suárez-Lledó and Álvarez-Galvez, 2021). On the other hand, the prevalence of health misinformation online is high across platforms, languages and thematic areas. Systematic reviews in the *Journal of Medical Internet Research* show that misleading health claims are widespread and often more attention-grabbing than accurate material, complicating public education efforts (Suárez-Lledó and Álvarez-Galvez, 2021). These contradictions illustrate why knowledge production on social media requires both accessibility and rigorous verification.

Within intersex scholarship, a substantial body of peer-reviewed work critiques long-standing medical practices, particularly non-urgent childhood surgeries performed before the individual can offer consent. Carpenter's (2018) research traces how psychosocial fears rather than clinical necessity often drive these interventions, while a recent systematic review shows that medical justifications for such surgeries are inconsistent and frequently grounded in cultural assumptions about "normality" rather than evidence-based need (Rooney et al., 2024). Social media allows these academic debates to be translated into public-facing knowledge. Advocates summarise key findings in threads, clinicians provide short videos distinguishing medical

emergencies from social normalisation, and rights-affirming practitioners debunk persistent myths about chromosomes, hormones, fertility outcomes and gender identity. In this way, social platforms become mediators that convert specialist knowledge into digestible, shareable and locally relevant material.

Emerging African research strengthens this picture. Clinical work from Nigeria identifies the complex realities of managing ambiguous genitalia, including shortages of multidisciplinary teams, gaps in counselling and a historical tendency to determine sex of rearing based on surgical feasibility rather than patient autonomy (Adeyemi et al., 2020). Earlier Nigerian literature often advocated for early assignment and “normalising” surgeries, mirroring global medical standards of the time (Olusanya, 2021). Contemporary human-rights-aligned scholarship and UN guidance now call for a shift: urgent, life-saving procedures should be clearly distinguished from non-emergent interventions; families require thorough counselling; and the child’s long-term bodily integrity and capacity for informed participation must be prioritised (Carpenter, 2018; OHCHR, 2023). These evolving knowledge frameworks increasingly appear in Nigerian digital spaces, where advocates, clinicians and community groups share official documents, explain legal concepts such as consent, and contextualise global standards within local hospital realities. By circulating this material online, users bridge the gap between clinical scholarship and public understanding.

Effective knowledge work on social media usually shares several defining features. First, it demonstrates source transparency by linking directly to peer-reviewed articles, medical guidelines or official technical notes. Second, it employs clear myth-versus-fact formats that translate complex concepts into accessible language without oversimplification. Third, it relies on participatory engagement, allowing clinicians, scholars and affected persons to respond publicly to recurring questions. Fourth, it incorporates localisation by connecting global discourses to Nigerian legal structures, referral pathways and clinical norms. Finally, it builds bridges to services by directing users toward rights-respecting healthcare providers, counselling resources and legal aid.

Because misinformation is pervasive, counter-strategies are indispensable. The solution is not disengagement but strategic inoculation: pre-bunking common myths, boosting corrective content from professional bodies, adding friction to the spread of misinformation and pairing factual explanations with compelling narratives. Evidence from parasocial and narrative

persuasion research suggests that when accurate information is embedded within human-centred stories, users show greater openness, comprehension and retention. As subsequent sections argue, these narrative elements are essential for advancing acceptance in contexts where knowledge alone may not shift deeply ingrained attitudes.

Social Media and Acceptance

Acceptance moves beyond recognition and information toward inclusive attitudes, social belonging and equitable treatment. Communication research identifies narrative exposure and parasocial contact as two central pathways through which media environments can reduce prejudice. Parasocial contact occurs when audiences form one-sided but meaningful emotional bonds with minority characters or real-life creators. A growing body of experimental, longitudinal and review literature shows that such mediated contact increases empathy, reduces intergroup anxiety and supports attitudinal openness (Bond, 2021; Moyer-Gusé and Dale, 2024; Quan et al., 2024). Studies of YouTube-based parasocial interventions further demonstrate measurable reductions in stigma toward highly stigmatised groups, such as individuals with mental health conditions, indicating broader applicability to other marginalised identities (Simons et al., 2022).

