

From the Failure of Partnership Narrative to the Rejection of Legitimacy: Youth Resistance and the Unmaking of Françafrique

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Abstract: *This article interrogates the erosion of France's legitimacy in Francophone Africa through the lens of narrative failure, shifting geopolitics, and youth-led resistance. Moving beyond traditional analyses of Françafrique, which emphasise political, economic, and military entanglements, this study examines the role of narrative construction in sustaining or undermining international influence. The paper argues that France's long-standing partnership narrative has lost credibility among African youth, who increasingly interpret French engagement as a continuation of neo-imperial practices. By situating this legitimacy crisis within broader global transformations, including the diversification of external actors and the decline of post-colonial patronage systems, the paper analyses the rise of digitally mediated historical consciousness. It shows how youth movements mobilise counter-narratives rooted in colonial memory, sovereignty, and dignity to challenge France's presence. Through discourse analysis and selected case illustrations, the article demonstrates how these narratives circulate across social media, protest movements, and cultural production that reshape public opinion and influence state-level alignments. The findings suggest that France's reliance on established instruments of influence, such as military bases, elite networks, and conditionality frameworks, fails to resonate with a generation demanding more equitable and transparent partnerships. The study contributes to debates on decolonising international relations by highlighting the centrality of narrative legitimacy in contemporary soft power competition. It concludes that without a substantive re-articulation of its engagement grounded in mutual respect, France risks further rejection by Francophone African youth within an evolving geopolitical landscape.*

Keywords: Counter-narratives, decoloniality, Françafrique, historical consciousness, narrative legitimacy, youth resistance.

INTRODUCTION

France's relationship with its former African colonies has long been characterised by dense political, economic, and military ties, commonly conceptualised as *Françafrique* (Verschave, 2000). Emerging in the aftermath of formal decolonisation in the late 1950s and early 1960s, this system represented

not a rupture but a reconfiguration of postcolonial relations. Through a combination of defence agreements, monetary arrangements, and political alliances, France retained a privileged position across Francophone Africa. These ties were sustained both through institutional mechanisms, such as military cooperation accords and the CFA (Communauté Financière Africaine) [African Financial Community] franc zone, and through informal networks linking French political elites with African leaders (Chafer, 2002). While *Françafrique* project has often been framed in official discourse as a mutually beneficial cooperation rooted in shared history and cultural affinity, critics have consistently pointed to the asymmetrical and neo-colonial nature of these arrangements (Bayart, 2000).

For decades, this system proved remarkably resilient. France maintained military bases across the continent, intervened in domestic conflicts, and exercised significant influence over political transitions. At the same time, it constructed an image of itself as a guarantor of stability and development. This dual strategy, combining material power with symbolic narratives, allowed France to sustain its influence even as global power dynamics shifted.

In recent years, however, this system has started to fade and entered a period of profound crisis. Across Francophone Africa, particularly in the Sahel and West Africa (Ndiaye, 2021), public sentiment toward France has deteriorated sharply. This shift is visible in mass protests, political discourse, and the proliferation of anti-French sentiment across digital platforms. Demonstrations in several countries have featured slogans such as “France dégage!” [France out] and “Nous ne sommes plus vos colonies,” [We are no longer your colonies] which signal not only dissatisfaction with specific policies but a broader rejection of France’s role in the countries and the region. These expressions of dissent are accompanied by increasingly critical media narratives and political rhetoric that frame France not as a partner but as a hegemonic actor undermining national sovereignty and democracy.

More importantly, this transformation is especially vivid among youth populations, who constitute a demographic majority across much of Africa. It is important to underscore that the median age of the entire African population, which means the age at which half the population is younger and half is older, is approximately 19.5 years in 2026. This reflects that Africa has the youngest population of any continent in the world. Furthermore, about 60 % of Africa’s population is under the age of 25, which indicates a very high proportion of youth relative to older age groups (Worldometer, 2026).

Young people are therefore at the forefront of political mobilisation, both online and offline, and play a central role in shaping contemporary political discourse. Their engagement reflects broader socio-economic frustrations, including unemployment, inequality, and limited political inclusion (Volpi and Benzenineb, 2023; Northey, 2024; Pouo Moutsouka, 2025; Daga, 2025). However, it also reflects a deeper shift in political consciousness, one that challenges inherited narratives of post-colonial partnership. Through protests, cultural production, and digital activism, youth are actively reinterpreting the history and meaning of Franco-African relations.

This paper argues that the erosion of France’s influence cannot be fully understood through material or institutional analyses alone. While factors such as military intervention, economic dependency, and geopolitical competition remain important, they do not adequately explain the intensity and widespread nature of contemporary anti-French sentiment. Instead, this transformation must be conceptualised as a crisis of *narrative legitimacy*. The long-standing “partnership narrative”, which emphasised shared history, cultural ties, and development cooperation, has lost credibility among African youth.

Increasingly, French engagement is interpreted not as benevolent cooperation but as a continuation of colonial domination under new forms.

This shift highlights the importance of discourse in international relations. Narratives are not simplistically rhetorical devices; they rather shape how political relationships are understood, evaluated, and adhered to. When narratives align with lived experiences, they reinforce legitimacy and consent. When they diverge, they generate scepticism, contestation, and resistance. In the case of France and Francophone Africa, the growing dissonance between official narratives and popular perceptions has contributed to a profound legitimacy crisis.

By focusing on youth resistance and narrative contestation, this study contributes to emerging scholarship that foregrounds the role of ideas, identities, and discourse in international relations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). It also engages with decolonial perspectives that emphasise the persistence of coloniality in contemporary global power structures (Mignolo, 2011). From this perspective, the rejection of French narratives can be understood as part of a broader process of epistemic resistance, in which historically marginalised actors challenge dominant frameworks of knowledge and representation.

The article is guided by three central research questions. First, how has France's partnership narrative lost legitimacy among African youth? Second, what role do digital platforms play in the construction and dissemination of counter-narratives? Third, how does this legitimacy crisis intersect with broader geopolitical transformations, including the rise of alternative global actors and the decline of traditional Western influence?

To address these questions, the study adopts a qualitative research design centred on discourse analysis. It examines how narratives about France are constructed, circulated, and contested across different arenas, including social media, protest movements, and public discourse. The analysis is grounded in three case studies, namely Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal, which illustrate varying trajectories of youth mobilisation and Franco-African relations. Together, these cases provide a comparative lens through which to explore the dynamics of narrative legitimacy and its implications for the future of France's engagement in Africa.

In doing so, the study seeks to move beyond conventional accounts of *Françafrique* by highlighting the central role of youth agency and narrative transformation in reshaping international relations in the region.

Rationale and theoretical framework

Beyond material power: the importance of narrative

Traditional analyses of international influence have long prioritised material capabilities, particularly military strength, economic leverage, and institutional power. Within realist and neo-realist traditions, power is largely understood in terms of the ability of states to coerce or incentivise others through tangible resources (Mearsheimer, 2001). Similarly, liberal institutionalist approaches emphasise the role of formal agreements, economic interdependence, and international institutions in structuring cooperation. While these perspectives provide valuable insights into the mechanics of state behaviour, they often understate the importance of ideational factors in shaping political outcomes.

Constructivist scholars challenge this limitation by arguing that power is not solely material but also social and discursive (Wendt, 1999). From this perspective, international relations are constituted through shared meanings, norms, and identities. Legitimacy, therefore, is not an objective attribute but a socially constructed phenomenon that emerges through processes of recognition and acceptance. States do not simply exercise power; they must also justify and narrate their actions in ways that resonate with relevant audiences.

