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From Hashtags to the Streets: Exploring the Role of Social Media in the #EndSARS Protests in Nigeria

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Resumo

Este estudo investiga o papel das redes sociais no protesto #EndSARS na Nigéria. Sendo um trabalho que analisa as condições do protesto em relação à repressão estatal e à brutalidade policial, a investigação adota uma metodologia mista, combinando um inquérito online e entrevistas semiestruturadas. O inquérito contou com 60 respondentes e foram realizadas entrevistas com 10 participantes do protesto #EndSARS. A investigação revela que o X e o Instagram estiveram no centro da organização do protesto, evidenciando o caráter ambivalente de poder e vulnerabilidade no espaço digital da contestação. O estudo também demonstrou a ligação entre a construção discursiva da questão da brutalidade policial e o impacto das redes sociais na formação das opiniões públicas sobre o tema.

Palavras-chave: #EndSARS; Redes Sociais; Ativismo Digital; Brutalidade Policial; Repressão Estatal; Mobilização Juvenil; Nigéria

Abstract

This study investigates the role of social media in the #EndSars protest in Nigeria. As a study that addresses the condition of protest with a view to state repression, police brutality, the study adopts a mixed research methodology adopting an online survey and a semi structured interview season. The survey recorded 60 respondents and interviews were conducted with 10 individuals who are participants of the EndSARS protest. The research reveals that X and Instagram are at the core of the protest organization, highlighting the double-edged character of power and vulnerability in the digital space of protest. The study also revealed that the connection to the framing of police brutality issue and the impact of social media in shaping people's opinions on the matter

Keywords: #EndSARS, Social Media, Digital Activism, Police Brutality, State Repression, Youth Mobilization, Nigeria

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Introduction

Nigeria's #EndSARS protests in October 2020 represent a significant instance of youth-driven, decentralized digital activism. SARS, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, established in 1992 to address violent crime, had been accused of extrajudicial activities, including arbitrary arrests, extortion, torture, and killings (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2022). Although concerns were raised previously, the 2020 movement was distinct due to its mobilization and organization through digital technologies. The collective indignation was transformed into a decentralized protest with shared demands for SARS's disbandment.

Social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook, played an essential role in mobilization, testifying, sharing information about protests, and expressing solidarity (Uwalaka, 2024). Hashtags #EndSARS and #EndPoliceBrutality trended globally, centering on demands for good governance, accountability, and corruption. Repression of the protest through misinformation, internet blackouts, and violence from the state increased during this period. The protests' zenith was the Lekki Toll Gate massacre on 20 October 2020 when security forces opened fire on peaceful demonstrators.

Twitter facilitated organization and visibility, but at the same time, it put activists at risk of surveillance and misinformation. Nigerian youth harnessed digital technologies for crowdfunding, live streaming, and global advocacy. On the other hand, the state froze accounts, hired pro-government influencers, and banned Twitter in 2021 (Dambo et al., 2022). Thus, digital activism, which simultaneously enables and limits, mirrors patterns observed in other movements, such as the Arab Spring (Howard & Hussain, 2013), Hong Kong (Lee, 2018), and Southern Europe's anti-austerity movements (Accornero & Ramos Pinto, 2015). As Branch & Mampilly (2015) remind us, the wave of popular protests in African countries must be taken seriously, not dismissed as

mere echoes of events elsewhere. Today's uprisings build on a legacy of African protest stretching back to the anti-colonial struggle, which continues to shape the repertoire and meanings of contemporary mobilizations. The Nigerian case is distinctive for three reasons:

1. **Demographics** – Nigeria has one of the world's largest youth populations, with over 60% under 25, many facing unemployment and systemic precarity.

2. **Institutional fragility** – Weak accountability structures and entrenched corruption intensified the sense of grievance.

3. **Diaspora engagement** – The Nigerian diaspora played an active role in amplifying global visibility and mobilizing resources.

#EndSARS is part of what Branch & Mampilly (2015) identify as the "third wave of African protest," which since the late 2000s has challenged entrenched regimes across more than forty countries. Nigeria, alongside Uganda, Ethiopia, and Sudan, illustrates the diversity and intensity of this new continental protest cycle. These factors combined to make #EndSARS not merely a protest against police brutality, but a broader expression of generational discontent and demands for systemic reform.

The Nigerian #EndSARS protests can be seen as an example of the deeper challenges with the Nigerian system of governance. Beyond the call for an end to police brutality, protesters demand government accountability, transparency, and the inclusion of youths in political processes. Della Porta and Reiter (1998) discovered that political opportunity structures and repression interact across multiple dimensions including temporal, discursive/legitimacy, and strategic/surveillance effects during protest campaigns.

As Beissinger (2017) argues, mobilizations strongly rooted in "virtual civil society"—networks sustained primarily online—are particularly volatile in contexts where "traditional civil society,"

such as trade unions or associations, is weak. While digital platforms allow for rapid diffusion and mass mobilization, they often struggle to convert visibility into durable institutional change African experiences remain underrepresented in academic literature while Nigeria's #EndSARS protests provide an essential context for studying digital activism on the continent (Okoye & Tokpo, 2023). These shortcomings collectively highlight the necessity for an investigation into digital mobilization and repression in Nigeria that is both relational and informed by context.

RQ: Against this background, this thesis investigates the interplay between digital mobilization and state repression during the #EndSARS protests. It asks:

How did digitally native activists use social media platforms to mobilize collective action during the #EndSARS protests, and in what ways did state repression reshape these digital strategies?

The main aim of this thesis is to offer a more precise and focused examination of the impact of digital technologies on the structuring of protests and the portrayal of state repression. It emphasizes the dual role of social media as a means of mobilization and a platform of susceptibility.

