

‘We Will Never Forget’: Thematic Analysis of Digital Media Contents during the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests in Nigeria

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Abstract

The thrust of the study was to appraise the influence of social media in contentious politics and solidarity building by interrogating themes from tweets and posts of digital activists during the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests in Nigeria. The content analysis of digital media posts and tweets (N=24,688) show that social media platforms were used as a vehicle for provoking solidarity contagion that ignited a memorial for fallen activists in Nigeria. Findings further demonstrate that protesters used social media platforms to reveal how vexed, and anguished they were as well as imprecating the authorities. Data reveal that there is a substantial relationship between celebrity posts and tweets and positive hedonic experiential valence about the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests. Finally, this study explicates and contributes to the theorisation of the affective theory.

Keywords: digital activism, social media, EndSARS protests, EndSARS Memorial protests, Nigeria, Affective Theory

1. Introduction

Social movement literature has presented various frames for the way in which social media influences collective and connective actions. These frames consist of providing organising records and news not accessible in other media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014), assisting in the coordination of protests, helping users to join political causes, creating opportunities to debate or chat with other people (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011; Walgrave et al., 2011), and spreading enthusiasm and facilitating emotional contagion (Gerbaudo, 2012, 2016). However, many of these studies are wholly centred in one platform (Bosch & Mutsvauro, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2016; Vitak et al., 2011).

Furthermore, there is relatively low interest in studying solidarity or memorial protests. Rather, researchers move on from one protest to another as though the issues were all fixed in the first protest. Remarkably, the 2020 #EndSARS and the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests have not been sufficiently studied with media reports stating that the protests were marshalled and organised online (Agbo, 2021; BBC, 2020b). Only one study has evaluated the hypothesis about the salience of online media during the 2020 #EndSARS protests (Dambo et al., 2021). While the study is vital to understanding some aspects of the hypothesis, it however, looked only at spread of protests related messages on twitter but failed to interface with the protesters on the streets. The above mentioned study also only looked at the 2020 protests and not the 2021 memorial protests. This study is designed to provide further insights and understanding to the literature regarding themes from the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests in Nigeria.

From the foregoing, the aim of this study is to situate the influence of social media in contentious politics and solidarity building. Consequently, the study investigates the themes that emerged from digital media during the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests in Nigeria.

This study sought to answer the following research question:

1. What are the themes from digital activists social media posts during the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests in remembrance of those who were killed during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria?
2. What factors contributed to increased engagement with a social media post or tweet during the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests in remembrance of those who were killed during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria?

1.1 The 2020 #EndSARS Protests and 2021 #EndSARSMemorial Protests in Nigeria

The 2020 #EndSARS protests are series of global mass protests that started on October 7, 2020, against police brutality

in Nigeria. The protesters called for the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) - a special unit of the Nigerian Police Force that achieved notoriety with a long record of abuses (BBC, 2020b; Orjinmo, 2020). Nigerians have always complained about the imperiousness with which SARS handles cases. The Nigerian youths did not however, pursue the disbanding of SARS. This posture changed when a video emerged on October 3, 2020, revealing some Officers from the SARS unit fleeing a scene in a white vehicle that allegedly belonged to an unnamed man they had shot in front of the Wetland hotel in Ughelli, Delta State (Dambo et al., 2021). The reaction that followed the circulation of the video was swift and substantial as many Nigerians took to the streets of Nigeria and many other cities around the world, protesting and asking the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, to get rid of the police unit (Orjinmo, 2020).

The renaissance of Nigerians' anguish against the Nigerian Police Force, particularly SARS maybe a response and experience gathered from the global social movement against police brutality from the kneeling to death of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States of America (Cappelli, 2020; Derrick, 2020). George Floyd's death and subsequent protests exposed the insensitivity of some law enforcement Officers not just in the US, but across the globe. This is why 'I can't breathe' or Black Lives Matter protests reverberated across the world. It was in that neryv time and extreme distrust of Police Forces around the world that the SARS video emerged and trended online. The video showed a lifeless body and a dearth of empathy shown by the fleeing SARS Officers.