Narratives play a central role in this process. They function as interpretive frameworks that organise political reality, providing coherent stories about actors, intentions, and relationships. As Somers (1994) argues, narratives are fundamental to identity formation and social action, shaping how individuals and communities understand their place in the world. In the context of international relations, narratives help to define what constitutes legitimate behaviour, who is considered a trustworthy partner, and how historical relationships are interpreted.

When narratives align with lived experiences and observable realities, they reinforce legitimacy and facilitate cooperation. Conversely, when narratives diverge from lived experience, they generate cognitive dissonance, scepticism, and ultimately resistance. This dynamic is particularly relevant in post-colonial contexts, where historical memory plays a significant role in shaping contemporary perceptions.

France's engagement in Francophone Africa has long been underpinned by a carefully constructed partnership narrative. This narrative emphasises shared history, linguistic and cultural ties, and a commitment to development and stability (Munyangeyo, 2026a). Through official discourse, diplomatic rhetoric, and cultural diplomacy, France has sought to present itself as a benevolent partner rather than a former colonial power. This framing has historically enabled France to maintain influence without relying exclusively on overt coercion.

However, as this article argues, the effectiveness of this narrative has significantly diminished. For many African youth, the partnership narrative no longer aligns with their lived experiences of economic inequality, political exclusion, and perceived external interference. Instead, it is increasingly interpreted as a discursive strategy that masks underlying asymmetries of power. This disjuncture between narrative and reality lies at the heart of the current legitimacy crisis.

One can argue that the erosion of narrative credibility does not simply weaken France's symbolic standing; it also has tangible political consequences. As legitimacy declines, resistance becomes more likely, and previously stable relationships may become contested. This underscores the need to move beyond materialist explanations and to consider the role of narrative in sustaining or undermining international influence.

Narrative legitimacy and soft power

The concept of soft power, popularised by Nye (2004), provides a useful starting point for understanding the role of narratives in international relations. Soft power refers to the ability of an actor to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. It is rooted in culture, political values, and foreign policy, and operates by making certain forms of behaviour appear desirable or legitimate.

However, soft power is not simply a function of cultural appeal or institutional influence; it is fundamentally dependent on credibility. If claims are perceived as inconsistent, hypocritical, or self-serving, they do not have the capacity to attract and persuade. In this sense,

Munyangeyo (2026b) argues that, “soft power does not displace hard power but conditions its reception, shaping the social and political environments in which material capabilities operate” (p.20). In this sense, soft power is inherently relational, contingent on the perceptions and interpretations of target audiences.

This study builds on Nye’s framework by introducing the concept of *narrative legitimacy*. Narrative legitimacy refers to the extent to which an actor’s self-representation, its claims about its intentions, values, and role, is accepted as credible and appropriate by relevant audiences. It is not enough for a state to project a particular image; that image must be recognised and validated by those it seeks to influence.

In the case of France, the partnership narrative has historically served as a key vehicle of soft power. By emphasising cooperation, mutual benefit, and shared values, France has sought to frame its presence in Africa as both legitimate and desirable. This narrative has been reinforced through educational exchanges, cultural institutions such as the Alliance Française, Centre Culturel Français, and diplomatic discourse.

Nevertheless, as empirical developments across Francophone Africa suggest, this narrative is increasingly contested. Youth populations, in particular, question the authenticity of France’s claims, pointing to perceived inconsistencies between rhetoric and practice. For example, military interventions framed as stabilising are often interpreted as serving French strategic interests, while economic arrangements are seen as perpetuating dependency.

The decline of narrative legitimacy has significant implications for France’s broader soft power. As trust fades, France’s ability to influence public opinion and political outcomes diminishes. This, in turn, affects its capacity to maintain strategic partnerships and pursue its interests in the region.

Furthermore, the erosion of narrative legitimacy creates space for alternative actors to assert their own narratives. Emerging powers such as China and Russia often position themselves as partners without colonial baggage, emphasising principles of non-interference and mutual respect. While these claims are themselves subject to scrutiny, they resonate with audiences disillusioned by traditional Western narratives.

Thus, narrative legitimacy is not simply an abstract concept but a strategic variable that shapes the distribution of influence in the international system. Understanding its dynamics is essential for analysing the transformation of Franco-African relations.

Decoloniality and narrative resistance

While constructivist and soft power frameworks provide valuable insights into the role of narratives, they must be complemented by decolonial perspectives to fully capture the historical and structural dimensions of the current legitimacy crisis. Decolonial theory emphasises that colonialism did not end

with formal independence but continues to shape global power relations through what scholars term coloniality (Mignolo, 2011; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

Coloniality refers to the enduring patterns of domination that persist in economic structures, political institutions, and systems of knowledge. It operates not only through material inequalities but also through epistemic hierarchies that privilege certain ways of knowing while marginalising others. In this context, narratives are not neutral; they are embedded in power relations and serve to legitimise particular worldviews.

France's partnership narrative can thus be understood as part of a broader epistemic framework that seeks to normalise its continued presence in Africa. By framing its actions in terms of cooperation and development, France positions itself as a necessary and beneficial actor, while obscuring the historical and structural asymmetries that underpin the relationship.

Youth resistance to this narrative can be interpreted as a form of *epistemic resistance*. Rather than simply rejecting specific policies, young people are challenging the underlying assumptions and representations that sustain France's legitimacy. This involves reinterpreting history, questioning dominant narratives, and asserting alternative visions of sovereignty and identity.

Digital technologies play a crucial role in this process. Social media platforms enable the rapid circulation of alternative narratives, allowing individuals to share experiences, mobilise support, and contest official discourses. This has contributed to what can be described as a *digitally mediated historical consciousness*, in which colonial history is not only remembered but is actively re-politicised.

As illustration, images of colonial-era exploitation are frequently juxtaposed with contemporary political developments, creating powerful visual narratives that link past and present. Similarly, viral posts and hashtags provide accessible entry points for engaging with complex historical and political issues. These practices facilitate the construction of collective identities centred on resistance and sovereignty.

This form of epistemic resistance is not confined to elite intellectual circles but is embedded in everyday practices of communication and cultural production. Music, art, memes, and protest slogans all contribute to the dissemination of counter-narratives that challenge dominant representations.

From a decolonial perspective, the erosion of France's narrative legitimacy is thus part of a broader process of decolonisation that extends beyond formal political independence. It reflects a growing refusal to accept externally imposed frameworks of meaning and a demand for greater epistemic autonomy.

Toward a narrative-centred analysis of power

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of power in international relations, one that integrates material, ideational, and historical dimensions. While France continues to possess significant military and economic resources, its ability to translate these into influence is increasingly constrained by declining narrative legitimacy.

This article adopts a narrative-centred approach that places discourse, perception, and meaning-making at the core of analysis. By doing so, it seeks to bridge constructivist and decolonial insights, recognising both the socially constructed nature of legitimacy and the historical structures that shape its production.

In this framework, youth resistance emerges as a critical site of analysis. As a demographic group with limited attachment to post-colonial political arrangements and high engagement with digital technologies, youth are particularly well positioned to challenge dominant narratives and articulate alternative visions. Through case studies of Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal, the article explores how narrative legitimacy is contested, transformed, and reconfigured in practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Françafrique and its critics

The concept of *Françafrique* has been central to scholarly and political debates on France's post-colonial presence in Africa. Originally coined in a positive sense by Félix Houphouët-Boigny to describe close cooperation between France and its former colonies, the term was later critically reappropriated to denote a system of neo-colonial domination sustained through opaque political, economic, and military networks (Verschave, 2000). This system has been widely analysed as a mechanism through which France maintained disproportionate influence in its former colonies despite formal decolonisation.

