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DISSERTATION PROJECT

ON

**HASHTAG ACTIVISTS – AN INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM: THE INVOLVEMENT OF NIGERIANS IN
DIASPORA IN THE RECENT #ENDSARS PROTESTS.**

BY

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ABSTRACT

The impact of social media in scaling social justice movements has taken different forms over the years. With the widespread #EndSARS protests that took place in Nigeria from 07/10/2020 till 20/10/2020, we are able to explore the role social media played in a Nigerian context. Through semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, we are able to explore how social media serves the proliferation of activism especially for Nigerians in the diaspora. It seeks to understand how social media can serve not just as an informational source but a participatory tool through platformization and online mobilization towards the cause. Findings from the interview indicate that social media is a key component of the protests as it aided in organization, global support, participation, validation and amplification. These findings combined with information of the protest gathered from online sources were compiled into a documentary video to show the impact of social media in the protests.

DOCUMENTARY VIDEO ARTIFACT

<https://youtu.be/fm2xWgD9OYQ>

INTRODUCTION

The impact of social media on activism has been widely studied in the humanities. The studies have explored the roles and the effectiveness of social media in different movements across the world (Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018). This research study seeks to understand the impact of social media in the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria.

#EndSARS is a twitter hashtag created in response to the gross impunity displayed by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Nigerian Police Force. The squad was created in 1992 in response to increasing crime rates in the country however in the past 2 decades it has become synonymous with oppression and police brutality in Nigeria (Peter 2020). Their illegal activities range from harassment, rape, extortion, kidnap and extra-judicial murder (Dambo et. al 2020). These forms of police brutality go without check as reports to the authorities are either sidelined or over-extended till there is a loss in interest or information trail.

On the 1st of December 2017 a video of a boy being shot went viral and this led to the birth of the hashtag. Although not verified, the hashtag was then used to chronicle the sad experiences of various Nigerians at the hands of the SARS operatives. The protests that ensued at the time led to the government repeatedly promising an end to the unit of the police force. This promise was never followed through and the displeasure of the youths came to a climax in October 2020.

On the 3rd of October 2020, another video went viral of yet another man being shot and in the wake of the protests against police brutality with regards to the George Floyd case, the youths of Nigeria took the streets in massive numbers. They were at first ignored, then the government yet again promised the disbandment of the unit. When the youth's anger did not abate, they were met with brute force. The protests took a turn for the worse when on the 20th of October 2020 peaceful protesters were shot at with live bullets by the Nigerian army. This action has been debated but the live video feed that was carried out by DJ Switch a celebrity present at the protest ground gave everyone an undeniable proof of the events that transpired.

For Nigerians in the diaspora, it was with mixed emotions that they followed the events with. First, many were impressed at the unique organization and comradeship displayed at the protests and later they were faced with sadness at the government's impunity for its citizenry. This immediate and readily available association with the protest going on in Nigeria was largely facilitated by the use of social media especially Twitter (Dark 2020). Twitter and other social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube and Facebook were not only used as informational sources but were also used for online mobilization to keep the hashtag trending and also to lend support through funds and signing of petitions. Through the help of digital alternatives such as

cryptocurrencies, Nigerians in the diaspora were able to also contribute to the movement and organize protests in their various locations all over the world (Dambo et al. 2020).

This study is designed to explore how social media is actively changing the scene of activism in Nigeria. Drawing from existing knowledge on other movements with global impact such as Black Lives Matter, the study explores the role of social media in a Nigerian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has in recent times proven to be an interesting means to scale social justice movements (Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018). Its involvement in prominent movements around the world in the last decade have been documented and is currently a rapidly growing area for research (Cox 2017). The majority of interest in research have been driven by the cultural disruption introduced by social media. This disruption is manifested through social media as an informational source, for coalition building, participation and organization in social justice movements (Lim 2013, Rickford 2016, Cox 2017, Liebermann 2020).

The change digital technologies such as social media bring to the field of activism has been presented from two major ends of the discourse. Many see it as positive with claims to the democratization of voice in public discourse, inclusion of marginalized people groups and the extension of collaboration across traditional limitations of distance and location (Neumayer and Stald 2014, Gerbaudo and Treré 2015, Smith, Williamson, and Bigman 2020). However, other researchers present an argument across its amputation of active, in-person participation that would usually demand presence and come at a recognizable cost to the individual (Morozov 2009, Gladwell 2017).

