



Social media as a strategy for protest movements: A study of #EndSARS in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria gained global attention. The protests drawn thousands of youths to the streets in a wave of rolling fury that built into one of the largest demonstrations for years in the country. Unlike previous protests in the country, the 2020 year's protests played out across social networks in a buildup of videos, images, and stories on Twitter Facebook, and other platforms displaying pictures and footage from the streets. This study employed the Social Network Theory in identifying the influence of social media as a strategy for protest movements and for the diffusion of information about #EndSARS and the sustenance of this movement over a long period, despite forces that have tried to silence it. This study argued that the sustenance of protests such as #EndSARS over a long period was dependent on factors such as: (i) that some individuals were more resistant to being influenced than others; (ii) that some individuals tended to be more responsive than others; and (iii) that some individuals seemed to be more affected than others (and were therefore more likely to pass information on to others). The findings revealed that protesters used emotional dynamics, collective identities, symbolic artefacts, and mutual values to sustain protests if their demands were not met on time.

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Introduction

Social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook are prominent platforms where people of all ages share their life memories and other things that they consider important to them ranging from social, religious, and political discussions. It is therefore worth noting that in Nigeria, the most active users on Facebook as of September 2020 are young people (aged 13 – 44 years) and they constitute 86.2% of the total users, while the remaining 13.8% of the users (aged 45 above) are people who can be considered as old, according to Statista (2020). Twitter, on the other hand, has a user profile of 26% young active users (aged 18 – 35 years), and 13% of the people active on the platform are considered as old (aged 36 and above). The remaining 61% cannot be accounted for as they are either inactive users or their accounts have been deactivated (Noi Polls, 2019).

The above signifies that the most active users of these two prominent media platforms are youths. The above-identified social media platforms have been proven to be very potent platforms that have helped Nigerian youths in mobilising social movements and these are platforms where their voices seem to be heard more quickly with the use of hashtags (#) than via physical organisations to effect social and political changes. The invention of these social media platforms and many others has drastically changed the diffusion of information from one person to another in seconds. This seemingly quick passage of information has increased the rate of participation by the public in decision-making processes through online/virtual platforms.

The use of the prominent social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were instrumental during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria during which youths took to the streets to protest police brutally and bad governance. The 2020 protests unlike the subsequent ones played out across social media platforms where videos, images, and stories of police brutality and evidence of bad

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governance in Nigeria were displayed for the world to see with the use of associated hashtags (#) such as #EndSARS and #EndPoliceBrutality.

Studies in media studies argue that social media platforms have been able to influence the behaviour traits of protests among people and that these protests can cause social and political changes (Valenzuela et al. 2012; Bekmagambetov et al. 2018; Mourão and Brown, 2022). A study conducted by Sinpeng (2021) on social media hashtag (#) activism in Thailand by youths was focused on the displeasure of youths with the Thai government and their demand for working democracy. The study suggested that Twitter was the prominent and most effective medium in mobilizing the youths to demand a working democracy in Thailand. In another study, Sebeelo (2021) made a case for the use of hashtags in creating social media-based mobilization about the #ThisFlag (Zimbabwe) and the #RhodesMustFall (South Africa) movements. The study established that social media was a great way of sending a strong message to the government.

The above instances are indications that the purpose of social media is not just for disseminating and gathering information, building a communal relationship, and creating social identity; it can also be used to generate certain ideologies and motivate individuals for community movement (Margolis and Resnick, 2000). It should be noted that the rate of use of social media is directly proportional to 'social trust and political mobilization'. Social media support and host many socio-political movements and these movements enjoy the privilege of being visible to a larger audience.

This paper focuses on the relationship between social media and a social movement against bad governance in Nigeria, known as #EndSARS. The #EndSARS is a movement of Nigerian youth protesting against police intimidation, police brutality, and extra-judicial killings. Ultimately, this movement protests against bad governance in Nigeria.

The data for this study was collected mainly from Twitter and other online sources that the author found related to the purpose of this study. The streaming API (Application Programming Interface) of Twitter was used in the gathering of tweets that consisted of the hashtags #EndSARS, #End Police Brutality and Nigeria from the last quarter of 2017 until November 15, 2020. The selection of this period was necessary as this was the period that the #EndSARS protests lasted for from their inception. The author felt that this period would capture the social media agitations and debates on the disbandment of this notorious police unit with the use of the #EndSARS hashtag. The search identified close to 6 million tweets using the #EndSARS hashtag on Twitter by more than 75 000 users worldwide. The author then collected the profile descriptions and followers' connections of the 75 000 plus users. Over 3 000 had either been inactive for 30 days or had had their accounts deleted, deactivated, or set their accounts to private at the time that the author gathered the profile data. The Social Network Theory propounded by White and Houseman (2002) was used in identifying the influence of social media on the diffusion of information about the #EndSARS movement and the sustenance of this movement over a long period.