State of the art

The research attempts to understand the role of social media and the transition from online rallying to street protest in the Nigerian #EndSARS movement. Digital media transform social movements, creating opportunities for communication, coordination, and collective identity (Tremayne, 2014; Joyce, 2010). This literature review brings together research related to these questions.

The section on protest policing and social movements begins with research on states' protest strategies. These studies find a continuum of strategies from negotiated management to escalated force. Negotiated management emphasizes communication and the minimization of fatalities; however, its application is often inconsistent and uneven, frequently intertwined with coercive measures (McPhail & McCarthy, 2005, pp. 156–158; Della Porta, 2014, p. 233). The anti-austerity movements in Portugal were shaped by both repressive actions and political opportunities, as well as media narratives that influenced mobilization efforts (Accornero & Ramos Pinto, 2014).

In the US policing of protests moved from increased force during the 1960s and 1970s towards negotiated management in certain cities and European countries according to McPhail & McCarthy (2005). 156–158). Escalated force involved indiscriminate violence, mass arrests, and coercion without dialogue. In contrast, negotiated management focused on communication and reducing injuries and fatalities (McPhail & McCarthy, 2005, pp. 157–158). Decentralized police systems combined with changing political landscapes result in uneven implementation of negotiated management strategies.

Political opportunities and the culture within organizations can significantly shape strategic approaches. The nature of responses is contingent upon the type of government, the influence of military entities, and the level of professionalization within police forces (Della Porta, 2014, p.

233). Instances of militarized forces and agencies lacking training in managing protests have resulted in the use of indiscriminate force, as observed in Seattle (1999). Conversely, agencies with greater experience, such as those in Washington D.C., demonstrate a more selective approach (McPhail & McCarthy, 2005, p. 164). Instances of failure may prompt bureaucratic reforms and subsequent changes (Wahlström, 2016, p. 291).

The research on repression and social movements points to a complex relationship between mobilization and repression (Davenport, 2005, p. vii). It can increase or decrease participation, with ambiguous effects (Davenport, 2005, pp. xvii–xviii). Scholars have mainly theorized and studied several different causal pathways. Repression can have a deterrent effect by increasing risks and mobilization costs (Francisco, 2005, p. 58). Punishment can also have backlash effects of anger and increased mobilization (Francisco, 2005, pp. 207–213). Arresting protest leaders can enhance their moral authority or radicalize and change tactics (Francisco, 2005, p. 207).

Forms of repression include hard types like the use of force, arrests, and surveillance (McPhail & McCarthy, 2005, p. 156; Davenport, 2005, p. xv). Soft forms of repression include less tangible methods like stigma, slurs, or barring access to media (Ferree, 2005, pp. 138–147). Intense policing can shorten a protest cycle by dispersing crowds and penalizing leaders but can also strengthen networks, creating more organized and radical opposition. Activism may be redirected into formal political or underground forms (Zwerman & Steinhoff, 2005, pp. 230–233). Ritual arrests of protestors can sometimes contain unrest in democracies (McPhail & McCarthy, 2005, p. 168).

Grievances and repression, however, do not determine collective action. Accornero (2017) points out that without certain other factors, they will not become social movements. Collective identities arising from strategic framing and support from actors and institutions alongside political opportunities and institutional access can determine success.

The media's role significantly influences the interplay between protest and repression. Both authorities and protesters react to the activities of protests and their representation in the media (Koopmans, 2005, p. 270). Coverage of protests by news media tends to exaggerate instances of violence while largely overlooking nonviolent collective actions (McPhail & McCarthy, 2005, p. 122). Despite the prevalence of police violence, research on protests often depends on news media sources. Reporting in newspapers frequently introduces selection bias. In authoritarian regimes, censorship may restrict media access to information regarding both police violence and protest activities (Ball, 2005, pp. 192–318; Davenport, 2005, p. 116; Koopmans, 2005, p. 274). Therefore, it is essential to complement newspaper data with human rights reports and additional sources of information (Ball, 2005, p. 190).

Social media has become an unavoidable source of organizing and communicating during global protests (Tremayne, 2014). In the civil unrest in Moldova (2009) and the Iranian election protests (2009-2010) to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions (2010-2011) and the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement (2011), digital platforms have been influential in many protests (Tremayne, 2014). This common correlation has made twitter revolutions a common term (Tremayne, 2014).

Twitter, specifically, enables users to share brief statements (tweets) with such conventions as the hashtag (#) that enable connecting ideas, and the symbol (at) that signifies a mention to a particular user (Tremayne, 2014). These attributes provide virtual channels through which information is disseminated and bridges relationships (Tremayne, 2014). The proliferation of the internet has led to the development of social media as an effective tool of mobilization, and young people often use these channels to acquire knowledge and air their opinions on matters concerning the nation (Ogungbade et al., 2024; Rainie, 2012, as cited in Ogungbade et al., 2024).

A case in point is the 2020 Nigeria protest movement, EndSARS, which tried to disband the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) because of human rights abuses (Ogungbade et al., 2024). The movement spread extensively on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, whereas young people posted graphic pictures and videos of the alleged SARS atrocities (Ogungbade et al., 2024). In a study, Twitter was the most used platform (90.9) among other social media platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, Blogs, and Snapchat, in mobilizing the Nigerian youths (Ogungbade et al., 2024). According to Ogunbade et al (2024) Tweets were used to:

- Share locations for protest gatherings (56.3% of respondents strongly agreed)

- Inform foreign organizations about events in Nigeria (37.7% strongly agreed)

- Disseminate information on SARS's actions and encourage participation (48.0% strongly agreed) .

- Share e-flyers and videos documenting SARS atrocities (49.3% strongly agreed).