This distinction is reflected in the difference between in Neil Postman's analysis of the Technopoly as opposed to Manuel Castells' Networked society. Postman presented a decline in cultural and political value system due to the prevalence of technology (Postman 1986). However, Castells believed that the introduction of a horizontal, flexible and mobile forms of information production and processing allows for a disruption of power structures in communication (Castells 2015). This disruption is thus important for establishing new systems and structures for meaning and culture. Social media in the field of activism is a prime example of the changes posited by Postman and Castells as it is essentially transforming the way individuals engage in activism, however, both views only partially explore the complexities and impact that are made possible through social media (Lim 2013).

The foremost considerable impact produced by the interaction between social media and activism is the democratization of voice (Couldry 2008). With a horizontal system of information production, social media offers a voice to marginalized groups, however with a neoliberal system in place it does not guarantee that the voices will be heard (Day 2018). If culture is created with the tools of conversation, then the offer of voice is not inconsequential. It presents an opportunity for the redistribution of power depending on the use of the platforms. There is a consequence of noise to consider with a multitude of voices, but the provision of a readily flexible power structure makes social media much more appealing for activism efforts (Bethke and Pinckney 2019).

Another important consideration in the study of social media and activism is the production of collective identity that comes because of the information shared rapidly and consistently across social media channels (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015). With most young people getting their "facts" online, social media serves as an informational source for identity formation of young activists (Cox 2017). This then creates an opportunity for creation and editing of one's identity through performances of the digital self (Papacharissi 2012). It can be argued that this negates the authenticity of the collective identity of an activist group, this digital self can be seen as an extension of people's lived experiences. Therefore, through the ubiquitous nature of the online self, a user is able to interact with and understand other people outside their social circles. The collective identity is then formed not from a foreign or traditional ideal, but from the dynamic interaction of a wide variety of people (Liebermann 2020).

A third concept that is disrupted through social media is that of non-violence resistance (Lim 2013). With the ease of use and access provided by social media platforms, activists engage parrhesia – speaking truth to power – much more readily. The use of Foucault’s parrhesia may be overstated, however it does meet the parameters of a relationship to truth through unfiltered commentary, a relationship to the user’s life through uncertain danger, and a relation to other people through criticism (Foucault 2010). Social media’s horizontal power structure allows for direct confrontation with political powers that are otherwise inaccessible. Hence, through a diverse and participatory culture of expression with lesser danger to one’s life, social media makes speaking truth to power more feasible and attractive for people (Highfield 2016, Bethke and Pinckney 2019).

The power disruption that emanates from a networked society gives room for a carnivalesque field of communication between political figures and the citizens (Kalaman and Batu 2020). Social media flips Foucault’s panopticon on the political leaders leading to a predominance of sousveillance as against surveillance (Trottier and Fuchs 2015, Thomsen 2019). The versatility of the internet and the portability of mobile devices makes documenting videos and images relatively easy to create and share. Hence, power figures know they are always being watched and this provides a much-needed leverage in political discourse (Neumayer and Stald 2014).

The theoretical framework of disruption helps to establish a background on which to discuss the roles social media plays in social justice movements around the world. It is important not to see social media just as a tool for conveying activism efforts (Gerbaudo and Treré 2015), but as an active player in the initiation, organization and execution of activism.

Social media activism albeit not clearly defined in current literature, can be perceived as actions primarily carried out on social media platforms to aid or promote a larger and physical movement (Lim 2013, Trottier and Fuchs 2015). A prime example is the Black Lives Matter movement with its origins on tweets and Facebook groups but has effectively led the charge in organizing physical protests and brought visibility to black politics (Liebermann 2020). Other notable movements influenced by social media activism are the #MeToo movement and the #BringBackOurGirls movement in Nigeria. While these are all good examples of social media activism, the Black Lives Matter is directly situated in the contests of police brutality as is the #EndSARS movement which is analysed in this study. The roles social media activism plays are discussed quite liberally across literature on the Black Lives Matter movement and according to Mundt et al. (2018), they include:

Visibility – Through the possibility of individuals to record acts of police brutality, the movement gained worldwide attention. These videos provided proof for already existing acts of violence and racism that could have been easily denied if not recorded (Campbell and Valera 2020). With increasing recording and sharing of these acts on social movement, the hashtag has risen to be one of the most used hashtags globally with increasing calls for reform (Leach and Allen 2017). Therefore, the resultant physical protest as was seen in the case of George Floyd is a direct consequence of the visibility his story gained on social media (Daragahi 2020).