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

Brief history of SARS

SARS is the household name for the Special Anti-Robbery Squad. It is a unit that was created by and out of the Nigerian Police Force in 1992 to fight against armed robberies and other serious crimes around the country. The unit can be likened to the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit in the United States of America or SO15 in the United Kingdom. The personnel of this unit undergo special training and are equipped with specialized weapons such as grenades, assault rifles, armoured tanks, and other military equipment to combat crime within the country. The SARS unit was only supposed to be deployed during serious crimes such as armed robberies and terrorism linked cases. Before the creation of this unit, cases of robbery and terrorism were the responsibility of the Nigerian police force. During its early years of operation, its operatives worked undercover in casual clothes. They went around in unmarked cars and did not carry weapons in public. Their responsibilities were to monitor wireless communications and expedite the arrests of armed robbers and other criminals and uncover terrorism to bring perpetrators to face justice.

However, following two decades of operation of the SARS unit, its operatives began being seen in public performing the job of the conventional police. They started conducting stop and search operations, to the extent that they stopped cars to verify cars and drivers' documents. The men of this unit then started extorting money from the motorists, passengers and other citizens. They started illegally arresting and detaining people who owned laptops and phones. Owning a laptop and/or a phone and dressing nicely was seen by them as being synonymous with online fraudulence. Anyone that they were unable to extort money from began being taken to an unknown destination and assaulted and tortured until they called someone to send them money to give to these SARS men. Those who did not have cash on hand were taken to an ATM to withdraw money, after being warned to cooperate unless they wanted a crime to be pinned on them. It is interesting to note that the target of this unit was and still remains young Nigerians. In the process, many Nigerians became intimidated and were not able to share their experiences because of their fear of being victimized further by these men of the SARS unit who had become visible everywhere on the streets.

These atrocities and many others at some point prompted youths to start sharing their experiences on social media using pseudonyms, as they felt that by using pseudonyms they could not be traced. This generated a social media uproar and sparked the first of the #EndSARS protests in 2017.

Analysing Protest Networks: A study of #EndSARS in Nigeria

The first wave of the #EndSARS protests

The #EndSARS movement started as a regionalized social movement with massive protests against the extrajudicial killings and brutality by the police in Nigeria. The hashtag stands for the disbandment of the *Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)*, a unit of the Nigerian police known since its creation for brutalising, abusing and killing innocent masses, especially youths, throughout the country. The protest that was started on Twitter in 2017 by Segun Awosanya, codenamed ‘Segalink’, used the #EndSARS hashtag to campaign and protest to force the Nigerian government to disband this notorious unit of the police force (Awosanya, 2017). The foremost atrocities of this unit were recorded towards the end of 2017 when an online newspaper had a section in its news articles titled “#EndSARS: Police mum as Nigerians recount atrocities of Special Anti-Robbery Squad” written by Sunday Ogundipe. Ogundipe (2017) recounted how the founder of the movement, Segun Awosanya lamented on the notorious and unruly behaviour of the men of the SARS unit of the Nigerian police:

The federal SARS has become overpopulated by people who have no regard for human life or dignity of citizens. Their grievous activities have gone on for too long and we can no longer hope that the police leadership can effect any change (Awosanya, 2017 as cited in Ogundipe, 2017).

The above extract indicated that the SARS unit of the Nigerian police force was beyond redemption, and it seemed that the Nigerian government itself was unable to regulate the behaviour of the personnel in the unit. This was worrisome in a democratic country such as Nigeria, where dignity and fundamental human rights were entrenched in its constitution.

This generated a mixed reaction from Nigerians who at that time were not happy with the unruly behaviour of the personnel of this unit. The tweets below indicate some of the experiences shared by some Twitter users:

In Nigeria, its now a crime to use good fragrances and dress well. It is punishable by forced ATM withdrawals or getting killed by SARS. #EndSARS now!!! If you can't tweet the hashtag, at least don't scroll past it without retweeting #EndSARS (Akintola, 2017).