- Reach out to local and international celebrities for support (47.4% strongly agreed)

While the utility of Twitter is clear, there has been considerable debate regarding its causal role in social movements. Critics argue that, despite the ease of sending electronic messages, effective street protests require committed individuals, strong relationships, and structured organizations. In contrast, Twitter often fosters weak connections and decentralized groups (Tremayne, 2014; Segerberg and Bennett, 2011, as cited in Tremayne, 2014). Nonetheless, social movements can derive significant benefits offline from online networking (Tremayne, 2014; Biddix and Park, 2008, as cited in Tremayne, 2014). The speed, reliability, scale, and affordability of digital networks facilitate the extensive outreach of contemporary activism (Joyce, 2010).

A shift between online interactions and mass real-life protests, which is also referred to as scale shift, is a decisive part of digital protests (Tremayne, 2014; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, 2001, as cited in Tremayne, 2014). The process is associated with several mechanisms: diffusion, brokerage, similarity attribution, and emulation (Tremayne, 2014). Initially used on real-life movements, these mechanisms can now be seen in online social networks when a movement is forming in the early stage (Tremayne, 2014).

The OWS movement gives a precise example of this process. The first OWS call was an August 2011 blog post by Adbusters and a corresponding Twitter message with the hashtag #OccupyWallStreet, and it led to the start of a low-level discussion, which would later burst into thousands of messages, signifying a shift in the scale of the conversation to online (Tremayne, 2014). Such activity online ultimately resulted in a physical attendance at Wall Street (Tremayne, 2014). Abrogation was essential to OWS: critical moments of brokerage, i.e. the process where a small action turns into a massive movement through diffusion along existing trajectories and the leap into a new sphere (Tremayne, 2014).

- Key Brokerage Incident One Key occurred on July 20, 2011, when a participant (@AmpedStatus) connected OccupyWallStreet to US Day of Rage (#USDOR), which doubled the number of OWS tweets and attracted an existing base of activists (Tremayne, 2014).
- Key Brokerage Incident Two occurred on July 23, 2011, in which one tweet associated the popular hashtag, FuckYouWashington, with OccupyWallStreet. This greatly expanded the awareness and led to an immediate increase in OWS tweets and the transmission of the message abroad (Tremayne, 2014).

Similarity attribution was a factor since the OWS messages perceived similarities to the previous anti-authoritarian movements such as the ones in Egypt (Tahrir) and in Arab countries (ArabSpring) (Tremayne, 2014). There was also emulation, with OWS borrowing the occupation strategy of the #Tahrir and #15M movement in Spain and borrowing the use of protest dates as hashtags, including: #Sept17 and #Sep17 (Tremayne, 2014).

On the same note, the internet movement, #EndSARS, transformed into street protests by actively using social media, particularly Twitter, to determine and publicize strategic places to hold demonstrations, resulting in thousands responding to a call to protest (Ogungbade et al., 2024). This simply illustrates how successful online mobilization under the influence of clear calls to action and location sharing can be successfully translated into substantial offline collective action (Ogungbade et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, social movements cannot achieve success without a robust collective identity, which emerges when movement participants share common beliefs and view themselves as part of the same group (Tremayne, 2014; Della Porta and Diani, 1999, as referenced in Tremayne, 2014; Melucci, 1996, as referenced in Tremayne, 2014). This concept is closely linked to frame alignment, which encompasses frame bridging, frame extension, and frame amplification, as it facilitates the unification of a movement across distinct groups (Tremayne, 2014; Snow, Worden, Rochford, and Benford, 1986, as referenced in Tremayne, 2014). Populism, as a type of political discourse, often shapes grassroots movements by employing rhetorical appeals that differentiate society into most so-called 'pure' individuals and a corrupt elite, thus necessitating the restoration of popular sovereignty (Aslanidis, 2017). Populist movements are characterized by their aim to

embody a social entirety and advocate for comprehensive change, rather than merely seeking limited policy adjustments, and they coalesce around a shared sense of injustice (Aslanidis, 2017).

Framing is successful in the OWS movement as it has emerged as the leading protest. Although other organizations such as Operation Empire State Rebellion (OpESR) and US Day of Rage (USDOR) shared the same objective, OWS triumphed due to:

- **Frame bridging and extension:** Its broad message allowed it to connect with the aims of OpESR (targeting the Federal Reserve) and USDOR (campaign financing reform), extending the target to "Wall Street" without alienating participants (Tremayne, 2014).
- **Clear articulation:** OWS articulated the anger expressed by #FuckYouWashington, linking political failures to the economic crisis (Tremayne, 2014).
- **Nonviolent framing:** The term "occupation" fit within a nonviolent tradition, distinguishing it from the more aggressive framing of "rage" or "rebellion" (Tremayne, 2014).
- **Specific call to action:** A clear call for action with a specific time and place (September 17, Wall Street) was crucial (Tremayne, 2014).

Similar dynamics can be observed in various transnational movements. The protests of the Arab Spring throughout the Middle East and North Africa garnered extensive support due to their inclusive demands and a unifying identity that transcended ideological boundaries (Abulof, 2015, as cited in Aslanidis, 2017; Gunning and Baron, 2014, as cited in Aslanidis, 2017). The populist framework and methods of protest subsequently spread to Europe, impacting the indignados movements to articulate a range of grievances (Aslanidis, 2017). In a similar vein, the #EndSARS

protest in Nigeria united Nigerians, predominantly the youth, around a common cause. This movement highlighted the effectiveness of social media in facilitating sustained collective action driven by a shared grievance (Ogungbade et al., 2024). Both online-driven movements are marked by open and inclusive narratives that appeal to new participants and are adaptable to emerging opportunities (Kavada, 2010, in Joyce, 2010; Bennett and Toft, 2008, as cited in Kavada, 2010, in Joyce, 2010).