Unsurprisingly, Nigerians, especially the youths, became incensed and marched to the streets of Nigeria and other countries such as Canada, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, United Kingdom, United States of America, South Africa and Australia (Lawal & Olanrewaju, 2020). In majority of the states in Nigeria, the protests were fierce, with huge turn outs and fervour unseen in protests in Nigeria. Many Nigerian youths staged multiple candle nights and in some instances the protest became a show as many Nigerian artistes delivered renditions of their popular albums while protesters danced along. The protests were deadly serious and fun-filled at the same time. After a sustained protest for four days, the Nigerian Police Force announced that it has dissolved the SARS unit in the Nigerian Police Force (Aljazeera, 2020). The announcement was received widely with mirth and thoughts of triumph enveloped the protests grounds (Aljazeera, 2020). News soon broke that instead of disbanding SARS that President Buhari is renaming them SWAT – Special Weapons and Tactics. The joie de vivre turned to frustration and the protests returned.

On October 20, 2020, armed men from the Nigerian Army arrived at one of the protest venues in Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos State. It was then reported that the Nigerian Army Officers opened fire on the protesters with live ammunitions, thereby, killing several protesters in Lekki in Lagos State (Orjinmo, 2020). An Instagram video by D.J Switch showing the shooting by the Nigerian Army trended online.

Youths and protesters in Nigeria became infuriated about the Lekki shooting that some in Rivers State (Port Harcourt and Oyigbo) and Lagos State, started chasing and killing police and military officers as well as burning government buildings and police stations (BBC, 2020a). It was later reported that about 69 people had been killed in the #EndSARS protest. According to a press release from the President of Nigeria, those killed were mainly civilians but also included soldiers and police officers. According to the report, 51 were civilians, 11 police officers, and 7 soldiers (BBC, 2020b).

1.2 The 2021 #EndSARSMemorial Protests

On October 20, 2021, Nigerian youths held peaceful protests to commemorate the one year anniversary of the 2020 #EndSARS protests and the shooting of protesters at the Lekki Tollgate in Lagos, Nigeria (Premium Times, 2021). One of the signposts of the protesters read, 'let it be known, 20/10/2020 – the Nigerian Government sent army tanks to attack unarmed peaceful protesters.' The banner is in support of the defiant remembrance of a Nigerian tragedy. The 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protesters waved the green, white and green flags of different sizes, some fixed the flags on buses, cars, and motorcycles as they cheerily drove through the streets, singing as a way of remembering those that were killed during the protests in 2020 (Agbo, 2021). However, there were reported cases of police and army violence and arrests (Agbo, 2021).

The memorial protests were held in many cities in Nigeria. The protesters played loud music and sang along to honour and memorialise those who were killed in 2020 and as a way of demanding for justice from the Nigerian government and to expose the atrocities waged against ordinary Nigerians by Nigerian authorities (Premium Times, 2021). The protest was a show of force and resilience by the protesters to the Nigerian government that they will not be cowered by violence and threat of death. The protests concluded without any known fatality.

Like previous protests such as the 'Occupy Nigeria' protests (Uwalaka, 2017; Uwalaka et al., 2018), #BringBackOurGirls protest (Akpojivi, 2019; Chiluwa & Ifukor, 2015) and #socialmediabill protest (Uwalaka, 2016), the #EndSARS protests were reported to have been effective due to the diffusion and innovation in social media technologies. The 2020 #EndSARS and 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests have been observed to have sprang from social media platforms (Dambo et al., 2021). It has been reported that social media provide Nigerians with the space

and channel to 'soro soke'. Soro soke is a Yoruba phrase that means 'speak louder' (BBC-Pidgin, 2020). In this instance, it connotes 'speak out' (BBC-Pidgin, 2020; Thisday, 2020). It has been noted that social media platforms provide channel for people to speak out in Nigeria regarding the ills in the Nigerian society and in this case, police brutality in Nigeria.

It has been suggested that the 2020 protests achieved the aim of dissolving the police unit due to social media platforms, and that they were used to mobilise, communicate, and provide real-time updates to protesters (Dambo et al., 2021). This is not novel as earlier studies on the impact of social media or mobile social networking applications in the organisation of protests in Nigeria showed that social media and mobile social networking applications enhanced the coordination, and planning of the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests (Uwalaka, 2019; Uwalaka & Watkins, 2017). However, there have been no published study that empirically test the notions that the 2020 and 2021 protests were planned and coordinated online other than hypothetical media reports.