A lot of boys turn up at CcHUB with tales of how they were harassed for carrying a laptop. Some of the police officers simply classify anyone with a laptop as a Yahoo boy (Tijani, 2017).

The new Lagos Commissioner of Police is also a family friend. I will escalate all our aggregated complaints to him (Asemota, 2017).

The first tweet above by a Twitter user with the name ‘BITCOIN//@Gamesole_NG @LanaAkintola’ (Akintola, 2017) expressed great shock at how the men of the SARS unit of the Nigerian police associated crime with dressing well and smelling good (using a good fragrance). The tweet was accompanied by the #EndSARS hashtag twice. The repetition of the hashtag seemed to emphasise the urgency to disband the SARS unit. Under a democratic system of government, crime suspects are investigated and if the investigation reveals that the suspect is indeed a criminal, the individual is charged and must appear in court to face the might of the law. However, in Nigeria, alleged suspects were not charged for the offences alleged by the SARS operatives. Instead, they were made to pay huge sums of money to clear themselves of their alleged and unproven crimes. In an attempt to be free, some suspects agreed to pay the extortion fees and when they did not have cash on them SARS personnel accompanied them to an ATM to withdraw the money. The above summarized one of the many atrocities that were perpetrated by this notorious unit.

The second tweet was by a Twitter user by the name of Bosun Tijani (@bosuntijani). He recounted the experiences of some youths working in his company called Co-Creation Hub, codenamed Cc-HUB (a technology-oriented centre situated in Yaba, Lagos State, Nigeria) (Tijani, 2017). They were victims of harassment by the men of SARS because they owned laptops. It was very disturbing to think that at this age, some people associated owning a laptop with a crime. The “Yahoo boy” in the tweet was a codename for an ‘online fraudster’ in Nigeria.

The last tweet was that of a Twitter user by the name of Osaretin Victor Asemota @asemota who was responding to the second tweet above about the infamous acts of the men of the SARS unit (Asemota, 2017). His tweet was a sort of assurance that he would elevate the complaints of the Nigerian youths to a family friend who happened to be the Commissioner of Police in Lagos State, Nigeria at that time. This summarised the height of rot in the SARS unit, and indicated that one had to know people in authority (the Commissioner of Police, in this case) in order to draw attention to the matter so that they would give instructions to force the SARS men to follow the law. What an irony! Those who were meant to uphold law and order had themselves become the breakers of the law. This was disheartening.

The convener of the protest during that period, Segun Awosanya with the Twitter name SEGA L'éveilleur® @segalink enjoined the citizens of Nigeria through social media to share their experiences in the form of pictures and videos, so that the world community and the Nigerian government could see the acts for themselves before labelling the protest as false. He tweeted as follows:

Keep sharing your experience with SARS and @PoliceNG. Their impunity ends now! #EndSARS #ScrapSARS #EndBadSARS #ReformPoliceNG (Awosanya, 2017a).

On the same day, Awosanya tweeted the following to sustain the protests and to implore Nigerians not to be afraid to share their experiences with the men of the notorious SARS unit:

A people United will never fall. Let's do this together. The #EndSARS #ScrapSARS #ReformPoliceNG is an affirmative action by and for all well-meaning Nigerians. Thanks for all your support. We are closer than ever. Victory is certain! (Awosana, 2017b).

Afterwards many citizens, the vast majority of whom were youths, started to narrate their ugly experiences with the men of the SARS unit with the #EndSARS hashtag. The following tweets captured the experiences of some of the Nigerian citizens with the men of this unit and they were aired by BBC online news:

A SARS officer once wanted to rape me under gunpoint. How I escaped that day is still a mystery to me. I support #EndSARS (Eze, 2017).

I was stopped at Iwo Road by SARS; my bags and phones were searched and found nothing. Took all the chocolate I bought for my sis (Mioraye, 2017).

The SARS here in Port Harcourt go about with cutlasses and axes, red ribbons and bandanas around their arm or head. Sick something (BBC, 2017).

Following this an online petition was created for citizens to sign, petitioning for the disbandment of the SARS unit. After evidential pictures and videos began surfacing online about the disorderly conduct of the men of the SARS unit, Amnesty International (n.d) accused the unit of illegally detaining and torturing Nigerian youths into confessing to crimes that they had not committed. At that juncture the Nigerian Inspector-General of Police reacted to the various allegations raised against SARS and promised to set up an investigation to address the situation. He also promised that the men of the SARS unit would turn a new leaf and would undergo corrective training (Toromade, 2018). The protests were halted at that point.