Digital activism is becoming pervasive among youth, and social media is deployed to "act on national issues and organize collective responses" (Ogungbade et al., 2024). The internet's prevalence has made accessing information and platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram potent tools for digital protest action (Ogungbade et al., 2024). However, successful mobilization still requires more than access or connectivity, relying on committed citizens and infrastructures (Tremayne, 2014; Gladwell, 2010, as cited in Tremayne, 2014; Morozov, 2011, as cited in Tremayne, 2014). Nonetheless, digital technologies have reconfigured the landscape of mass communication by connecting people to shared ideas (Tremayne, 2014). This demonstrates how social media can empower the younger generations to make a tremendous social and political change by empowering them to:

- Share locations for protests [Ogungbade et al., 2024].
- Disseminate critical information and encourage participation [Ogungbade et al., 2024].
- Engage with broader audiences, including foreign organizations and celebrities [Ogungbade et al., 2024].

Youth-led digital activism is not specific to Nigeria and can be seen as the extension of the wider pattern where young activists utilize digital media to break the traditional barriers to political

engagement and force their way into the politics of the country (Ogungbade et al., 2024; Zuckerman, 2011, as cited in Tremayne, 2014). However, the digital divide that involves inequality in accessing information and skills and governmental censorship may still restrict participation, particularly in favor of the economically elite or more open societies (Brodock, 2010, in Joyce, 2010).

The emergence of digital activism has elicited diverse and even complex responses on the part of governments, especially in terms of managing, controlling, or suppressing dissent (Glaisyer, 2010, in Joyce, 2010; Earl, 2016, in Bosi, Giugni, and Uba, 2016). Digital technologies have the potential to be in the hands of citizens, yet they offer prospects of command, control, and curbing authority (Tremayne, 2014). There are repressive governments, such as monitoring of political speech online, blocking online applications, and offline persecution and imprisonment of activists (Columbus, 2010, in Joyce, 2010; Glaisyer, 2010, in Joyce, 2010).

Examples of state repression in the digital age include:

- **Iran (2009):** The government blocked websites, cut off cell phone service and text messaging during demonstrations, and reportedly used the same computer technology as demonstrators to map their networks and tap data on social media accounts (Tremayne, 2014; Morozov, 2009, as cited in Tremayne, 2014; Palfrey, Etling, and Faris, 2009, as cited in Tremayne, 2014; Glaisyer, 2010, in They also used Red Vests or FIFty Cent Party counter-activists to exaggerate the official accounts and to report serious users (Glaisyer, 2010, in Joyce, 2010).

- **Myanmar/Burma (2007):** The government blocked all communications including cell phone services days after anti-government demonstrations, yet protesters used cell phones to send photos and video to foreign media (Scholz, 2010, in Joyce, 2010).
- **Egypt (2008):** The authorities monitored mobile phones and USB wireless modems, censored text messages, and censored internet cafe registration, resulting in the arrest of Facebook group organizers (Glaisyer, 2010, in Joyce, 2010; Scholz, 2010, in Joyce, 2010).

The government also responded to the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. Among the measures taken by the government was the dissolution of SARS as an operational body and the establishment of a new police force whose role was to keep insecurity at bay (Ogungbade et al., 2024). Furthermore, they attempted to pay amends to the victims and the families of the protest (Ogungbade et al., 2024). The study shows disagreement regarding the state releasing all arrested protesters and compensating victims and their families which suggests state inefficiency (Ogungbade et al., 2024). This demonstrates the complex interaction between activist pressure and governmental reaction which may produce both reconciliation and enhanced suppression efforts. Furthermore, while digital spaces have opened new channels for protest and activism, they are also key spaces for repression. Owen (2017) has shown the process of securitization has led to the institutional normalization of surveillance practices. Beissinger (2017) finds that movements originating mostly within virtual civil society but lacking strong offline organizational structures face volatility and typically fail to produce lasting political change. More recent contributions also document forms of digital repression. Harper et al. (2025) provide analysis of the forms of cyber targeting and human rights risks, Horgan et al. (2024) detect forms of 'influence policing' and practices of communication management by algorithmically created actors, while Gouliev & Dunne (2024) illustrate how misinformation on alternative platforms can be used to shape public narratives.

A Review of EndSARS Protest in Nigeria

Many books and academic articles cover protest movements against repression while focusing on police brutality including the prominent #EndSARS movement in Nigeria. The #EndSARS protest first trended in October 2020 showing the power of digital tools for mobilization, coordination, documentation and global amplification to take on police brutality. This was particularly the case against the Nigeria Police Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The government reaction to the #EndSARS protests exhibited perfect characteristics of digital authoritarianism and state repression. Eze (2021) documents security forces using violent suppression methods, such as the military shooting peaceful protestors at the Lekki Toll Gate on October 20, 2020, according to Amnesty International (2020). However, the repression went beyond the physical, with digital tactics coming to bear. Axios (2021) reported that after the Nigerian government banned Twitter for deleting President Buhari's tweet, the government went ahead to ban the microblogging platform in June 2021. Tayo and Adebayo (2023) use this to exemplify fragile digital freedom in nascent democracies.

The SARS unit had engendered years of built-up anger. Ojebuyi and Salawu (2022) detail how it came to symbolize unchecked power, profiling, arresting, torturing, and extrajudicially killing young Nigerians. Despite years of human rights reports, there was no redress and attempt at reform. Eromosele and Uchenna (2022) narrate how police engagement during the protest further emboldened the brutality, with dozens killed, and hundreds arrested without charges. This deepened mistrust and propelled the call for mobilization.

The #EndSARS protests also showcased the power of digital activism in mobilization, fundraising, and subverting state narratives. Uwalaka and Nwala (2023) term this "digital resistance," where youth used memes, threads, art, and viral videos to subvert and retake the protest narrative.