2. Social Media and Social Movements

The simultaneous diffusion of social media platforms and popularisation of protests around the world has raised the question about the role of social media as catalyst for dissent, protests and other forms of contentious politics have been ongoing for over a decade starting from the Arab Spring. Besides, the spread of social media coincided with protests around the world. Such protests include: the Arab Spring, the indignados, the Occupy Wall Street, and pockets of other protests such as the Occupy Nigeria protests (Flesher Fominaya, 2015, 2020; Gerbaudo, 2012; Uwalaka, 2019). The coordination of these protests were unusual and that forced researchers to conduct studies that assessed the role that social media platforms played in influencing these protests and many of the results are in the affirmative (Castells, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). For example, studies have suggested that protest networks used digital media to engage individuals in mobilisations targeting the G-20 London Summit during the global financial crisis and, that these media platforms permit activists to sustain multiple engagements in different protest events (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Bennett et al., 2014; Walgrave et al., 2011).

Studies about the effect of social media during the Arab Spring uncovered that the protests were synthesis of various factors: satellite TV, offline, and online media use, chief among them is social media (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Khamis & Vaughn, 2013; Lotan et al., 2011). But prior to the Arab Spring, scholars had predicted that the cumulative long-term effects of internet use in Arab societies will alter the ways in which people live their lives in the region, and thus, social media played a specific and timely role in the Arab Spring protests by providing a fundamental infrastructure for the movement (Howard & Hussain, 2013; Wheeler, 2010). Social media provided novel sources of information that autocratic regime in Egypt could not easily control and importantly, access to this information and social media access galvanised people to organise and join the protest in Tahrir Square (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012).

It has been hinted that social media platforms and other media such as satellite television contributed in the success of the protest in Egypt (Alexander & Aouragh, 2014; Aouragh & Alexander, 2011), that social media played an instrumental role in the success of the protests in Egypt (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011) and that Twitter played a key role in amplifying and spreading timely information across the globe during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions (Lotan et al., 2011).

Findings from some recent studies have shown that social media used for political purposes correlates with protest participation. Results show that political use of social media related to how young evaluated the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (Lee et al., 2020). The researchers determined that social media platforms help maintain protest potential even at a time when social mobilisation is generally frail (Lee et al., 2020). Studies from other parts of Asia have borne out these findings. For example, it has been established that the #FreeYouth protests in Thailand were loosely connected clusters of weak ties on Twitter and that Twitter and other social media platforms help invigorate and facilitate the protest (Sinpeng, 2021). Interestingly, researchers have also established that participating in protests increase citizen's political use of social media platforms (Chang & Park, 2021). This implies that the more people join and participate in protests, the more they use social media platforms for political purposes. This is exacerbated during duelling protests such as the 2016-2017 presidential corruption scandal in South Korea (Chang & Park, 2021).

Studies have evaluated the vitality of social media platforms to social movements. The results tilt towards affirming the significant positive correlation between social media use and social movements such as the Black Lives Matter, #Metoo movements and the ongoing protests in Venezuela (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Freelon et al., 2018; Mendes et al., 2018; Morselli et al., 2021). While many studies agree that social media gains outweigh its risks, they however are starting to caution digital activists on the need to critically manage their online groups in order to mitigate concrete, and physical risks that social media can create for activists (Mundt et al., 2018).

The trajectory is maintained in Sub-Saharan Africa's digital activism and social movement literature. Findings have consistently shown that social media platforms help social and digital activists in the coordination and even

documentation of the protest. Bosch, Mutsvairo and colleagues (Bosch, 2017, 2019; Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017; Bosch et al., 2018; Mutsvairo & Rønning, 2020; Wasserman et al., 2018) have authoritatively tested many questions regarding the impact and usefulness of social media in protest participation. Their results show considerably a positive relationship between digital networks and protest movements. Findings have demonstrated how activists in South Africa use nanomedia and digital media as communicative platforms and as a way of combating their asymmetrical and tenuous relationship with the mainstream media (Bosch et al., 2018). Researchers have argued that youth in South Africa are increasingly using social media to develop a new biography of citizenship which is typified by more individualised forms of activism especially during the #RhodesMustFall campaign (Bosch, 2017). Also, in their study that explored the role played by images on Twitter during the #FMF protests in South Africa, Bosch and Mutsvairo (2017) argue that it was clear through images on Twitter, how the use of social media platforms by citizens result in the “creation of a culture of participation via the creation of a networked public” (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017, p. 84). Scholars have also illustrated that ‘Twitter Activism’ during the #FMF protests show the collective experiences of social media within a social movement (Bosch, 2019).