Mobilization – Social media spaces have been used by activists to mobilize new activists and resources for further protest efforts. It presents a platform for reflexive discussion around issues of racial policing leading to the development of common understanding and movement identity (De Choudhury et al. 2016). While mobilization of participants is primary to this role, social media has also provided viable and often used platforms for monetary mobilization. Crowdfunding campaigns now provide the movement with an easier and versatile means for receiving donations and disseminating funds (Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018).

Coalition Building – A much broader perspective to mobilization is that of coalition building which involves the collaborative efforts established across groups of common interest or common goals (Mundt, Ross, and Burnett 2018). In the George Floyd case, a mutual disgust for the impunity displayed by the police officers saw the coming together of various activist groups and social media influencers which led to a global response in the form of protests (Daragahi 2020). This coalition is not only encouraged by social media, but it is also facilitated by it – with groups and individuals meeting and making plans virtually (Liebermann 2020). Consequently, collective action and social connections were established to assist, manage and participate in conversation as a community, that experienced “collective abuse” (Mark et al. 2012). This “ally-ship” created

among groups gives room for more powerful movements, stronger leadership and stronger civic actions against the state (Mizrahi and Rosenthal 2001).

Narrative amplification – While social media is useful in creating a dominant narrative among activism groups, it is also very useful in providing this as a counter-narrative in the larger field of public discourse (Milan 2015). Mainstream media has a history of presenting a skewed view of reality (Couldry 2008), and even though social media does not in effect produce a balanced narrative, it does give the opportunity for narratives that would otherwise be silenced (Smith, Williamson, and Bigman 2020). Social media users can create their individual narratives around the movements, the cause and also activism events (Yang 2016). Murthy (2018) argues that this is not an advantage to activist efforts as it leads to noise and slows down decision making processes.

Despite the outlined roles, the view of social media activism as slacktivism, clicktivism or nano-activism provides a critical look at the impact of a social media option to actual, in person activism (Murthy 2018). Morozov (2009) argues that the increased visibility and widespread participation social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter offer, does not in fact have any political or social consequence. Dambo et al. (2020) speaking on the #EndSARS protests explored this narrative and showed that, this is not the case. In addition, the response of Nigeria's government in an attempt to shut down social media (Kazeem 2020), displays the potential impact social media actions in a cumulative sense can effectively have on social reforms.

The literature on social media activism, to a greater extent, explores the evolving role of social media in activism efforts especially the Black Lives Matter movement. However, there is a gap in research regarding social media activism in Nigeria (Dambo et al. 2020). This study seeks to bridge the gap by studying the #EndSARS movement primarily from the viewpoint of social media. Thus, focusing on the roles and relationship of social media in the protests and how they are situated in the Nigerian context.

AIM

This study explores the role of social media in the widespread protests that took place in Nigeria through qualitative analysis. It reviews the relationship between social media and activism in Nigeria through the eyes of Nigerians in the diaspora.

OBJECTIVES

- To use relevant viral content from social media to provide context to the role of social media in the recent protests in Nigeria.
- To interview stakeholders to understand how social media enabled their active participation in these protests without being present in the country.
- To situate the Nigerian story in the broader context of research on social media activism

METHODOLOGY

To explore the key aspects of this research a multi-method approach was used to create a wholesome narrative of how social media had an influence in the protests. The primary source of data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews with 15 Nigerians in the diaspora.

The interviews were important for getting subjective experience of the protests (McIntosh and Morse 2015). Their perspective was particularly important to the research because of their secondary interaction with the events within Nigeria based on their location. Based on News reports, the participants could have engaged in other forms of reporting through sources such as mainstream media, social media and/or direct contact with family or friends in Nigeria (Gikandi 2020, Dark 2020).