Shokoya (2025) notes its efficacy in contesting the government-controlled media. It also managed to create international solidarity; hashtags such as #EndSARS and #LekkiMassacre captured celebrities, human rights groups, and foreign media attention (Obia, 2020). Despite limited structural change, this global attention impacted Nigeria's repression.

There was an interesting dimension of the digital domain becoming a battlefield between state and non-state actors. Dubawa (2020) reports how there was the spread of misinformation, with coordinated campaigns seeking to discredit the protesters. The state froze activists' bank accounts and cracked down on fintech platforms, such as Flutterwave, that powered donations to the protests (Odetola & Ogunyemi, 2021). Through their innovative tactics as described by Alhassan, Bello, and Inuwa-Dutse (2023), protesters adapted to government repression by utilizing VPNs and decentralized networks to sidestep restrictions while shifting to new communication platforms.

The #EndSARS movement became a landmark moment in African digital activism, challenging state repression and redefining civic engagement. The protests are a case of how youth-led resistance movements, systemic abuse, and state repression combined to create a generational shift in attitudes towards governance. Although repression also curtailed the reforms, the protests started essential debates on governance, police accountability, and digital rights in Nigeria and the rest of the world.

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods framework to examine the #EndSARS movement by utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. This design facilitated a comprehensive understanding of personal experiences as well as broader trends in online protest, repression, and collective action.

The study design is qualitative, and the interpretivist paradigm undergirding it also permits one to understand the social world from the perspective of those under study. Qualitative methods are the best fit for uncovering subjective meanings and lived experiences of digital protest mobilization. In terms of the most suitable context, the study of the #EndSARS protest movement in Nigeria is arguably the most germane given my goals and background. The design enables the researcher to explore how social media was used by activists and citizens to mobilize, organize, and document state repression during the protests. The research team applied triangulated digital ethnography together with semi-structured interviews and content analysis which helps in explaining the complex dynamics of online protests.

This research is based on an inductive approach while also utilizing mixed methods to inform its analysis. The study employs induction because it intends to generate knowledge based on participant experiences and digital records from the #EndSARS movement as opposed to testing pre-existing theories (Bryman, 2016). The study starts from tweets and digital artifacts together with interview observations to generate conceptual explanations regarding social media's role in citizen mobilization and its function to document police brutality and monitor activists. Deductive elements exist within the study through its structured questionnaire which uses Likert-scale items based on established measurements and concepts from digital activism research. In this sense, an

iterative approach is built to balance inductive and deductive lines of inquiry while also enhancing the internal coherence of the understanding of digital activism in the Nigerian context. The research use questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to achieve its aims. This research employs the use of a questionnaire and interview to analyze the pivotal role of social media in the #EndSARS protests. These platforms facilitated the discovery of news on #EndSARS, #EndPoliceBrutality, and #LekkiMassacre, as well as appeals for collective action. The ethnographic fieldwork took place from October 1 to November 15, encompassing the duration of the protests and the subsequent events. (Shola 2021).

Interviews were conducted with at least ten participants of the #Endsars protest to investigate individual experience and participation in the movement.

Interviewees were asked about:

- Their motivations for joining the protests.

- How they used social media platforms to mobilize, share information, or express solidarity.

- Their experiences of state repression, both online (e.g., account freezes, disinformation) and offline (e.g., intimidation, arrests, or police violence).

- Their reflections on how digital activism shaped the trajectory and outcomes of the #EndSARS protests.

These participants were selected through purposive sampling for their engagement with the protests. The interviews will concentrate on digital organizing, internet surveillance, misinformation, and international collaboration. Each interview will be conducted via Zoom or an encrypted chat platform, with the recorded comments subsequently transcribed and anonymized, subject to participant consent.

A further component of the data will derive from a 20-item questionnaire administered to a cohort of individuals who participated online in the protests.

The survey included both closed-ended and open-ended questions, focusing on:

- The platforms most frequently used during the protests.

- Types of digital strategies employed (e.g., hashtags, crowdfunding, live-streaming).

- Perceived effectiveness of social media in mobilization and international visibility.

- Experiences of online surveillance or censorship.

Participants are evaluated based on their engagement with social media for mobilization, their reactions to digital limitations, and their views on the media portrayal of extensive protests. Responses were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). This approach facilitates the assessment and comparison of a wide variety of information.

The research also examined secondary data, which included media articles, publications from NGOs, reports from Amnesty International, and digital archives related to protests (such as hashtags, tweets, and viral videos). These materials provided further evidence regarding the progression of events and served as a method for cross validating the accounts provided by participants.

Together, these three sources of data—interviews, questionnaires, and documentary analysis—create a robust foundation for examining the interplay of digital mobilization and state repression during the #EndSARS protests.

Each data source will be subjected to a distinct analysis approach, ensuring that no two are analyzed identically.

The analysis of interview data will be conducted using thematic analysis, a suggested method for identifying trends and themes in qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study utilizes NVivo or Atlas.ti to facilitate the coding and organization of themes. The selected method is inductive coding to identify emerging themes from the data. The anticipated themes in social media include hashtag movements, digital censorship, global collaboration, visual expressions of resistance, and the experience of vulnerability and terror.

The questionnaire results will be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean scores, standard deviations, and frequency distributions will characterize participants' responses to Likert items. These figures offer a deeper understanding of patterns in conjunction with other qualitative themes. The methods of analysis offer a comprehensive and significant perspective on the role of digital media in the #EndSARS protests, integrating both rational and emotional dimensions.

The theme of this research is based on ethical integrity. Participants were fully informed on interviews as part of this study, in the voluntary participation and with the option of withdrawing from the study at the participant's will, and how their data will be used. Participants' identities were anonymized by the researcher, and all data were stored securely to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. Since #EndSARS protests are politically sensitive, we will analyze online content cautiously to avoid endangering activists. Social media content will be publicly available only: private posts, DMs, and locked accounts will not be used.