Although these studies do not focus specifically on intersex persons, the mechanisms they describe map closely onto the types of content produced by intersex creators on platforms such as *TikTok, Instagram and YouTube*. Global creators like Pidgeon Pagonis (USA) and Intersex Equality Rights UK advocates regularly share narratives about embodiment, medical decision-making, family negotiations and everyday life. Their posts and videos blend personal storytelling with factual clarification, offering viewers a human-centred frame that can counter sensationalised portrayals and cultivate solidarity.

In African contexts, intersex creators are fewer in number but increasingly visible. South African activists associated with the Intersex South Africa (ISSA) collective, for instance, use YouTube conversations, Instagram reels and documentary clips to discuss bodily autonomy and challenge the legacy of medical paternalism. Amanda Lock Swarr's work on South African intersex narratives highlights how these digital stories travel beyond academic spaces into broader public discourse, allowing audiences to encounter intersex voices directly rather than through mediated description (Swarr, 2023). The absence of well-known Nigerian intersex influencers is itself significant: limited creator visibility restricts opportunities for parasocial contact and may

partially explain why acceptance in Nigeria remains fragile. Nonetheless, smaller Nigerian community groups and allied clinicians increasingly share anonymised testimonies and educational videos, offering the early infrastructure for more sustained digital storytelling.

Acceptance processes in African settings also intersect with regional human-rights developments that circulate widely on social platforms. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Resolution 552 (2023), which recognises the rights of intersex persons and condemns harmful practices, provides a normative anchor frequently referenced in online advocacy. Likewise, the OHCHR Technical Note (2023) synthesises international standards on bodily autonomy and non-discrimination. Research on African human-rights mechanisms suggests that such official signals acquire broader discursive power when reframed through social media posts, infographics and creator commentary, creating a feedback loop in which institutional recognition supports public acceptance, and public engagement legitimises further institutional action (Viljoen, 2023).

Recent empirical work in the region similarly foregrounds intersex experiences in ways that lend themselves to translation into digital advocacy. Studies such as Dhemba and Maseko's (2024) examination of intersex children's rights in Zimbabwe highlight lived realities, health-system barriers and parental challenges. When adapted into accessible explainers, such research has the potential to enhance public understanding and promote empathic responses.

Importantly, acceptance is neither automatic nor unidirectional. Nigerian social media research consistently documents ambivalence: the same visibility that encourages solidarity can also trigger moralised backlash, hostile commentary and contestations over bodily diversity (Oyeleke and Omozuwa, 2021; Oyelere and Odebunmi, 2025). This mixed pattern underscores why acceptance strategies must remain culturally attuned and intersectional. In Nigeria's religiously grounded and communally oriented context, framing intersex advocacy through themes of child welfare, bodily autonomy, medical ethics and family wellbeing may be more resonant than relying solely on global North framings. Highlighting African scholarship and showcasing regional examples also helps make intersex narratives locally legible, ensuring that online empathy can translate into offline openness, supportive health behaviours and rights-affirming community attitudes.

Nigeria and Africa: Situating the Discussion

To understand how social media shapes intersex experiences, it is essential to situate the discussion within Nigerian and broader African clinical, social, and communicative contexts. This section is organised into three interrelated dimensions: medical, social, and discourse contexts.

1. Medical Context

Nigerian paediatric surgery literature provides insight into the clinical pressures surrounding ambiguous genitalia and differences of sex development (DSD). Studies highlight diagnostic constraints, resource limitations, and the historical tendency to determine sex of rearing based on surgical feasibility rather than patient autonomy (Adeyemi et al., 2023). Earlier clinical work, such as Olusanya (1975), reflects now-contested assumptions that all non-life-threatening cases required rapid “correction” to conform to binary norms. Contemporary human-rights scholarship and UN guidance advocate for a clear distinction between life-saving interventions and irreversible, non-urgent surgeries. These guidelines emphasise comprehensive psychosocial support and the deferment of body-altering procedures until the individual can participate in decision-making (Carpenter, 2018; OHCHR, 2023; Rooney et al., 2024).

Social media interacts with these medical realities by translating specialist knowledge into formats accessible to lay audiences. For example, explanatory threads or short videos can clarify the difference between urgent and non-urgent interventions, provide guidance on consent, and link users to rights-respecting healthcare providers. In this way, platforms become conduits that bridge clinical expertise and public understanding, reinforcing both knowledge and accountability.