A substantial body of literature has documented the institutional foundations of *Françafrique*. Economically, the CFA franc zone has been identified as a key instrument of control, linking several African economies to the French Treasury and limiting monetary sovereignty (Pigeaud and Sylla, 2021). Politically, France has historically cultivated close relationships with African elites, often supporting authoritarian regimes in exchange for strategic and economic concessions (Bayart, 2000). Militarily, France has intervened repeatedly across the continent, justifying its actions in terms of stability, counterterrorism, or the protection of nationals (Charbonneau, 2017; Marchal, 2013).

French-language scholarship has been particularly influential in critically unpacking these dynamics. Verschave (2000) famously described *Françafrique* as “le plus long scandale de la République,” highlighting the persistence of informal networks and corruption. Similarly, authors such as François-Xavier Verschave and Antoine Glaser and Stephen Smith (Glaser & Smith, 2005) have documented the role of political patronage and personal relationships in sustaining French influence. Jean-François Bayart's (2000) concept of “extraversion” further explains how African elites strategically engage external actors, including France, to consolidate domestic power.

However, more recent scholarship cautions against treating *Françafrique* as a static or monolithic system. Chafer (2002) argues that French policy in Africa has undergone significant transformations, particularly in response to domestic political changes in France and shifting global dynamics. Likewise, Foucher (2009) suggests that French interventions in the Sahel reflect both continuity and adaptation, combining traditional influence with new security imperatives.

French scholars, such as Augé (2024), Borrel (2021), Bourgi (2024), Gourevitch (2020), Olympio (2024), Prunier (2025), Verschave (2019), and Wanme (2023), have emphasised the growing fragility

of Françafrique in the face of changing political realities. In particular, the rise of public contestation and the diversification of external partnerships challenge the durability of France's traditional networks. This evolving perspective shifts the analytical focus from structural continuity to processes of transformation and contestation.

Building on this literature, the present article argues that one of the key but underexplored dimensions of this transformation is narrative. While much of the existing scholarship focuses on material and institutional factors, less attention has been paid to how France's legitimacy is constructed, maintained, and contested through discourse. By foregrounding narrative dynamics, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the unmaking of Françafrique.

Youth as political actors

African youth have increasingly been recognised as central actors in contemporary political processes. Given that individuals under the age of 25 constitute a significant proportion of the population in many African countries (Worldometer, 2026), their political attitudes and actions have far-reaching implications. Yet for a long time, youth were often portrayed in the literature as marginalised, apolitical, or even as sources of instability (Honwana, 2012).

Honwana's (2012) concept of "waithood" provides a critical framework for understanding youth experiences in Africa. It refers to the prolonged and uncertain transition from youth to adulthood, characterised by limited access to stable employment, education, and political participation. This condition generates both frustration and creativity, as young people navigate constrained opportunities while seeking to assert agency.

Building on this perspective, scholars such as Branch and Mampilly (2015) have documented the central role of youth in protest movements across the continent. From urban uprisings to electoral protests, youth have been at the forefront of political mobilisation, often challenging entrenched political elites. These movements are typically decentralised, fluid, and adaptive, reflecting the organisational possibilities afforded by digital technologies.

Francophone African contexts provide particularly rich examples of youth activism. In Senegal, movements such as *Y'en a Marre* [We're fed up] have mobilised young people around issues of governance, accountability, and sovereignty. In Burkina Faso, youth played a decisive role in the 2014 uprising that led to the fall of Blaise Compaoré (Munyangayo, 2025). Similarly, in Côte d'Ivoire, youth militias and activist networks have long been central to political dynamics, albeit in complex and sometimes contradictory ways (Banégas, 2006; Charbonneau, 2012).

French-language scholarship has also contributed to this field by examining the sociopolitical imaginaries of African youth. Comi Toulabor (1986), for example, highlights how youth mobilisations are often rooted in broader struggles over dignity and recognition. These movements are not solely driven by material grievances but also by symbolic and identity-based concerns.

More importantly, youth activism increasingly extends beyond national politics to encompass international relations. Young people are not only contesting domestic governance but also questioning external influences, including those of former colonial powers. This shift reflects a growing awareness of the interconnectedness of local and global dynamics.

In this context, youth resistance to France can be understood as part of a broader reconfiguration of political agency. Rather than passively accepting inherited frameworks of international engagement, young people are actively reinterpreting and contesting them. This involves not only protest actions but also and mainly the production of alternative narratives that challenge dominant representations.

Digital media and political communication

The rise of digital media has fundamentally transformed the landscape of political communication. As Castells (2012) argues, contemporary social movements are increasingly organised through networks of communication that transcend traditional institutional boundaries. Digital platforms enable rapid information sharing, horizontal coordination, and the formation of collective identities.

In the African context, the expansion of mobile internet access has significantly increased the reach and impact of social media (Idowu, 2023). Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok have become central spaces for political expression, particularly among urban youth (Bosch, 2017). These platforms allow users to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and to disseminate their own narratives.

Scholars have highlighted the role of digital media in facilitating political mobilisation and shaping public discourse. They emphasise that social media can lower the costs of participation, enabling individuals to engage in political action with relatively limited resources. Similarly, Temin and Smith (2022) notes that digital platforms have transformed the relationship between media and politics in Africa, creating new opportunities for citizen engagement.

French-language studies further underscore the importance of digital spaces in Francophone Africa. For instance, Frère and Kiyindou (2009) and (2016) Temin and Smith (2022) analyse how digital media contribute to the emergence of new public spheres, where diverse voices can contest official narratives. These spaces are particularly significant for youth, who are often excluded from traditional political arenas.

One of the key features of digital media is their capacity to facilitate the circulation of counter-narratives. Unlike traditional media, which are often subject to state control or elite influence, social media platforms allow for more pluralistic and decentralised forms of communication. This enables the rapid dissemination of alternative interpretations of political events, including critiques of external actors such as France.

Visual and symbolic content plays a particularly important role in this process. Memes, videos, and images can convey complex political messages in accessible and emotionally resonant ways. For example, images juxtaposing colonial-era exploitation with contemporary military presence can reinforce narratives of continuity between past and present forms of domination.

Furthermore, digital platforms enable transnational connections, allowing narratives to circulate across national boundaries. This contributes to the formation of a shared discursive space in which youth from different countries engage with similar issues and reinforce each other's perspectives. In the case of anti-French sentiment, this has led to the emergence of a broader regional discourse that transcends individual national contexts.

Multipolarity and external actors

The transformation of France's position in Africa must also be situated within broader shifts in the global political economy. The post-Cold War period has witnessed the emergence of a more multipolar international system, characterised by the growing influence of non-Western actors. In Africa, this has translated into the diversification of external partnerships, reducing the dominance of traditional powers such as France.

China has been at the forefront of this transformation, significantly expanding its economic presence across the continent through infrastructure investments, trade, and development finance (Alden, 2007). Chinese engagement is often framed in terms of "win-win cooperation" and non-interference, which contrasts with Western narratives of conditionality and governance reform (Munyangeyo, 2026b). While these claims are subject to debate, they resonate with audiences seeking alternatives to traditional partnerships.

Russia has also sought to expand its influence, particularly in the security domain. Through military cooperation agreements, arms sales, and the involvement of private military actors, Russia has positioned itself as an alternative partner in regions such as the Sahel (Ramani, 2023). Similarly, Turkey has increased its diplomatic and economic engagement, emphasising cultural and historical ties.

French scholars have analysed these developments in terms of a *désoccidentalisation* [dewesternisation] of international relations (Badie, 2014), where Western dominance is increasingly challenged by new actors and perspectives. This shift has important implications for France's position in Africa, as it reduces its relative leverage and creates new opportunities for African states to diversify their partnerships.

The rise of alternative actors is not only a material phenomenon but also a narrative one. Competing powers offer different narratives of engagement, often emphasising respect for sovereignty and mutual benefit. These narratives may not always reflect reality, but they provide a discursive alternative to traditional Western frameworks.