The participants for this research were selected by snowball sampling. This sampling method was employed to create a sample set of people who have an established social connection with the interviewer and the people they referred (Browne 2007, Noy 2008). Leveraging on already existing social networks, contact with the participants were based on who would most likely have participated actively online with the #EndSARS protests (Dambo et al. 2020). The prior established validation made it easier to create a viable sample set of people who could comment on social media's role in the protests because they had actively participated and/or got their information through social media.

A total of 20 people was contacted in the course of the research. 15 of them were able to participate and complete the interview process. The sample included Nigerians living in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Canada and the Netherlands. They were 10 females and 5 males included in the study and all of them were within the age range for youths in Nigeria which is 18 – 35 years old according to Federal Ministry of Youth and Sports Development (2019). This demographic of people accounts for over 60% of Nigeria's population and also is credited with championing the protests and #EndSARS movement in general (Dark 2020).

The volume of reporting made on the protests has been able to provide quite a substantial amount of objective information around the protests and what transpired online and offline. The use of semi-structured interviews was informed by a need to create a subjective dataset that is important in understanding the impact of social media on the protests (McIntosh and Morse 2015, Seymour 2001). This meant the participants would comment from their knowledge and experience of the protests although largely remote (Dambo et al. 2020, Olaoluwa 2020). As the news of the protests had gone viral and it was reported on various international mainstream media platforms, the assumption was that most Nigerians would be to some degree aware of the events that occurred in the protests. The semi-structured interview also provided an empathetic approach to the individual stories, perspective of the participants and provided a substantial scope of data to be analysed (McIntosh and Morse 2015).

In the course of the interview, the participants commented on how they got information on the protests and their personal thoughts about the relationship between social media and the protests. Although, the framework changed with respect to the participant, the major questions asked included

1. Tell me about what you knew of the #EndSARS movement before the protests.
2. How did you get information about the protests?
3. How would you describe your views of the protests?
4. What kind of role do you think social media had on the protests?

The interviews were conducted through social media chat platforms specifically WhatsApp with only a participant being interviewed on Instagram. While this method was satisfactory to meet the challenges of location and also COVID travel restrictions (Seymour 2001) it was further tailored to mimic the situation in which my participants must have interacted with the #EndSARS movement. Mobile communication provided a platform for mass engagement in the protests (Neumayer and Stald 2014, Dambo et al. 2020, Olaoluwa 2020) so it can be inferred that the research could be designed to reflect this dynamic and give further insight that may be missed in a face-to-face interview.

This was also useful in maintaining data security for the participants, as the voice note clips and texts were anonymized on reception. The borderless nature of the interviews meant that participants would respond at their convenience and this impacted the duration of interviews which ranged from two hours to a month. However, it allowed for further comments and thoughts that might have been missed in an instant situation as is required in a face-to-face interaction (Seymour 2001).

To provide a much broader context for the participants comments, videos were sourced on the #EndSARS movement posted online. The majority of these videos were obtained from YouTube which further corroborated the research as it provides a platform for content visibility across the world and interaction

through comment sections (Hutchinson 2019). This would mean that the participants' comments were well situated in the context of these videos provided especially with specific videos that were mentioned in the interviews (Gikandi 2020).

The safety of Nigerians involved in the protests in the country were not included directly in the research (Olaoluwa 2020). However, through interviews and vlogs already granted on other public access platforms on social media such as Twitter and YouTube the comments from Nigerians were sourced during the course of the protests. Through the provisions of digital commons offered by these platforms, information was obtained and used for the analysis provided it was used in tandem with the purpose of its original creation (Fuchs 2020). This documentary evidence then serves a dual purpose of context for the interviews and as a secondary source of information for this research.

Finally, with respect to the creation of the documentary, it was important to get an expert analysis of the relationship between media and social justice movements. An expert researcher was interviewed who has experience in documenting police brutality and resultant activist movements against the state. This interview was semi-structured and conducted online through a video conferencing platform (Zoom). With recent COVID-19 restrictions, travel was restricted, and this was a viable option to get a video recording of the interview (Seymour 2001).