2. Social Context

At the societal level, Nigerian and African research illustrates the limited public understanding of intersex issues and the marginalisation of affected persons. Social science studies show that online communities can provide coping resources, peer support, and identity validation, particularly for minoritised or stigmatised groups (Asante et al., 2024). The scarcity of Nigerian intersex creators means that such digital spaces remain underdeveloped locally; nevertheless, even small-scale community groups and allied clinicians are beginning to share anonymised testimonies, educational videos, and rights-based guidance. These interventions create nascent

networks for awareness, knowledge, and empathy cultivation, filling gaps left by mainstream media.

Population-level research elsewhere underscores the potential of digitally mediated advocacy. For instance, Serrano-Barquín et al. (2025) document socioeconomic and health disparities among intersex adults in Mexico, providing a template for evidence-based storytelling. Once adapted for social media, such findings can shift public discourse from sensationalism to structural understanding, a framing that resonates in both global and African contexts.

3. Discourse Context

Social media platforms function as arenas where norms and attitudes are negotiated. Nigerian studies of digital discourse show that topics considered sensitive offline can achieve visibility online, where hashtags, explainers, and creator amplification elevate issues to mainstream attention (Oyelele & Omozuwa, 2021; Oyelere & Odebunmi, 2025). African research confirms that online networks can reinforce identity validation and psychosocial support, while also facilitating exposure to rights-based arguments and international standards (Asante et al., 2024).

Policy milestones, such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Resolution 552 (2023) and the OHCHR Technical Note on intersex rights (2023), circulate widely on social platforms. When paired with narrative content from creators, these documents provide legitimacy cues, reinforce inclusivity norms, and increase the reach of advocacy campaigns. Social media thus integrates three mutually reinforcing dynamics for intersex persons:

1. Awareness: Hashtags, news pegs, and creator amplification elevate intersex topics in contexts where traditional media may be reluctant, with institutional resources providing authoritative anchors (Oyelere & Odebunmi, 2025; OHCHR, 2023).
2. Knowledge: Peer-reviewed evidence and professional guidance are translated into accessible formats; audiences interact, ask questions, and receive clarifications. High misinformation prevalence requires pre-bunking and iterative correction strategies (Suárez-Lledó & Álvarez-Galvez, 2021; Rooney et al., 2024).
3. Acceptance: Narrative proximity and parasocial contact through short videos, threads, and livestreams foster empathy and reduce intergroup anxiety, while circulating policy

milestones supply legitimacy cues that normalise inclusion (Bond, 2021; Moyer-Gusé & Dale, 2024; ACHPR, 2023).

These dimensions operate interactively rather than sequentially. A widely shared OHCHR explainer (awareness) can link to peer-reviewed studies (knowledge) and then be contextualised by local creators using culturally resonant storytelling (acceptance). Situating Nigerian and African experiences in this integrated framework highlights the critical role of social media in translating clinical expertise and human-rights norms into public understanding, while simultaneously shaping attitudes and social inclusion.

Theoretical Discussion

Understanding how social media shapes public awareness and acceptance of intersex persons can be strengthened by drawing on Social Representation Theory and Framing Theory. These theories explain how meanings are constructed, shared, and reproduced within society, especially in highly mediated environments.

Social Representation Theory (Moscovici, 1961) provides a foundation for explaining how communities collectively make sense of phenomena that are unfamiliar or socially contested. Intersex variations have historically been obscured by medicalisation, stigma, and silence. In digital spaces, however, social representations of intersex identities emerge through shared narratives, images, testimonies, and advocacy messages circulated on platforms such as *Twitter*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok*. As users interact with this content, intersex issues become more familiar and are integrated into public consciousness. Social media thus operates as a contemporary arena where new meanings are negotiated, and old stereotypes are challenged or reinforced. This theory helps explain why visibility, personal storytelling, and community-led campaigns are central to shaping public understanding.

Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993) further clarifies how the presentation of information influences interpretation. Social media not only disseminates information about intersex people; it frames that information through hashtags, captions, visual cues, influencer narratives, and news discourses. Frames determine whether intersex identities are viewed through lenses of human rights, medical diversity, cultural morality, or social deviance. For instance, advocacy groups often frame intersex experiences as issues of bodily autonomy and dignity, while

hostile actors may employ frames of abnormality or controversy. The framing used on social media significantly affects whether audiences develop empathy, neutrality, or prejudice. This theoretical lens shows that acceptance is not solely a product of exposure, but of how that exposure is structured.

When combined, Social Representation Theory and Framing Theory illustrate the dual processes through which social media influences public knowledge of intersex persons. Social media provides the space where shared meanings are constructed, while framing determines the tone, direction, and emotional weight of those meanings. Together, these theories demonstrate that awareness and acceptance depend on both the collective production of new narratives and the strategic presentation of those narratives within digital environments.

Countervailing Risks and Mitigation

The most serious risk is health misinformation, well-documented across platforms (Suárez-Lledó & Álvarez-Galvez, 2021). In the intersex domain, this includes claims that intersex traits are uniformly pathological, conflation with gender identity categories, or the assertion that non-urgent surgeries are medically necessary for psychosocial reasons, as these are the positions critiqued in recent systematic and legal-ethical scholarship (Carpenter, 2018; Rooney et al., 2024). A second risk is targeted harassment and moralised backlash that is widely observed in Nigerian social media research on sexuality topics (Oyeleye & Omozuwa, 2021). A third is algorithmic amplification of sensational content, which can drown out nuanced educational materials. Mitigation should combine content strategy (myth-versus-fact formats, creator-scholar partnerships, consistent citations to journals and UN technical notes), safety practices (moderation, community guidelines literacy, block/report tools), and bridging to offline systems (clinic directories, legal aid, counselling).

Intersex realities remain poorly understood and frequently ignored in Nigerian and African public discourse, leaving affected persons vulnerable to stigma, non-consensual medical interventions, and social exclusion. In this context, social media functions as a critical determinant of awareness, knowledge, and acceptance. Platforms enable progress by pushing intersex issues onto public agendas, distributing rigorous, human-rights-aligned knowledge at scale, and cultivating empathy and inclusive norms through narrative exposure and parasocial mechanisms.

At the same time, these infrastructures carry risks, particularly the rapid spread of misinformation and hostile backlash, which must be actively managed.

For Nigeria and the wider African region, strategically designed social media ecosystems can accelerate both public understanding and rights-respecting practice. Such ecosystems should foreground African scholarship, align with ACHPR and OHCHR standards, and leverage locally trusted creators to translate complex clinical and legal information into culturally resonant formats. While the long arc from visibility to informed consent and social inclusion cannot be completed solely online, without social media, that arc is unlikely to bend quickly enough.

Based on the discussion, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Scholarly Anchoring of Content:** Campaign calendars for social media should prioritise recently published peer-reviewed articles, preprints, and official documents (e.g., Rooney et al., 2024; OHCHR, 2023). Short threads or posts should extract two to three clinically or legally salient points to ensure content is evidence-based and authoritative.
2. **Narrative-plus-Evidence Formats:** Creator narratives on TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube should be paired with captions citing at least one peer-reviewed source or UN technical note. This approach leverages parasocial mechanisms to maximise empathy while maintaining evidentiary grounding (Bond, 2021; Quan et al., 2024).
3. **Pre-bunking and Correction:** A living FAQ should preempt common myths—such as assumptions about surgery necessity, fertility, or chromosomes—using concise, citable explanations linked to systematic reviews and rights guidance (Suárez-Lledó & Álvarez-Galvez, 2021; Carpenter, 2018; Rooney et al., 2024; OHCHR, 2015, 2023).
4. **Online-Offline Bridges:** Social media content should actively route audiences to rights-respecting clinical services, hospital ethics committees, and legal support. Initiatives such as hospital-based grand rounds or continuing medical education sessions on intersex human-rights standards should be summarised for public consumption to reinforce digital learning with offline practice.

Finally, future research should conduct Nigeria-focused content analyses and audience perception studies to empirically validate the mechanisms identified in this conceptual review. By systematically linking social media exposure to awareness, knowledge, and acceptance outcomes,

such research can strengthen evidence-based strategies for promoting intersex rights and inclusion across African contexts.

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