For African youth, the availability of alternative partnerships reinforces the plausibility of counter-narratives that challenge France's role. It suggests that dependence on a single external actor is neither inevitable nor desirable. This contributes to a broader reimagining of Africa's place in the global order.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how youth in Francophone Africa articulate resistance and contest dominant narratives about France. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given the study's focus on meaning-making, discourse, and identity construction. By combining discourse analysis with comparative case studies, the research seeks to uncover both the content of youth narratives and the socio-political contexts in which they emerge. This dual strategy enables a nuanced understanding of how ideas and identities are mobilised in different national settings while also identifying broader regional patterns.

Data collection

The study draws on multiple sources of qualitative data to ensure a comprehensive and triangulated analysis. First, social media content constitutes a primary dataset. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok are particularly important spaces where young people express political opinions, mobilize support, and circulate counter-narratives. Posts, hashtags, videos, and comment threads are sampled using keywords related to France, neocolonialism, sovereignty, and protest movements. Social media is especially valuable because it provides relatively unfiltered access to youth voices and captures real-time reactions to political events.

Second, the study includes news media and opinion articles from both local and international outlets. These sources help contextualise youth narratives within broader public debates and provide insight into how such narratives are represented, amplified, or contested in mainstream discourse. Editorials, op-eds, and investigative reports are particularly useful for identifying dominant frames and counter-frames regarding France's role in the region.

Third, political speeches and public statements are analysed to examine how state actors and political elites frame relations with France and respond to youth-led critiques. These materials include official speeches, press releases, and interviews by government officials, opposition leaders, and civil society figures. By incorporating these sources, the study is able to compare grassroots narratives with elite discourse, highlighting points of convergence and divergence.

Data collection focuses on the period from approximately 2020 to 2025, a timeframe marked by heightened political mobilization, military coups in parts of the Sahel, and increasing public debate over France's role in Africa. This period is therefore particularly relevant for examining shifts in discourse and the emergence of new forms of youth resistance.

Analytical approach

The study employs discourse analysis as its primary analytical framework. Discourse analysis is used to examine how language, symbols, and narratives are deployed to construct meanings about France, colonial legacies, and African sovereignty. The analysis proceeds through several stages.

First, the data is coded thematically to identify recurring patterns and key concepts. These include themes such as neocolonialism, economic exploitation, military intervention, cultural influence, and national sovereignty. Second, the study analyses how these themes are framed, specifically, how youth actors define problems, assign responsibility, and propose solutions. This framing analysis helps to reveal the underlying assumptions and values that shape different narratives.

Particular attention is given to youth voices and modes of expression. This includes examining the use of humour, satire, music, memes, and visual imagery, which are often central to digital activism. Such forms of expression are not merely stylistic but play a crucial role in shaping political discourse and making complex ideas accessible to wider audiences.

In addition, the study explores how youth construct alternative visions of international relations. Rather than simply rejecting France, many narratives articulate broader aspirations for autonomy, regional integration, and new global partnerships. These discourses are analysed in relation to theoretical

perspectives in international relations that emphasize the role of ideas, identities, and norms in shaping global politics.

Finally, the comparative dimension of the analysis allows for the identification of similarities and differences across cases. This helps to determine whether observed patterns are context-specific or indicative of wider regional trends.

Case selection

The study focuses on three Francophone African countries: Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal. These cases were selected through a purposive sampling strategy designed to capture variation in political context, historical experience, and levels of youth mobilization.

Côte d'Ivoire represents a post-conflict state with deep historical, economic, and political ties to France. Its inclusion allows for the examination of how youth narratives evolve in a context where French influence remains significant but is increasingly contested.

Niger provides a contrasting case characterized by recent political instability, including military coups and the expulsion of French forces. It has been a focal point of strong anti-French sentiment and offers insight into how youth narratives intersect with broader geopolitical shifts and security concerns in the Sahel.

Senegal, by contrast, is often regarded as a relatively stable democracy with a vibrant civil society and active youth movements. This case enables the study to explore how narrative contestation unfolds in a more open political environment, where dissent is expressed through both institutional and non-institutional channels.

Together, these cases provide a diverse yet coherent sample that allows for meaningful comparison. By examining different political trajectories and forms of engagement, the study is able to generate a more comprehensive understanding of youth resistance and narrative contestation across Francophone Africa.

Case studies

This study examines how youth in three Francophone African countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal, articulate resistance and contest dominant narratives about France. While these countries differ in political trajectories and state in terms of France relations, they reveal converging patterns of youth-led discursive resistance grounded in questions of sovereignty, historical memory, and identity. Across all three cases, youth are not merely reacting to policy but actively reshaping the meaning of France's role in Africa through language, symbolism, and cultural production.

Côte d'Ivoire: Ambivalent partnership and youth reinterpretation

In Côte d'Ivoire, youth discourse reflects a deep ambivalence toward France, shaped by a history of close political and economic ties alongside growing scepticism about external influence. During student-led discussions at institutions such as Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny, as well as across online forums, recurring statements illustrate this critical re-evaluation of France's role. For example:

“Ils ont choisi notre président pour nous”

[They chose our president for us]

Reference : 2025 presidential election slogan.

and

“La démocratie ne vient pas avec des chars étrangers”

[Democracy does not come with foreign tanks]

Reference : 2010-2011 political crisis

These statements encapsulate a broader reframing of French intervention, shifting from narratives of stabilisation and support to those of imposition and illegitimacy. This discursive shift is particularly evident in the retrospective interpretation of the 2010-2011 post-electoral crisis, during which France supported the rise of President Alassane Ouattara (Piccolino, 2012). While this intervention was widely framed by international actors as necessary to restore order, it has increasingly been reinterpreted by Ivorian youth as an instance of external interference that undermined national sovereignty (Banégas, 2006).

Social media has played a crucial role in amplifying these reinterpretations. Hashtags such as #SouverainetéCI [SovereigntyCI] and #NonÀL'ingérence [No to interference] have circulated widely, particularly during elections and moments of political tension. These digital spaces enable youth to challenge official narratives and construct alternative accounts of political events. Importantly, such narratives are not limited to explicit political commentary but are embedded in broader cultural production.

Ivorian music, particularly rap and spoken word, has become a powerful medium for expressing resistance. One widely shared lyric captures this sentiment succinctly:

“Indépendance sur papier, dépendance dans les faits”

[Independence on paper, dependence in reality]

This line reflects a broader critique of postcolonial sovereignty, suggesting that formal independence has not translated into genuine autonomy. Through such expressions, youth artists contribute to what can be understood as a counter-memory, challenging official histories that portray Franco-Ivorian relations as mutually beneficial and stable.

These cultural and discursive practices highlight the importance of ideas and identity in shaping political perceptions. Rather than rejecting France outright, many Ivorian youth engage in a process of reinterpretation, questioning the legitimacy of existing partnerships while imagining alternative futures based on greater autonomy. This ambivalence underscores the complexity of youth resistance in contexts where historical ties remain strong but increasingly contested.

Niger: From security cooperation to popular rejection

In contrast to the ambivalence observed in Côte d'Ivoire, youth discourse in Niger reflects a more explicit and radical rejection of France's presence. Niger has become a focal point of anti-French mobilisation, particularly in the context of France's military operations in the Sahel, including Operation Barkhane. While these interventions have been justified as necessary for counterterrorism, many young Nigeriens view them as ineffective at best and exploitative at worst.

Protests in the capital, Niamey, have featured highly visible symbolic acts, including the burning of French flags and the display of placards bearing slogans such as:

- "Base militaire = occupation" [Military base = occupation]
- "La sécurité sans souveraineté est une illusion" [Security without sovereignty is an illusion]
- "Barkhane dehors!" [Barkhane out!]