This marked the end of the first wave of the #EndSARS protests against police brutality and intimidation by the Nigerian youths. It was interesting to note that social media was instrumental in the intervention of the Nigerian government at this point, as it provided a platform for the the complaints of the masses about the unruly conduct of the men of the SARS unit. The pertinent information regarding the unit's conduct was shared by the citizens who had ugly first-hand experiences with the SARS personnel, and this was information that many mainstream media outlets may not have been able to share as it would probably have been censored.

The second wave of the #EndSARS protests

The second wave of the #EndSARS protests covered 2018 and 2019. This second wave was necessitated because of the continued harassment and intimidation of the citizen of Nigeria, months after the government had promised to reform the SARS unit. The government made empty promises to dissuade the protesters as the protests had already gained the attention of the international community. Nigerian citizens reported the following incidents between 2018 and 2019 about their latest horrible experiences with the men of the SARS, and one was covered by Al Jazeera News online.

A young female by the name of Philomena, aged 25, recounted her terrifying experience in 2018 when she was travelling home after her graduation ceremony with members of her family in Edo State, Nigeria. They were pulled over by men of the SARS unit, who threatened to shoot them, implied by the fact that they cocked their weapons. Her two brothers were forced out of the car and threatened with dire consequences unless they confessed to cybercrime. Philomena recounted:

My four-year-old niece was in the vehicle, but they cocked their guns at our car and drove my brothers into the bush where they harassed them for over 30 minutes and accused them of being cybercriminals. They could see my graduation gown but that did not deter them. My sister was trembling and crying in fear (Al Jazeera, 20 October 2020).

Another Twitter user by the name of *One day at a time, love you, @_kingnaya_* shared his terrible experience towards the end of 2019. He was a military officer who was travelling on public transport while dressed in civilian clothes. The caption of the tweet read, *"These people really consider themselves as mini gods #EndSARS"* (King, 2019). The bus that he was on was also pulled over by the men of the SARS unit and Figure 1 below captures his experience and that of the other passengers:

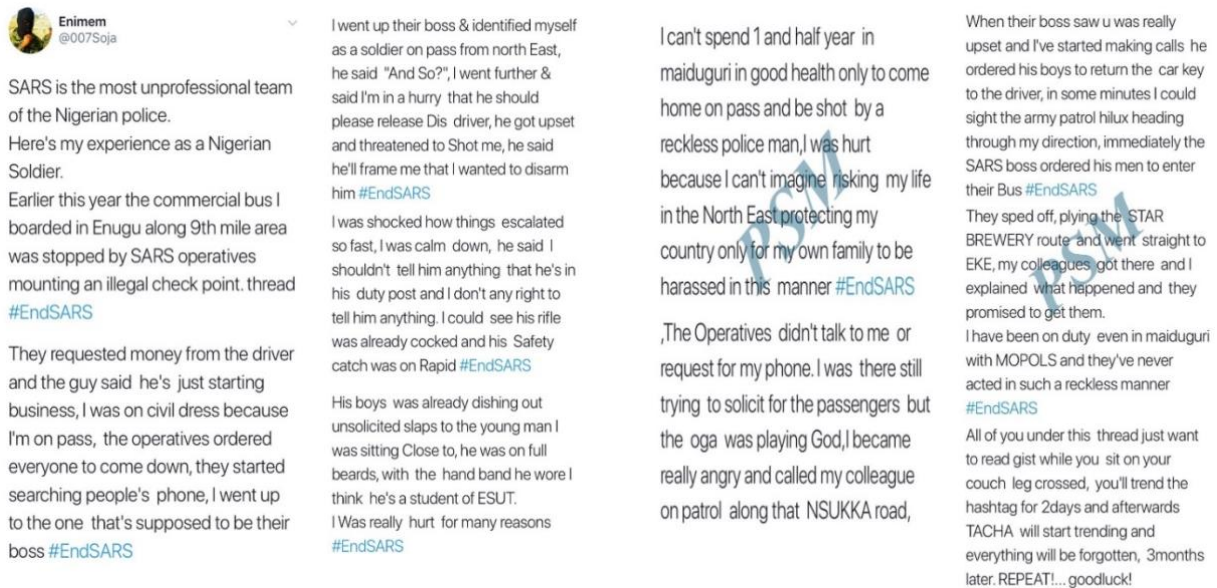


Figure 1: Account of bus incident; Source: King, 2019

Another Twitter user by the name of Princewill shared his awful experience while commenting on a video made by Speed Darlington, a US-based Nigerian rapper on the notorious men of the SARS, and a tweet by a Twitter user by the name of ObumForPresident, @iObumss. The experience of Princewill is captured below:

They [SARS men] threw me into their vehicle and it was the last time I could hear properly, even till now as I'm typing this. They kept raining slaps on me, asking me how much I had, they requested 300k or they shoot me... Please shoot me I said. Next thing was another hit. After 3 hours of driving around Abuja and constant hitting with guns and punches, they took me to a deserted [ATM] while it was already dark and asked for my ATM pin. Before I could speak I was hit more and more. They withdrew all I had in cash and left me. #EndSARS (Prince, 2019).

The above three shared experiences were a few of the many accounts of citizens of Nigeria about their ugly experiences with the men of the SARS unit that ignited the second wave of the #EndSARS protests in many cities across the country in 2018 and 2019. The SARS unit was indicted for ceaselessly abusing, intimidating and harassing countless harmless civilians since its creation in 1992. It was laudable to note that these protests were possible because of the social media platforms, most notably Twitter, where people were able to share their sad lived experiences with the men of SARS. The social media space seemed to be a safe haven for individuals to share their experiences, thoughts and opinions without the fear of being victimised further.

During the second wave of the #EndSARS protests of 2018/2019 the government of Nigeria, represented by the Vice President, Prof Yemi Osinbajo, was compelled to make a statement on the developments on 14 August 2018. The Nigerian Inspector-General of Police was ordered to shut the SARS unit down 'with immediate effect' and an investigation was to be carried out on their numerous atrocities (Yahya, 2018). It was therefore saddening that less than 24 hours following the announcement of the shutdown of the unit, some members of the unit were reported as having extorted a driver in the Surulere metropolis of Lagos state. A piece of video evidence by a Twitter user by the name of Vyräl Treñdz @TheVyrälTrendz accompanied this report where some SARS operatives were seen, while dressed in their uniforms, to be physically threatening a cab driver with guns in their hands. The report is captured below:

Barely 24 hours after the AG President Yemi Osinbajo gave directive to IGP on #EndSARS, SARS operatives are currently having their way and extorting in Surulere, Lagos (Treñdz, 2018).

On 18 August 2018, four days after the shutdown of the SARS unit, there was another report of an atrocity in another part of Nigeria, in Uyo, Akwa Ibom state. This time a lady was pulled over while driving on the evening of the same day. She said that she was harassed, but the nature of the harassment was not indicated. A Twitter user by the name of AlgoRidm @ridbay retweeted the screenshot below (which seemed to be a Facebook follow-on from Nora Udofia's tweet), with the caption:

Didn't Osinbajo order for overhaul of SARS a few days ago? Or SARS haven't gotten the memo yet? I hope this #ENDSARS thing doesn't end up like Ogoni clean up too (AlgoRidm, 2018).



Figure 2: Retweet by AlgoRidm @ridbay; *Source:* Udofia, 2018.

From August 2018 onwards there were several reports of atrocities committed by the men of SARS across Nigeria, despite the announcement of their shutdown. Towards the end of August 2018 there was a news editorial by The Guardian Nigerian newspaper using their verified Twitter handle with the caption: “*Osinbajo and SARS public relations tragedy*”. The news-editorial confirmed the Vice President’s announcement of the shutdown of the unit some weeks earlier and wondered why the unit was still operational, with various atrocities still evident around the country. The news-editorial lamented:

Between the time Osinbajo gave his order and last weekend, SARS operatives have carried on with its trademark recklessness and impunity. Only last week they were implicated in the killing of a student in Osun State (The Guardian Nigeria, 2018).

The news editorial concluded that nothing had changed, despite many promises by the Nigerian government to discontinue and reform the unit. The unit was seen by the Nigerian populace as the black sheep in the entire police family.

Some pertinent questions at this point were: (i) why was the Nigerian police unable to curtail the activities of one of its units, despite being given a direct order from the presidency? (ii) Was the announcement of the shutdown of the unit by the Vice President just media noise to suppress the voice of the masses against SARS’ harassment, intimidation, and brutality? (iii) What did the Nigerian government gain from seeing the citizens it had promised to serve and protect undergoing continuous police brutality, harassment, and intimidation? The above questions were begging for answers.