From Tweets to the Streets.

Analysis of Questionnaire

The table below features the descriptive statistics of the survey respondents who captured perceptions about the #EndSARS movement. Survey results indicated moderate interest among respondents towards political or social issues in Nigeria (Mean = 3.15) and online protest participation (Mean = 3.05), yet fewer respondents viewed politics as their main motivation (Mean = 2.51).

Survey participants strongly endorsed the role of social media in facilitating mobilization and awareness efforts (M = 4.6066, SD = 0.73663). Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook had effectively disseminated information across various regions in a short period, with little disagreement from respondents. The low standard deviations indicate a near consensus that social media had united nationwide protests. Hashtags and viral trends have been useful for organizing activities (M = 4.4262, SD = 0.90294). The inclusion of influencers (M = 4.3115) and campaigns (M = 4.3934) also assisted in mobilizing participants, highlighting the instrumental role of both key individuals and organized drives.

Respondents showed the greatest variation in their responses to "Social media supplements older protest organizations" (M = 3.9344, SD = 1.06253), acknowledging the ongoing importance of physical grassroots and offline mobilization efforts. This speaks to the emergence of hybrid protest movements, where protest activities have both digital and analog strategies.

Government surveillance and censorship were another common theme. The perception that authorities were monitoring or censoring social media content had a score of M = 3.8197 (SD =

1.05685). Respondents expressed a wide range of opinions about online threats to activists, as indicated by the highest standard deviation score of 1.25341, corresponding to a mean value of 3.7213. Disinformation was also raised: Survey respondents reported a mean score of 3.5738 regarding their exposure to fake news and 3.7541 about the impact of disinformation on movement trust which supports earlier research about disinformation's role in undermining both credibility and mobilization efforts (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Tufekci, 2017).

Respondents agreed that tactics shifted as a response to online risks, M = 3.6885 for "Alter the digital strategy in the face of online monitoring". The online risk awareness was mirrored by anxiety M = 3.2951 for "Online monitoring created anxiety for me as an individual". Respondents, on average, presented themselves as digitally active, risk-aware, and flexible in the face of increasing restrictions.

Global presence was one of the positive outcomes. The online presentation made #EndSARS more well-known worldwide, receiving a high mean of 4.2787 (SD = 0.91526). The evidence suggests that the movement's online presence has successfully garnered international attention and support from NGOs, celebrities, and both global and diaspora communities. High also means that the critical importance of digital content types in the #EndSARS movement was supported.

The mean score for virtual videos and testimonies to make police brutality relatable was 4.2131, and social media emerged as the primary platform for understanding police brutality, with a mean score of 4.1311. The low standard deviation in responses shows that people agreed that narrative content effectively increased empathy. Online storytelling humanized victims, M = 4.0164, and online framing increased support for protesters, M = 4.0984. Threads, photos, hashtags, and testimonials were employed to help shape the conversation, draw public appeal, and pressure

stakeholders. The quantitative findings validate that social media functioned as both a mobilization

tool and a storytelling platform for #EndSARS.

Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have a personal interest in political or social issues in Nigeria.	61	1.00	5.00	3.1475	1.09295
I actively followed or participated in the #EndSARS protests online.	61	1.00	5.00	3.0492	1.21691
My political interest influenced my engagement with the #EndSARS movement.	61	1.00	5.00	2.5082	1.20586
Social media platforms played a key role in mobilizing people for the #EndSARS protests.	61	1.00	5.00	4.3279	1.01195
Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook helped spread awareness quickly across different regions	61	1.00	5.00	4.6066	.73663
Hashtags and viral trends were effective tools for organizing protest activities.	61	1.00	5.00	4.4262	.90294
Online influencers and celebrities helped amplify the movement's message.	61	1.00	5.00	4.3115	.88583
Social media campaigns significantly increased public interest and participation.	61	1.00	5.00	4.3934	.82217
Social media complemented rather than replaced traditional forms of protest organization.	61	1.00	5.00	3.9344	1.06253
I was concerned about government surveillance while engaging with #EndSARS content online.	61	1.00	5.00	3.2951	1.05427
I believe the government attempted to monitor or control social media content related to the protests.	61	1.00	5.00	3.8197	1.05685
I encountered fake news or misleading information during the #EndSARS protests.	61	1.00	5.00	3.5738	1.14687
Disinformation negatively affected public trust in the movement.	61	1.00	5.00	3.7541	1.04332
Activists and protesters were at risk of arrest or harassment due to their online activities	61	1.00	5.00	3.7213	1.25341
Protesters adapted their digital strategies in response to surveillance or censorship.	61	1.00	5.00	3.6885	.84737
Social media played a central role in shaping how people understood police brutality.	61	1.00	5.00	4.1311	.84608
Viral videos and personal testimonies made the issue of police abuse more relatable.	61	1.00	5.00	4.2131	.95070
The framing of the protests online led to increased support from the public.	61	1.00	5.00	4.0984	.96099
Digital storytelling helped humanize victims and expose systemic abuse.	61	1.00	5.00	4.0164	.97454
The international community became more aware of the #EndSARS movement because of how it was portrayed online	61	1.00	5.00	4.2787	.91526
Valid N (listwise)	61				

Analysis of Interviews

A total of 10 interviewees consisting of four regular protesters or participants of the project alongside two legal practitioners, two medical experts and two #EndSARS activists had their responses analyzed and presented in Table 5. Throughout the interviews participants discuss interlinked themes which together demonstrate the extensive and layered characteristics of the protest activities. As shown in Table 5, social media, hashtags, Twitter Spaces, and live updates were key mobilization tools for coordinating action and unifying disparate participants across the country. As one of the participants noted, hashtags, such as #EndSARS, were a "rallying cry" for unifying the collective group. This finding resonates with the way in which digital technologies enabled information dissemination as well as providing a participatory space for social movement participants to coordinate their activities and form collective identities.