These slogans illustrate a direct challenge to the dominant security narrative promoted by France and its allies. Rather than accepting the framing of French military presence as protective, youth discourse redefines it as a form of occupation that undermines national sovereignty.

Social media further intensifies this critique by linking contemporary events to historical experiences of colonialism. Viral posts often juxtapose images of colonial-era exploitation with current military deployments, accompanied by captions such as:

- "Hier ils prenaient nos ressources, aujourd'hui ils contrôlent notre sécurité"
[Yesterday they took our resources, today they control our security]

The repetition of such narratives contributes to what can be described as narrative radicalisation, whereby initial scepticism evolves into a more categorical rejection of France's role. This process is not simply rhetorical; it shapes public perceptions and influences political developments.

A particularly salient slogan that has emerged in protests is:

- "Le Niger aux Nigériens!"
[Niger for Nigeriens!]

This phrase encapsulates a broader ideological shift toward reclaiming political, economic, and security autonomy. It reflects a reassertion of national identity in opposition to perceived external domination.

The 2023 military coup in Niger further accelerated these dynamics. Although the coup was driven by complex internal factors, the new authorities strategically mobilised anti-French sentiment to legitimise their actions, including the expulsion of French forces. Youth narratives played a crucial

role in this process by shaping public opinion and providing a discursive framework through which these political changes could be understood.

In this context, youth resistance in Niger goes beyond critique to actively redefine the terms of international engagement. By rejecting France's security narrative and proposing alternative visions centred on sovereignty, young Nigeriens contribute to a broader reconfiguration of regional geopolitics.

Senegal: contestation within stability

Senegal presents a different but equally significant case. As one of France's closest partners in Africa, Senegal has maintained relatively stable diplomatic and economic relations. However, beneath this stability, youth-led contestation has been steadily growing, particularly in urban areas and among politically engaged populations.

Unlike in Niger, where resistance is often overt and confrontational, youth discourse in Senegal tends to be more nuanced and embedded within broader critiques of governance and democracy. During periods of political unrest, protest movements have incorporated anti-French rhetoric into their demands. Common slogans include:

- "France complice!" [France is complicit!]
- "Pas de démocratie sous tutelle" [No democracy under supervision]

These statements suggest that France is perceived not only as an external actor but also as a participant in domestic political dynamics. This perception reflects broader concerns about sovereignty and the integrity of democratic processes.

Social media plays a central role in facilitating these debates. Senegalese youth frequently engage in discussions about the CFA franc, a currency historically linked to France. Posts questioning its legitimacy are widely shared, including statements such as:

- "Pourquoi notre monnaie est-elle encore contrôlée à Paris?"
[Why is our currency still controlled in Paris?]

Hashtags such as #FreeCFA and #DécoloniserLEconomie [Decolonise the economy] indicate a growing awareness of economic sovereignty issues and a desire to challenge existing financial arrangements.

Importantly, these narratives do not yet translate into dramatic policy shifts. The Senegalese state continues to maintain close relations with France, and official discourse remains largely supportive of this partnership. However, the increasing prominence of youth resistance signals a gradual erosion of France's symbolic legitimacy, particularly among younger generations.

This case highlights the importance of examining not only overt political change but also discursive transformation. Even in relatively stable contexts, shifts in how young people talk about France can have long-term implications for foreign policy and international relations. By questioning established

narratives and proposing alternative frameworks, Senegalese youth contribute to an evolving political landscape in which ideas and identities play a central role.

DISCUSSION

Narrative failure and legitimacy crisis

The empirical findings from Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal demonstrate that youth resistance cannot be reduced to episodic protest or reactive dissent. Rather, it reflects sustained processes of meaning-making, in which narratives are constructed, circulated, and contested across multiple arenas. Slogans, chants, artistic expressions, and digital content function as discursive tools that condense complex political critiques into accessible and emotionally resonant forms. In doing so, they enable broader participation in political debate while shaping collective interpretations of France's role in the region.

These narratives exhibit three recurring features. First, they emphasise historical continuity, linking contemporary French engagement to colonial legacies. This temporal framing aligns with postcolonial scholarship, which argues that colonial power relations persist through economic, political, and cultural structures long after formal independence (Mbembe, 2001). Youth narratives frequently draw direct parallels between past exploitation and present-day policies, thereby situating current grievances within a longer historical trajectory.

Second, these narratives use moral framing, portraying France as unjust, exploitative, or hypocritical. This reflects broader dynamics of legitimacy in international relations, where actors are judged not only on material outcomes but also on perceived fairness and normative consistency (Clark, 2007). When France's actions, such as military interventions or economic arrangements, are perceived as contradicting its stated commitments to democracy and partnership, they generate what can be described as a legitimacy deficit.

Third, youth discourse contributes to identity construction, emphasizing sovereignty, dignity, and self-determination. These narratives are not purely oppositional; they articulate positive visions of African agency and autonomy. In constructivist terms, they reflect the role of shared ideas and identities in shaping political behaviour (Wendt, 1999). By redefining what it means to be a sovereign African state or citizen, youth actors challenge existing hierarchies in international relations.

Across all three cases, a common pattern emerges: the failure of France's partnership narrative. Official discourse often frames Franco-African relations in terms of cooperation, mutual benefit, and shared security interests. However, youth increasingly perceive a gap between this rhetoric and lived realities. This disjuncture undermines the credibility of France's narrative and contributes to growing scepticism and, in some contexts, outright rejection.

This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of strategic narratives, defined as representations of the past, present, and future that shape political behaviour (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013). France's strategic narrative of partnership appears to be losing resonance among younger generations, who instead construct counter-narratives that emphasize inequality and dependency. The erosion of narrative coherence thus contributes to a broader legitimacy crisis, in which France's

influence is increasingly contested not only at the policy level but also at the level of meaning and interpretation.

Digital platforms as catalysts

Digital platforms play a crucial role in amplifying and transforming these narratives. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok enable the rapid dissemination of content across national and transnational networks. This accelerates the circulation of ideas and facilitates the emergence of shared discursive repertoires among youth in different countries.

The affordances of digital media—such as visual storytelling, interactivity, and algorithmic amplification—enhance the emotional and persuasive impact of these narratives. Images of protests, historical footage, and symbolic acts (e.g., flag burning) are often paired with concise captions that convey clear moral messages. As scholars of digital activism have noted, such content is particularly effective in mobilizing attention and fostering engagement (Tufekci, 2017).

A widely shared tweet from a Senegalese activist illustrates the centrality of narrative contestation:

“Ils ont perdu la bataille des armes, mais ils mènent encore celle des récits. À nous de reprendre notre histoire.”
[They lost the battle of arms, but they still wage the battle of narratives.
It is up to us to reclaim our history.]

This statement encapsulates a key insight of this study: that contemporary struggles over power are increasingly fought at the level of narratives. While military and economic instruments remain important, their effectiveness is mediated by the meanings attributed to them. In this sense, digital platforms function as arenas in which competing interpretations of reality are negotiated and contested.

Furthermore, social media facilitates collective identity formation by connecting individuals who share similar grievances and aspirations. Hashtags, viral posts, and online campaigns create a sense of belonging and solidarity, transforming individual expressions of dissent into collective movements. This process aligns with research on networked publics, which highlights how digital communication reshapes the dynamics of political participation (Castells, 2012).

Importantly, the impact of digital platforms is not limited to amplification. They also enable innovation in narrative form, incorporating humour, satire, and creative expression. Memes, music videos, and short-form content on platforms like TikTok allow youth to engage with political issues in ways that are both accessible and culturally resonant. These forms of expression play a crucial role in sustaining engagement and expanding the reach of counter-narratives.