The atrocities committed by the men of SARS continued throughout 2018 and 2019 while people continued sharing their horrible experiences on social media platforms. The Nigerian government, instead of acting on the various complaints from the masses, suggested restructuring the unit. The Nigerian government’s definition of restructuring was merely to change the name of the unit from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) to the Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad (FSARS). The atrocities of this unit with its new name continued unabated into 2020, and this led to the third and fourth waves of the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria and the diaspora.

The third wave of the #EndSARS protests

This protest wave was sparked some days prior to Nigeria’s 60th Independence Day celebration in 2020. The Nigerian masses felt that there was nothing to celebrate in a country witnessing political unrest, terrorism and the extrajudicial killings of citizens 60 years after gaining independence. They felt that instead of an Independence Day celebration, worldwide protests had to be staged to demand better governance and to end police brutality in the country. The protests were set to continue until the Nigerian government yielded to the requests of its citizens. The venues and times of the protests were communicated across the social media platforms and Nigerians in the diaspora made their intentions to participate in the planned protests known on the same platforms. The protests commenced in Nigeria and the diaspora early on the morning of October 1, 2020, the day of the independence celebration. Nigerians were seen out marching in their thousands, holding placards with various hashtags such as #EndSars, #EndSarsNow, #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria, #EndPoliceBrutality, #ReformPoliceNG and so on. Below is a compilation of some of the placards:



Figure 3: #EndSARS protesters with different placards; *Source:* West, 2020; Lawal, 2020; Nsemgh, 2020; Bolashodun, 2020.

The protests venues, as mentioned earlier, were communicated on social media platforms and people attended these protests in their thousands both throughout and outside the country. Some of the converging points of the protests in Nigeria were the Nigerian National Assembly complex in Abuja, the Lekki tollgate in Lagos, and other strategic locations in the country. The protesters at some of the protest sites were seen to sleep there for days, waiting for the government to respond to their demands. Protesters conducted Friday and Sunday services for Muslim and Christian worshippers respectively at these venues. The figures below indicate protesters sleeping and camping at the Lagos State House of Assembly and at the Lekki tollgate:



Figure 4: #EndSARS protesters sleeping at the Lagos House of Assembly; *Source:* Ososanya, 2020.



Figure 5: #EndSARS protesters asleep at the Lekki tollgate; *Source:* Natty, 2020.



Figure 6: #EndSARS protesters camping at the Lekki tollgate; *Source:* Ajayi, 2020.

The Nigerian government, rather than address the numerous demands of the protesters, again announced a change of the unit's name, from the Federal Special Anti-Robbery Squad (FSARS) to the Special Weapon and Tactical Team (SWAT). This announcement was met with displeasure from the masses protesting on the streets as they saw the announcement as a media tactic to silence them and to make them leave the streets. The protests continued despite the announcement. The sleeping and camping also continued for two weeks following the October 1, 2020 Independence celebration. During the first two weeks, the #EndSARS hashtag gathered momentum on social media, and on Twitter especially, with the daily use of the hashtags in reporting the atrocities of the men of the FSARS, now SWAT. This caught the attention of the founder and CEO of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, who afterwards gave the #EndSARS hashtag a Nigerian flag, so that whenever a user typed/tweeted '#EndSARS', the Nigerian flag would appear right after it. A special Bitcoin account was also created by Jack Dorsey, Twitter's former CEO, to support the protests (Dorsey, 2020). (See Figure 7 below).

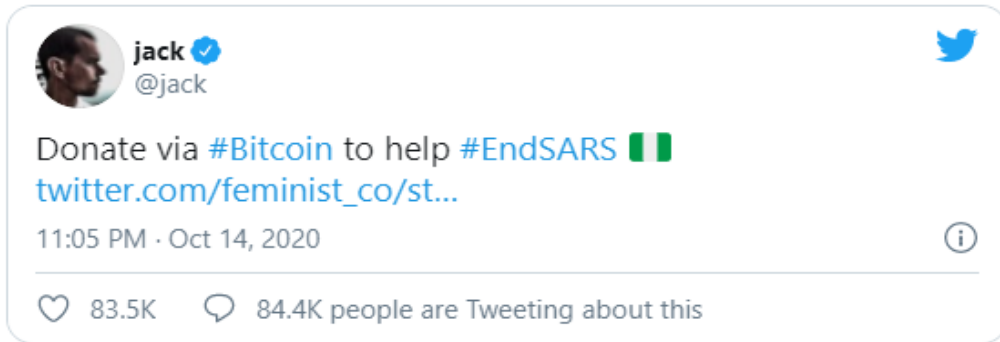


Figure 7: Twitter CEO endorses the #EndSARS protest; *Source:* Dorsey, 2020)