RESULTS

All interviews were extracted from the chat platforms and through thematic analysis, four (4) themes were gleaned from the responses the participants gave in the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006). These themes are largely discussed and explained in the documentary video artefact. However, a brief explanation of each theme will be described as discussed in the video.

Amplification

Social media helped the #EndSARS movement to gain widespread notoriety. The role of amplification was expressed through 3 basic forms namely information, education and exposure. With the hashtag trending on Twitter, most of the participants got interest in the story and were informed about what was going on in Nigeria. This is reminiscent of the visibility social media gave the Black Lives Matter movement. However, the use of social media in this case went a step further as people did not know much about the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Police Force. Hence, through infographics and explainer videos, Nigerians in the diaspora and non-Nigerians were able to know why the most populous black nation was at odds with its government.

While this is largely a good thing, the amplification came at the risk of noise and promotion of falsehood. This is due to the transformation of the media landscape into a neoliberal democracy (Coudry 2008). However, it is important to note that the amplification offered by social media does better for the cause because, if injustice is not recorded then it can be denied and looked over by the government (Fero 2020).

Validation

Many participants referred to the validation the presence of the stories gave to the protests. For the participants who were largely following the news of the protests online, without the presence of an alternate narrative, the voices of the protesters could have been ignored. This is because, mainstream media bodies in Nigeria did a poor job of reporting the protests up until international news bodies picked up the story.

With authenticity offered through the amateur aesthetic in social media videos and the immediacy offered through live videos on Instagram and Facebook, the stories of the protesters were able to stand as a good alternative (Neumayer and Stald 2014, Cabrera 2019). This validation was facilitated by the involvement of social media celebrities and influencers. Although, these stories were important, the use of their platforms to share this content gave it visibility and the more viral the content, the more valid it seemed.

Global Support and Participation

Marcia Mundt et al. (2018) commented on the role of social media in building bridges for coalition and collaborative action. In the #EndSARS protests, this was further expressed in a global sense. This is reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan's global village whereby we were able to have a global reach but local in effect (Castells 2015). However, the notion of support through a tweet and/or video of goodwill is explored in J. L. Austin's performativity. Austin (1962) argues that all utterances perform actions. Hence, sharing your displeasure through social media was perceived as support especially as it shone more light on the issue and kept the hashtag trending.

Other means of support mentioned included online fundraising, signing of petitions and video messages. This is arguably the most powerful stance that social media affords the protests by creating a global backing for the movement. Fero (2020) commented in his interview that the only logical way to effectively create a force against oppressive government is to transcend sporadic and explosive occurrences of protests to coalition building globally. An example of this sort of global body is the Amnesty International and their ability to corroborate the voices of the youths against the government.

Organization

Participants commented with surprise on how social media homogenized the Nigerian Youths in their fight against police brutality. Nigeria boasts of a largely diverse group of people and this would in many cases hinder the organization of such social justice efforts (Dambo et al. 2020). However, in the case of the #EndSARS protests, there was a clear camaraderie and comradeship that soared above the socio-cultural difference the Nigerian society is plagued with.

Also, the immediacy and ubiquitous nature of the internet made social media a handy tool for organization on protest grounds in Nigerian and abroad (Neumayer and Stald 2014). This created novel modes of fundraising and mobilization. This would come in handy especially when the government tried to stifle the movement by suspending its bank accounts, and the switch was made to cryptocurrency (Coalition 2020).

CONCLUSION

This study was able to establish the roles of social media in the recent #EndSARS protests that held from the 7th of October 2020 till the 20th of October 2020. Similar parallels were drawn between the roles played in both #EndSARS protests and the Black Lives Matter movement. The roles include amplification, validation, organization, global support and participation. This provides an understanding of how social media is changing the cultural field of activism in Nigeria. The disruption it offers should not be seen as slacktivism because, regardless of the platform (online or offline) activism can be powerful depending on the effort put into it.

The limitations in data collection however reflect the limitations of social media activism as outlined earlier. The noise and distraction are always going to be a risk to deal with when communicating across social media, however as Fero (2020) stated, if one has a clear political purpose, the distraction will not be a problem.

A possible prospect for further research would be to explore how the influence of social media in the #EndSARS protests can affect the political scene in Nigeria.

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