Youth agency and political transformation

The findings underscore the importance of **youth agency** in shaping political discourse and, potentially, political outcomes. Rather than being passive recipients of external influence, young people actively construct and disseminate narratives that challenge existing power structures. This perspective aligns with recent scholarship that emphasizes the role of non-state actors and societal forces in international relations (Acharya, 2014).

One key implication is that narrative legitimacy should be understood as a strategic variable. When an external actor's narrative loses credibility, its ability to influence local populations diminishes, regardless of its material capabilities. This helps explain why France's traditional instruments of influence, including military presence, elite diplomacy, and economic frameworks, have become increasingly contested. Without a credible and resonant narrative, these instruments may not only fail to achieve their intended goals but may also exacerbate perceptions of domination.

The cases of Niger and Côte d'Ivoire illustrate how declining narrative legitimacy can contribute to significant political shifts. In Niger, youth-driven narratives of sovereignty and anti-imperialism played a role in shaping public support for the expulsion of French forces. In Côte d'Ivoire, they have contributed to a more critical re-evaluation of past interventions and current partnerships.

Even in Senegal, where state-level relations remain relatively stable, youth narratives signal potential future transformations. The growing prominence of debates around economic sovereignty, particularly regarding the CFA franc, suggests that underlying assumptions about France's role are being questioned. Over time, such discursive shifts may translate into changes in policy and international alignment.

These dynamics highlight the need to move beyond state-centric analyses and consider how ideas, identities, and discourse shape international relations. Youth narratives are not merely reflections of structural conditions; they actively constitute the social reality within which political decisions are made.

Implications for France and international relations

The decline of France's narrative legitimacy in Francophone Africa has significant implications for both policy and theory. From a policy perspective, it suggests that traditional instruments of influence are insufficient in the absence of credible narratives. Military interventions, economic partnerships, and diplomatic engagements must be accompanied by narratives that resonate with local populations and reflect their aspirations.

France's continued reliance on established frameworks, which are often associated with the legacy of Françafrique, appears increasingly misaligned with the expectations of younger generations. Without meaningful efforts to address concerns of sovereignty, equality, and historical justice, these frameworks risk further eroding France's legitimacy.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce the importance of constructivist and postcolonial approaches to international relations. They demonstrate that power is not only material but also discursive, and that legitimacy is shaped by the ability to construct compelling and credible narratives. As Miskimmon et al. (2013) argue, strategic narratives are central to the exercise of power in the international system. When these narratives fail, even well-established relationships can become unstable.

More broadly, the study highlights the need to conceptualize international relations as a contested discursive space, in which multiple actors, such as states, youth movements, and digital publics, compete to define reality. In this space, narrative contestation becomes a key battleground, shaping not only perceptions but also political outcomes.

Comparative mapping of youth resistance narratives in Francophone Africa through case studies

To synthesise the cross-case findings, the table below (figure 1) presents a comparative mapping of youth resistance narratives across Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal. The table is designed to distil the core analytical dimensions identified in this study, such as historical framing, moral positioning, identity construction, and modes of expression, into a structured format that facilitates systematic comparison. By doing so, it highlights both the shared discursive patterns that cut across these cases and the context-specific variations that shape how youth resistance is articulated.

Rather than treating youth mobilisation as a uniform phenomenon, the table reveals a spectrum of narrative intensity and rupture, ranging from radical rejection in Niger to more ambivalent reinterpretation in Côte d'Ivoire and embedded contestation in Senegal. This comparative approach underscores that while the content of youth narratives differs, their underlying logic remains consistent: they seek to challenge the legitimacy of France's role by exposing perceived contradictions between official discourse and lived realities.

The table also foregrounds the importance of digital media and cultural production as key sites of narrative construction, showing how different forms of expression, from protest slogans to online debates, contribute to the diffusion and consolidation of counter-narratives. In this sense, it serves not only as a summary of empirical findings but also as an analytical tool that clarifies how narrative contestation operates across diverse political contexts. Ultimately, the table reinforces the article's central claim that youth resistance in Francophone Africa is best understood as a dynamic and multi-layered process of discursive struggle:

Dimension	Côte d'Ivoire	Niger	Senegal
Narrative Intensity	Moderate (ambivalent, critical but not fully rejectionist)	High (explicit rejection of France)	Low-moderate (subtle but growing contestation)
Historical Framing	Reinterpretation of 2010-2011 crisis; selective memory politics	Strong colonial continuity; direct past-present linkage	Structural continuity (e.g., CFA franc, economic dependency)
Moral Framing	France as intrusive but still a partner	France as exploitative and occupying force	France as complicit in governance issues
Identity Construction	Postcolonial dignity; questioning "real independence"	Strong nationalism ("Niger for Nigeriens")	Economic sovereignty and reform-oriented identity
Primary Narrative Target	Political intervention and influence	Military presence and security role	Economic control and political influence
Forms of Expression	Music, student debates, social media discourse	Street protests, slogans, viral imagery	Online debates, hashtags, civic discourse
Digital Media Role	Amplification and reinterpretation	Mobilisation and radicalisation	Debate, awareness, and gradual diffusion
Level of Narrative Rupture	Moderate (contestation within relationship)	High (breakdown of legitimacy)	Emerging (erosion without rupture)
Impact on Politics	Reframing past and present relations	Direct influence on policy (e.g., expulsion of French forces)	Potential long-term influence on policy debates

Figure 1. Comparative mapping of youth resistance narratives across Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal.

The comparative mapping presented in the above table reinforces the central argument of this study: that youth resistance in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal is fundamentally a narrative-driven process that reshapes the contours of international legitimacy. While the intensity and expression of resistance vary across cases, the table demonstrates a clear regional pattern of declining confidence in France's partnership narrative. This erosion is not simply the result of policy disagreements but reflects a deeper transformation in how young people interpret history, evaluate external actors, and imagine political futures.

Furthermore, the table illustrates that narrative rupture is not binary but exists along a continuum. In Niger, the breakdown of legitimacy is pronounced and has translated into tangible political outcomes. In Côte d'Ivoire, contestation remains embedded within an ongoing relationship, producing ambivalence rather than outright rejection. In Senegal, the process is more gradual, signalling an emerging shift that may shape future trajectories. This variation highlights the need for context-sensitive analysis while also confirming the broader regional significance of youth-led narrative contestation.

The table ultimately underscores that power in contemporary international relations is increasingly mediated through discourse. As youth continue to construct and circulate alternative narratives, they challenge not only specific policies but the very frameworks through which external influence is justified. In doing so, they position themselves as key actors in redefining legitimacy, sovereignty, and the future of Franco-African relations.

The chant as form: “*France dégage !*” and “*À bas la France !*” in call-and-response

The power of call-and-response chanting lies not only in what is said, but in how it is collectively produced, circulated, and embodied. In protests in Bamako, slogans such as “*France dégage !*” and “*À bas la France !*” demonstrate how a simple linguistic structure can become a highly effective political tool. These chants operate as more than expressions of dissent; they function as participatory scripts that organise individuals into a unified vocal force.

Digital media has significantly intensified this dynamic. Short videos filmed on mobile phones and shared across platforms capture the full performative dimension of these chants: the cadence of the leader's call, the synchronised reply of the crowd, and the gestures that accompany each phrase (France 24, 2020; africanews, 2021; Sahelien, 2021). Viewers encountering these clips are not merely absorbing information; they are witnessing a model for action. The call-and-response format is especially suited to audiovisual circulation because its structure is immediately intelligible. Even without translation, the alternation between caller and respondents signals how to participate. As a result, the chant travels easily across contexts while preserving its form, enabling rapid imitation and adaptation.