Collective action and solidarity are another main theme, which was expressed in Nigeria and extended to the diaspora. The interviewees described the offline mass participation and volunteerism as well as the symbolic value of international support. Also, respondents highlighted the role of professionals, such as the provision of medical aid and legal assistance, as some of the crucial enablers of the civic resistance. The creation of legal hotlines and documentation of unlawful arrests by lawyers is an example of how legal professionals used their training to assist the protest.

Treatment of the wounded by medical experts, in hastily set up clinics, is another key example of how experts supported the movement. Findings also indicate that the exercise was not without risks, and several respondents reported online harassment, shadow banning, and suspicion of being tracked digitally. Disinformation campaigns which accused protesters of violence emerged as a significant risk, but some participants recommended following only verified accounts as a

countermeasure. The third key theme is how framing of police brutality with viral videos and personal accounts shaped public opinions and swayed wider participation. Some international organizations including Amnesty International participated by utilizing online evidence during their independent investigations and demonstrated the worldwide reach of these narratives. The interview themes demonstrate that the #EndSARS protests thrived through adaptability and unity while displaying diverse tactics against digital challenges and opportunities.

Table 2: Qualitative Analysis

Theme	Code	Excerpt
Personal Connection to Social Issues (Recurrent)	Lived Experience and Youth Identity	"From police harassment to unemployment, these things are very personal to me and to a lot of people in my generation." (Interview 1)
	Lived Political Reality	"Nigeria's political issues aren't abstract to me—they shape our daily lives... everything is political." (Interview 2)
Mobilization through social media (Dominant)	Twitter as Coordination Hub	"Twitter especially became a kind of central command... Hashtags like #EndSARS and #SoroSoke went viral." (Interview 1)
	Twitter as Protest Heartbeat	"Twitter was the heartbeat of the protests... real-time coordination, amplified voices..." (Interview 2)
	Hashtags as Rallying Symbols	"#EndSARS wasn't just a slogan—it became a rallying point." (Interview 2)
	Digital Visuals and Trust	"Instagram was great for visuals... helped build momentum." (Interview 1); "Livestreams on Instagram and Twitter... building trust." (Interview 2)
	Celebrity Amplification	"When celebrities... like Rihanna and Beyoncé spoke up, it gave the movement more legitimacy." (Interview 1 & 2)

	Transparency and Public Confidence	"Feminist Coalition's transparency... daily updates-built trust." (Interview 2)
Digital Surveillance and Threats (Recurrent)	Targeted Harassment and Threats	"Some had their accounts flagged... friends being harassed, doxed..." (Interview 1); "Friends received threatening DMs... the fear was real." (Interview 2)
	Content Restrictions and Shadow banning	"Suspicious activity—getting locked out of my account..." (Interview 1); "Shadow banning of some posts." (Interview 2)
	Digital Counter-Strategies	"We started using VPNs... shared digital safety tips." (Interview 1); "Used Signal, blurred faces, avoided tagging real-time locations." (Interview 2)
	Misinformation Undermining Credibility	"Fake news... tried to paint protesters as violent..." (Interview 1); "False reports... created confusion." (Interview 2)
	Fact-Checking Initiatives	"We just tried to fact-check and share only verified info." (Interview 1); "Pages like @FakeNewsNG helped correct misleading stories quickly." (Interview 2)
Framing Police Brutality (Dominant)	Raw Documentation and Humanization	"People could see real videos—raw, emotional, and direct." (Interview 1); "These weren't just stats—they were people you could relate to." (Interview 2)
	Viral Stories as Mobilizing Agents	"Some stories were heartbreaking and went viral fast." (Interview 1); "One tweet... could go viral within minutes and spark a protest." (Interview 2)
	International Awareness and Solidarity	"Hashtags trended worldwide... international bodies made statements." (Interview 1); "The movement's digital presence was global... a human rights issue."

From Hashtags to Resistance

Mobilization and Coordination via Social Media

The findings present compelling evidence supporting the idea that social media functions as a space where conflicts occur. Survey results indicated strong participant agreement since Twitter, Instagram and Facebook received ratings above 4.2 on a five-point Likert scale for awareness promotion, information sharing and real-time mobilization. Hashtags and viral content were often cited as instrumental for rallying support. These findings align with Tufekci (2017) and Mutsvairo & Ragnedda (2019), who demonstrated how social media reduced the cost of mobilization and allowed for sustained decentralized coordination (Stewart & Schultze, 2019).

The interviews corroborated the survey results. Accounts given by the respondents positioned Twitter as the "heartbeat" of the movement, with hashtags like #EndSARS and #SoroSoke serving as rallying points for swift mobilization and global visibility. This resonates with Uwalaka and Watkins (2018), emphasizing the function of hashtags in collective identity construction. Respondents also described Twitter Spaces and Instagram Live as "digital town halls" for open deliberation, and real-time updates as informing on-ground safety decisions.

Images, live streams, and testimonies enabled empathy and trust-building, echoing Abdulrauf-Salau and Tanko's (2019) choreography of assembly, as digital communication facilitated psychological arousal for action. Doctors reported that injured protester videos sparked volunteer aid while attorneys asserted that videos of unlawful arrests required immediate legal responses. Acts of solidarity from celebrities such as Beyoncé and Rihanna, as reported by the respondents, amplified legitimacy, transnational support, and global media attention. In line with Dadas (2017) and Olorunnisola & Martin (2020), the results confirm that social media served as a foundation for mobilization, framing, and coordination in the #EndSARS protests.