Immediately following the announcement of the unit's name change from SARS to SWAT, new hashtags emerged on the social media platforms such as #EndSWAT, #EndSWATNow, #EndPoverty, and so on (See Figure 8 below).



Figure 8: New protests hashtags; *Source:* Eco Information 2020; Anwana, 2020; Tero 2020.

On the evening of 20 October 2020, the Nigerian army launched an offensive against the protesters protesting peacefully at the Lekki tollgate. The attack started with the disabling of the CCTV cameras and cutting of the power at the tollgate. Thereafter the army shot at the protesters and tens of them were murdered in cold blood, while many others sustained various injuries. As if the shootings and killings were not enough, some of the bodies of the murdered protesters were taken away by the Nigerian army. The removal of the bodies seemed to be an effort to remove the evidence from the scene of the shootings. The tweets below corroborated the massacre and referred to a video recording during which the protesters were heard singing the Nigerian national anthem as they were being shot at.

Twitter Nigeria let's locate this man. He must tell us who sent him to remove those cameras. Whether it's Buhari, Tinubu or Sanwoolu??? We must know! Someone must be held responsible for this bloodshed! Retweet aggressively!!!! (Sòrò, 2020).

Happening now. Lekki massacre. Even in the midst of the shootings we are still singing the national anthem. #LekkiMassacre#EndPoliceBrutalityinNigeriaNOW #EndSARS #endbuharigovernment@UN (Superb, 2020).

Tony was my class mate, we spoke some months ago. So painful we lost a hero in The Lekki Massacre today. His last words were Peace and Unity. I weep for this country #LekkiMassacre #EndSARS #StopNigeriaGovernment (Lambo, 2020).

The first tweet above recounted how the CCTV cameras at the Lekki tollgate were removed and the tweet was accompanied by a picture of a young man dismantling the CCTV cameras. The tweet further called on Buhari (the Nigerian President), Tinubu (a Chieftain of the ruling party) and Sanwoolu (the Lagos State Governor) to specify who ordered the removal of the CCTV cameras before the shooting of the peaceful protesters. The removal of these cameras indicated that the shootings were planned and that the authorities did not want any evidence of the shootings. Many Nigerians reacted to this ugly incident and they believed that the

instruction to shoot the protesters was known by the three individuals mentioned above because the military was controlled by the federal government. The Lekki tollgate was also rumoured to be owned by one of the sons of Tinubu. Sanwoolu was connected to the shootings because whenever there was a need for the deployment of the military in a particular part of the country, the governor of that particular state requested their deployment from the federal government.

The second tweet recounted the experience of one of the protesters who was believed to be on the ground during the shootings. In the video that accompanied their tweet, the protesters could be heard singing the Nigerian national anthem while the shooting was heard in the background. The Nigerian military violated the fundamental human rights of the protesters by shooting at them, especially considering that they were singing the national anthem peacefully at the time. This was the height of the moral decadence of the Nigerian government and its military.

The third tweet above was a lament about one of the murdered victims in the Lekki tollgate shootings. A classmate of the victim (Tony) was believed to have been with him as he took his dying breath. A picture of this victim murdered at the tollgate accompanied this tweet. May his soul rest in peace!

Despite these shootings, the protests continued for days thereafter. It was saddening that all three individuals mentioned above, who would have known about the shootings, all denied knowledge of the incident. A rumour making the rounds at that time was that Bola Tinubu, a Chieftain of the ruling party, boarded a chartered plane to France to escape lynching by angry protesters who believed that he knew about the shootings. He was believed to be losing a great deal of money from the tollgate (rumoured to be owned by one of his sons) as it had been closed for over two weeks since the beginning of this wave of protests. The involvement of the Lagos state government in the shooting of the protesters was linked to news aired by many newspaper outlets a day before the shootings occurred. The following tweet by a Twitter user cited one of the news headlines, which read, “#EndSARS protest: Lagos loses N234 million to tollgates closure” (Nairametrics, 2020).