The effectiveness of these slogans also stems from their linguistic directness. Phrases like “*France dégage !*” and “*À bas la France !*” are devoid of metaphor or ambiguity. They explicitly name their target and articulate a clear demand or judgment. In the charged environment of a protest, where noise, movement, and emotional intensity can fragment attention, such clarity is crucial. Participants do not need to interpret or decode the message; they can immediately grasp and repeat it. This reduces cognitive effort and maximises collective uptake, ensuring that the chant remains coherent even as it is repeated by large, dispersed crowds.

Equally important is the performative quality embedded in the call-and-response structure. When a leader calls out “*France !*” and the crowd responds “*dégage !*”, the act of chanting enacts the very demand being expressed. The naming of the target and its symbolic expulsion occur in tandem, creating a repeated enactment of the desired political outcome. Each cycle of the chant becomes a rehearsal of transformation, reinforcing both the message and the collective identity of those participating. This performativity helps explain why such chants resonate so strongly, not only among those physically present but also among those who encounter them through digital media.

The prominence of these slogans in Francophone West Africa protests is therefore inseparable from their formal properties. Their brevity makes them easy to remember and repeat; their rhythm supports synchronisation; and their adaptability allows them to function across different scales, from small gatherings to mass demonstrations. The call-and-response format, in particular, transforms passive listeners into active participants, converting a crowd into a coordinated vocal body.

What might initially appear to be simple slogans are, in practice, strategic and rich communicative devices. They condense complex political sentiments into repeatable forms, align individual voices into collective expression, and circulate efficiently across both physical and digital spaces. Through this process, localised grievances are not only articulated but also amplified, and take on a shared and enduring presence within broader protest movements.

How slogans spread between countries

Across Francophone Africa, especially in Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, anti-France protest slogans do not emerge in isolation. Instead, they circulate through a regional communicative ecosystem shaped by shared language (French), interconnected youth cultures, and rapidly evolving media environments. What begins as locally grounded political expression can quickly become standardised, transnational chant vocabulary, repeated across borders with minimal variation.

This diffusion is not random. It follows identifiable pathways, such as cultural, digital, and political, that enable slogans like « *France dégage* » or « *À bas la France* » to move from one context to another, often within days or weeks.

MECHANISMS OF SPREAD

Physical protest imitation

One of the most immediate and tangible mechanisms through which slogans spread across Francophone West Africa is physical protest imitation. Activists, students, and civil society actors do not operate in isolation within national borders; rather, they are embedded in a regionally interconnected political space. In countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, protest movements often emerge in close temporal proximity, responding to parallel concerns around governance, security, and foreign influence. This simultaneity facilitates observation and imitation.

Exposure occurs in multiple ways. Protest leaders and participants may travel, maintain personal or organisational ties across borders, or follow events unfolding in neighbouring countries through regional media. When a particular chant, such as « *France dégage !* », proves effective in mobilising large crowds in one country, it is quickly recognised as a useful rhetorical tool elsewhere. Protest

leaders, seeking to generate similar energy and cohesion, adopt these slogans wholesale rather than inventing new ones. In doing so, they draw on an already validated repertoire of collective expression.

Cross-border activist networks further reinforce this process. Activist groups, NGOs, and informal youth movements frequently share strategies, messaging, and symbolic practices. Slogans circulate within these networks as part of a broader exchange of protest techniques, from march organisation to visual symbolism. Over time, this leads to a striking convergence: demonstrations in different national contexts begin to sound alike, even when their immediate triggers differ.

The result is a form of “protest convergence”, in which similar grievances, whether related to sovereignty, security, or economic conditions, are articulated through nearly identical linguistic expressions. Slogans become portable, standardised tools of mobilisation, shaped less by local invention than by regional diffusion through embodied, on-the-ground practice.

Social media circulation and feedback loops

Social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and YouTube function as critical accelerators in the diffusion of protest slogans across Francophone West Africa. Unlike earlier periods in which slogans spread primarily through physical proximity or traditional media, contemporary movements operate within a digitally mediated feedback environment. In this environment, slogans are not only heard but also seen, recorded, edited, and redistributed in rapid succession.

A typical circulation cycle begins with the filming of a protest in a city such as Bamako in Mali. Video clips capture not just the words of a chant but its performative elements, including intonation, rhythm, crowd response, and visual intensity. Once uploaded, these clips circulate widely, often reaching audiences in Burkina Faso or Niger within hours. Users in these platforms do not simply consume the content passively; they actively repost, remix, and emulate it, integrating the observed chants into their own protest repertoires.

This process generates what can be described as iterative amplification. Each cycle of recording, sharing, and imitation reinforces the slogan’s visibility and perceived legitimacy. Repetition across multiple digital contexts lends the impression of ubiquity, transforming a locally specific chant into a regionally recognised expression. Moreover, the editable nature of social media content allows for stylisation, through music overlays, subtitles, or visual effects, which can intensify emotional resonance while preserving the core linguistic structure. In this way, social media does not simply transmit slogans; it actively shapes their form, reach, and durability within a transnational protest ecology.

Linguistic simplicity and standardisation

The transnational spread of protest slogans in Francophone West Africa is deeply facilitated by linguistic simplicity combined with the unifying role of French as a lingua franca. Across countries such as Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, French provides a shared communicative medium that allows slogans to circulate without the friction of translation. This common linguistic ground is crucial for rapid diffusion, particularly in multilingual societies where local languages vary significantly.

However, language alone does not explain the dominance of certain slogans. The most successful expressions exhibit a set of formal characteristics that enhance their portability. They are typically short, often no more than two to four words, which allows for ease of memorisation and repetition. They are also rhythmically structured, making them suitable for chanting in large settings. Finally, they are semantically direct, conveying clear and unambiguous demands or positions without reliance on metaphor or complex syntax.

Slogans such as «*France dégage*» exemplify these features. The imperative verb form delivers an immediate, emotionally charged directive, while the brevity of the phrase ensures that it can be repeated rapidly and synchronised across a crowd. Similarly, «*À bas la France*», though slightly more formal in tone, retains a compact structure that lends itself to collective chanting. Over time, these qualities contribute to linguistic standardisation. Rather than generating a diverse array of locally specific slogans, movements across the region converge on a limited set of highly efficient expressions. These slogans become recognisable markers of protest, which transcends national boundaries and reinforces a shared vocabulary.

Cultural transmission through music and youth identity

Beyond immediate protest contexts and digital circulation, the diffusion of slogans in Francophone West Africa is rooted in longer-term processes of cultural transmission linked to youth identity, particularly through music and activist art. Movements such as *Y'en a Marre* [We are fed up] in Senegal have played a foundational role in shaping the linguistic and expressive frameworks that underpin contemporary protest discourse. Emerging from a fusion of hip-hop culture and civic activism, such movements cultivated a distinctly politicised youth voice that prioritised clarity, repetition, and emotional immediacy.

Crucially, the slogans and expressions associated with these cultural forms were not initially directed against France or external actors. Instead, they focused on domestic political accountability, social justice, and generational frustration. However, in articulating these concerns, they established a repertoire of short, punchy, and repeatable phrases that could be easily mobilised in collective settings. This stylistic template, which is characterised by brevity, rhythm, and direct address, proved highly adaptable.

As protest movements intensified in the Sahel, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, this pre-existing linguistic infrastructure was repurposed. The same expressive strategies that had been used to critique domestic elites were redirected toward external targets. In this context, music and youth culture function as incubators of protest language, providing not specific slogans but the forms and rhythms through which slogans can be effectively constructed and disseminated.