Digital Surveillance and Disinformation

Social media functions as a crucial instrument for empowerment while simultaneously introducing new risks for its users. A significant issue raised by participants was the threat of surveillance and censorship. The survey responses from participants indicated a heightened concern regarding surveillance and censorship, with scores ranging from 3.3 to 3.8 on two pivotal statements related to government oversight of content and the actions of individuals during protests. As Branch & Mampilly (2015) contend, protests in Africa are increasingly taking place in urban environments influenced by 'new urbanism,' where elites remain detached from the grievances of the masses, and urban populations are subjected to control through state violence and the pacification efforts of NGOs. Lagos serves as a prime example of this militarized environment, where protests such as #EndSARS were labeled as security threats rather than recognized as valid demands for justice.

This trend was borne out qualitatively as well. Lawyers, in particular, voiced suspicions of digital tracking of phones and lines of communication. Activists and protesters disclosed digital manipulation practices while account flagging and shadow banning were identified as specific content moderation methods along with doxing. Medical experts and grassroots protesters noted how the latter had seeped into physical spaces, resulting in more pervasive experiences of fear. As before, however, instances of agency were also present. The use of VPNs and encrypted messaging tools alongside account rotation by activists and lawyers demonstrates the strategic flexibility of Lim's (2013) "digital tacticianship" which enables the oppressed to retain control through innovation (Obia, 2025).

The second prominent risk factor named by respondents was disinformation. Interviewees consistently reported facing false information about protests and protesters which portrayed violence or unlawful acts to damage the movement reputation. Bradshaw and Howard (2018)

observed computational propaganda as a tool that targets grassroots political activism. However, interviewees also spoke to counter-strategies, including fact-checking information, following and trusting certain accounts, or using NGO-supported verification pages. The idea of building trustworthiness and reliability through social processes during uncertain times aligns with the "social production of trust" framework proposed by Aubyn and Frimpong (2022).

Police Brutality

The third central theme covered both how police abuse is scrutinized and the dominant frame of state aggression. The quantitative data indicated that social media had an influence on the framing of the public's understanding of police abuse. Both social media impact on police brutality perceptions and digital storytelling as a humanizing force achieved scores over 4.0 which confirms Entman's (1993) framing theory about how information packaging sways public understanding and reactions.

The qualitative data corroborated this assertion as well. Respondents frequently referenced viral videos, candid testimonies, and emotionally charged narratives that "imbued the movement with its essence" and rendered the pertinent issues both immediate and personal. This finding aligns with Papacharissi's (2015) notion of affective publics, illustrating how emotions disseminated online can have political implications and foster awareness and unity (Abubakar et al., 2022; Sandig, 2015). Activists acknowledged the influence of narratives surrounding shootings in conjunction with accounts of harassment in motivating individuals toward active participation through their feelings of empathy and indignation. Consequently, storytelling emerged as both a communicative and an activist strategy.

Furthermore, interviews revealed that this framing also had a global dimension. Legal professionals and human rights advocates highlighted Amnesty International's utilization of social media evidence, while medical experts pointed to international media coverage that intensified the call for justice. Omeni (2022) posits that digital networks have the capacity to elevate local struggles into global movements.

Conclusion

As revealed in the current research, social media platforms severely transformed into an agent of mobilization and coordination of the #EndSARS protests. The quantitative data has shown that the general belief among the participants regarding the importance of such platforms as Twitter and Instagram as the core of the organization of the protest actions and the dissemination of awareness, as well as the boost of the movement. The #EndSARS and #SoroSoke hashtag became potent elements that not only gave voices unity, formulated demands, but also triggered online and on-ground actions. This role was once again emphasized through qualitative interviews, where Twitter was viewed as the central command and Instagram was seen as a platform for visual storytelling. Such platforms were highly significant for turning personal complains into mass movement. Millions of activists gained access to mass digital activism through real-time organization paired with emotion-centered solidarity.

The study has also revealed the double-edged character of power and vulnerability in digital space of protest. Social media gave activists an international platform but established a digital space filled with monitoring and harassment along with false information campaigns aimed at delegitimizing their protests. Research findings indicated that digital resilience was quite pronounced since protesters adopted protective measures like VPNs, Signal, and fact-checking services to safeguard their digital identities and maintain protest stories' authenticity. This shows the contested and messy character of digital activism in non-democratic or even semi-democratic settings.

The other important finding of the study is connected to the framing of police brutality issue and the impact of social media in shaping people's opinions on the matter. Relying on crude videos, viral testimonies and emotionally touching narrations, the web could humanize victims and show police violence not as a product of some bad apples but as the part of a larger drama of abuse. Such digital storytelling approach turned out to be effective to build a positive attitude towards the issue and invoke compassion in people and the international support. Global celebrities along with mass media have joined the debate which has boosted the movement while putting more pressure on authorities. The research demonstrated that social media served both as communication platforms and battlegrounds for narrative control and emotional mobilization to support democratic movements. Further Research and Recommendation

Although this research gives a reasonable conclusion, there is a need to consider the following areas in further studies, such as a study that is relevant in determining whether digital activism is sustainable and leads to institutional change and long-term offline action, or whether its visibility wanes after an initial burst of intensity. Moreover, there a necessity to conduct a comparisons study of #EndSARS protests with other societal movements in Africa or in different parts of the world so that research can get insight about the similarities and dissimilarities in the role of digital tools in the sphere of civic involvement in various political and technological environments. This can serve as a valuable resource for cross-cultural and policy-based approaches to digital activism. Similarly, conducting research on the impact of algorithmic behaviors and platform-related policies such as social reactions over a civil matter or a protest over a government policy such as the currently study is also recommended in other to understand the context of individual reaction through algorithms.

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