However, the Lagos state government denied all knowledge of the shootings, and Bola Tinubu also denied having boarded a chartered plane to France, despite abounding evidence of his flight and other details of his itinerary showing that he had indeed crossed the Nigerian border and flown to France (Joe, 2020).

The shootings further contributed to the protests in Lagos state and in other parts of the country. Protesters who had turned the protest grounds into their homes were regularly sent food parcels, toiletries and other basic day-to-day essentials by concerned citizens (otherwise referred to as promoters of the protests). These promoters regularly updated protesters through social media on which location could expect which supplies and when.

This marked the end of the third wave of the #EndSARS protests and the beginning of the fourth wave of the protests.

The fourth wave of the #EndSARS protests

The fourth wave of the #EndSARS protests was exacerbated by the freezing of the bank accounts of the 20 most prominent persons linked to the #EndSARS protests. Shockingly, the apex bank in Nigeria (Central Bank of Nigeria) reportedly received a court order to freeze the said accounts for 90 days, pending investigations linking them to the protests. This news was aired by several online media outlets such as New24 online news with the headline, “Nigeria's central bank freezes accounts of police brutality protesters” (Kitwood, 2020). Prominent among the 20 persons whose accounts were frozen was Ms Rachael Oduala Bolatito, a representative of the protesters on the judicial panel organised earlier to investigate the October 20 shootings. The panel was to be convened in Lagos on November 14, 2020 but it was boycotted by the protesters because of the action taken by the apex bank to freeze their accounts pending the outcome of this panel (Larnyoh, 2020). Another activist, whose name was not among the persons whose accounts were frozen, had her passport seized by the Nigerian immigration authority and she was prevented from travelling out of the country (Olatunji, 2020).

Until today, the protests are police brutality and bad governance in Nigeria have continued on social media space and the physical protests are still being met with resistance by the Nigerian police in different parts of the country.

Findings

The findings of this study indicated that analysing protest networks could be complex and dynamic. The sustenance of protests, such as #EndSARS, for an extended period depended on the following: that some individuals were more resistant to being influenced than others; that some individuals tended to be more responsive to threats than others; and that some individuals seemed to be more affected by threats and actions than others and were thus more likely to pass such information on to others. This study also revealed that during protests such as the #EndSARS protest, protesters used emotional dynamics, collective identities, symbolic artefacts, and mutual values to sustain and/or prolong their protests. Social media platforms such as Twitter played an important role in the diffusion of information for the #EndSARS protests.

The digital platforms made everyone a live reporter of events, even those events that mainstream media outlets would have censored or not aired at all.

Conclusions

The #EndSARS protests championed by Nigeria youths as portrayed by this study has contributed to the discourse of the use of social media to create awareness and strategise for protest movements which could influence the state policies and result in positive socio-political change. The Nigerian model of protests during the #EndSARS movement was able to cause peaceful online protests within Nigeria and throughout the world which was expected to put governments at all levels on their toes to offer quality leadership and put in place policies that would promote the welfare of their citizens. This study has demonstrated the role of social media in empowering ordinary citizens who could use the social media space to protest peacefully in order to demand for accountability from the government without the fear of victimisation. This study has also pointed out the attempt by some mainstream media outlets in censoring the atrocities of some government officials (police in this case) thereby in some ways encouraging them to continue to be irresponsible and lack accountability in the discharge of their duties. The mainstream media due to their coverage and people's dependence on them to get timely information should use their platforms to promote online protests of citizens for better governance. The mainstream media could serve as platform to voice out the masses dissatisfaction and this could reach more people including the government as well as its officials and for the fact that the mainstream media are the means through which the government set and promote their political agendas. It should also be noted that social media protests could occur with or without the presence of physical organised group activities. In other words, social media protests could result in movement stronger, more organized and more influential than actual physically formed movements. This study concludes that although a methodological improvement of the study on social media and the diffusion of information was put forward, a few limitations still abounded. The author did not perform content analyses of the tweets, so there was no insight into the kind of information that was being spread through the social media space. Future studies of this nature could combine content analysis with thematic analysis to investigate the influence of the types of information on the actions of people when staging online protests. This could better explain why different social media accounts had different audiences and a different influence on their followers or subscribers. This could then account for how followership could lead to the spread of information on these social media platforms.

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