Thus, the role of youth identity is not merely demographic but structural. It shapes how political messages are framed, performed, and transmitted, ensuring continuity between cultural production and street-level mobilisation across the region. The following table provides a cross-country slogan diffusion mapping:

Origin context	Transmission pathway	Receiving context	Typical slogan form	Notes
Senegal (youth activism, rap)	Cultural influence (music, activism networks)	Mali	Indirect: evolves into explicit slogans	Foundation of protest language style
Mali (mass protests in Bamako)	Social media + regional visibility	Burkina Faso	«France dégage»	First major standardisation point
Burkina Faso (urban protests)	Protest imitation, plus digital sharing	Niger	«France dehors», «À bas la France»	Intensification and variation
Niger (M62 movement, rallies) - M62 : Union sacrée pour la sauvegarde de la souveraineté et de la dignité du peuple [<i>Sacred Union for the Safeguard of the Sovereignty and Dignity of the People</i>]	Organised civil society, coupled with online circulation	Regional (Sahel-wide)	« Barkhane dehors », «À bas la France»	Institutionalisation of slogans
Multi-country (Sahel)	Viral social media loops	All (including Senegal influence feedback)	« France dégage» (dominant form)	Full regional convergence

Figure 2. Cross-country slogan diffusion mapping

The spread of anti-France slogans across Francophone West Africa reflects more than shared political grievances. It reveals a highly networked regional youth public sphere. France's rejection travels through a combination of embodied practice (protests), digital media (viral clips), and cultural production (music and activism).

What emerges is not a diverse field of expressions, but rather a tight cluster of highly efficient, standardised slogans that gain power through repetition and recognisability. In this sense, the regional diffusion of chants like «France dégage» or «À bas la France» is less about invention and more about circulation, adaptation, and amplification within a connected youth-driven ecosystem.

CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTION

This paper has argued that the contemporary erosion of France's influence in Francophone Africa cannot be fully understood through material or institutional explanations alone. While military withdrawals, shifting alliances, and economic tensions are often presented as the primary indicators of geopolitical change, they are better understood as symptoms of a deeper transformation. At its core, this transformation reflects a crisis of narrative legitimacy, driven in large part by youth-led processes of resistance, reinterpretation, and discursive contestation.

Across the cases of Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal, the analysis has shown that young people are not merely reacting to France's policies; they are actively reshaping how those policies are understood. Through slogans, digital content, cultural production, and everyday political conversation, youth are constructing alternative narratives that challenge long-standing representations of Franco-African

relations as cooperative, stabilising, and mutually beneficial. These counter-narratives expose perceived inconsistencies between rhetoric and reality, particularly in relation to sovereignty, democracy, and economic autonomy.

Importantly, this shift is not uniform across contexts. In Niger, youth discourse has contributed to a more explicit and radical rejection of French presence, particularly in the security domain. In Côte d'Ivoire, narratives are more ambivalent, reflecting both historical ties and growing scepticism. In Senegal, contestation remains embedded within a relatively stable political framework but signals an emerging re-evaluation of France's role, especially among urban and digitally connected youth. Despite these differences, a common pattern emerges: the increasing inability of France's official narrative to resonate with younger generations.

This finding underscores a central claim of the article: that international influence depends not only on material capabilities but also on the ability to sustain credible and compelling narratives. When such narratives lose legitimacy, influence becomes fragile, regardless of military strength or economic presence. In this regard, the decline of France's position in Francophone Africa reflects not simply a redistribution of power but a transformation in how power itself is constituted and contested.

Key contributions

Conceptualising narrative legitimacy as central to international influence

The first major contribution of this article lies in its conceptualisation of narrative legitimacy as a central dimension of international influence. While existing scholarship in international relations has increasingly recognised the importance of ideas, norms, and discourse, this study advances the argument by explicitly linking narrative credibility to geopolitical outcomes. It demonstrates that narratives are not merely descriptive or rhetorical tools; they are constitutive of political reality.

By examining how youth in Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Senegal reinterpret France's role, the article shows how legitimacy is constructed, contested, and eroded through discourse. France's longstanding narrative of partnership, which is grounded in ideas of shared history, mutual benefit, and security cooperation, has lost much of its persuasive power among younger audiences. This erosion is not simply a matter of miscommunication but reflects a deeper disconnect between official representations and lived experiences.

Conceptualising narrative legitimacy in this way has broader implications for international relations theory. It suggests that power should be understood not only in terms of resources and capabilities but also in terms of discursive alignment, which means the extent to which an actor's narrative resonates with the beliefs and expectations of relevant audiences. When this alignment breaks down, even well-established relationships can become unstable. This insight contributes to constructivist and postcolonial approaches by providing a more precise account of how discourse shapes geopolitical outcomes.

Highlighting youth as key agents of geopolitical change

The second contribution of the article is its emphasis on youth as central actors in international politics. Much of the existing literature on Franco-African relations has focused on state elites, diplomatic institutions, and external powers. While these actors remain important, this study demonstrates that

youth play a critical role in shaping the discursive environment within which political decisions are made.

In all three cases, young people emerge as active producers of political meaning. They engage in debates about sovereignty, critique economic arrangements, and reinterpret historical events. Through both online and offline practices, they challenge dominant narratives and articulate alternative visions of the future. This form of agency is particularly significant in contexts where formal political participation may be limited or constrained.

Furthermore, youth narratives do not remain confined to the margins of political discourse. They influence public opinion, shape media coverage, and, in some cases, inform state policy. The example of Niger illustrates how youth-driven narratives of sovereignty and anti-imperialism can contribute to broader political shifts, including the reconfiguration of international partnerships. Even in more stable contexts such as Senegal, the growing prominence of youth discourse signals potential long-term changes in foreign policy orientation.

By foregrounding youth agency, the article challenges state-centric assumptions in international relations and highlights the importance of societal actors in shaping global politics. It also underscores the need to pay closer attention to generational dynamics, as younger populations may hold different perspectives and priorities than political elites.

Demonstrating the role of digital media in reshaping narratives

The third key contribution of this study is its analysis of digital media as a transformative force in narrative contestation. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok are not merely channels of communication; they are spaces in which political meaning is actively constructed and negotiated.

The findings show that digital media amplify youth narratives by enabling rapid dissemination, fostering emotional engagement, and facilitating collective identity formation. Hashtags, viral posts, and visual content allow complex political critiques to be communicated in accessible and compelling ways. This enhances their reach and impact, both within and across national contexts.

In addition, digital platforms enable new forms of political expression, including humour, satire, and creative storytelling. These forms are particularly effective in engaging younger audiences and sustaining participation over time. They also blur the boundaries between politics and culture, making resistance more pervasive and difficult to contain.

Crucially, digital media contribute to the transnationalisation of discourse. Narratives originating in one country can quickly spread to others, creating shared frames of reference and fostering a sense of regional solidarity. This helps explain why similar themes, such as sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and economic autonomy, appear across different contexts.

By highlighting the role of digital media, the article contributes to a growing body of literature on networked politics and digital activism. It also underscores the need for international relations scholars to engage more seriously with the communicative dimensions of power in the digital age.

Broader implications and future research

Taken together, these contributions point to a broader rethinking of how international influence is conceptualised and exercised. They suggest that legitimacy, discourse, and identity are not peripheral concerns but central components of geopolitical power. For France, this implies that efforts to maintain influence in Francophone Africa must go beyond traditional instruments and engage with the underlying narratives that shape public perception.

More broadly, the findings have implications for other external actors operating in the region, as well as for global politics more generally. In an increasingly interconnected and media-saturated world, the ability to construct credible narratives may be as important as the ability to deploy material resources. Actors that fail to recognise this may find their influence eroded, even in contexts where they retain significant structural advantages.

Future research could build on this study in several ways. Comparative analyses involving other external powers, such as China, Russia, or regional organisations, could provide further insight into how different narratives compete and interact. Longitudinal studies could examine how youth narratives evolve over time and whether they translate into lasting policy changes. Finally, more detailed ethnographic work could explore how these narratives are experienced and negotiated at the local level.

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