Majority of digital activism studies in Nigeria reflects those of Africa and even the globe. Studies have found that the socio-economic and political issues discussed by the online protesters motivated offline protesters during the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests (Ibrahim, 2013); that social media platforms are used during protests as a result of eroded trust in the mainstream media (Kombol, 2014), that social media was a driver for the protests (Hari, 2014), and that the appropriation of social media enhanced Nigerian youths’ ability to challenge dominant power groups while making it difficult for the power groups to clamp down the protesters (Uwalaka et al., 2018; Uwalaka & Watkins, 2017, 2018). Studies have demonstrated that social media played a robust role in the success of the Church Must Vote campaign during the 2019 election (Uwalaka et al., 2020). It has been suggested that social media platforms were used to educate supporters of the #NotTooYoungToRun campaign and also to contact and shame lawmakers into supporting the bill in the two legislative houses in Nigeria (Uwalaka, 2020a).

Overall, the studies discussed in this section emphasised and examined the role of social media use in protest organisation and planning. This can also be said in relation to studies about the Arab Spring and other contentious political protests. However, due to dearth of research in the digital activism literature in Nigeria regarding the relationship between media platforms used and the type of messages that protesters received and forwarded as well as leadership-based issues during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, this study is designed to fill these gaps.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical underpinning of this study is the affective theory propounded by acclaimed Psychologists and researcher, Silvan Tomkins (Tomkins, 1962, 2008). He argued that affects system is the primary motivational system because without its amplification, nothing else matters, and with its amplification, everything matters (Tomkins, 1962). The theory has since been adopted into many fields including communication. One of the cardinal studies in this space argue that social exchanges produce positive or negative global feelings which are intentionally rewarding or punishing (Lawler, 2001). The theory according to him, demonstrates that social units such as relations, groups, and networks are perceived as a source of these feelings contingent on the degree of jointness in the exchange task (Lawler, 2001). He further delineated, in what he called ‘nonseparability’, that the jointness of the task is utmost if actors find it difficult to extricate their individual effects on or contributions to solving the exchanged task, and when actors perceived a shared responsibility for success or failure at the exchanged task (Lawler, 2001, p. 1). The theory elucidates the effects of diverse exchange structures on cohesion and solidarity.

Recent studies have also adopted the affective theory in the research analyses. For example, a group of researchers have argued that their result support the central assumptions of the model, that is, affective states, quantified as valence and arousal, exponentially return to an individual specific baseline (Pellert et al., 2020). Their findings are vital as it helps in the detection and modelling of collective emotions, refinement of psychological research methodology, and detection of abnormal, and potentially pathological, individual affect dynamics (Pellert et al., 2020). On his part, Pang (2021) reports that hedonic and utilitarian values positively impact attitudes and satisfaction among customers. In this study, the researcher evaluates how digital activists while different and individualistic in nature, employing personal frames to contentious politics, still find ways to work together and organise protest movements.

4. Methods

Facebook and Twitter are found to be two of the promising sites for analysing global debates on key issues due to its close ties with the overall government and media and the relatively open environment of the data (Hussain et al., 2021), and Nairaland reportedly the best Nigerian discursive platforms (Badmus et al., 2019; Uwalaka, 2015). This study adopts a qualitative content analysis technique and specifically utilized social media network analytics (Bryman, 2012, 2016). The researcher analysed tweets and retweets as well as Facebook posts and comments, and posts and discussion

threads on Nairaland from the hashtag “#EndSARSMemorial” evaluate the themes from the tweets and posts on how digital activists in Nigeria showed their solidarity to those that died during the 2020 #EndSARS protesters in Nigeria.

Researchers are enticed to social media platforms since they can collect thousands of contents using freely and openly available and simple configurable tools (Bosch, 2017). Researchers are increasingly using methods such as social networking analysis (Bosch, 2017; Literat & Markus, 2019) to make sense of big data.

This study analysed 24,688 posts, comments, tweets, and retweets from the hashtag #EndSARSMemorial. These posts, and tweets were collected between October 19, 2021, to October 29, 2021. Posts and tweets were scraped using NCapture. The posts and tweets were later imported into an NVivo 12 Pro for analysis. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that helps the researcher come up with themes and other relevant trends as well as graphs in a qualitative data. The researcher preferred this software because the aim was to develop common themes from the tweets and comments. This method has been used by other studies to analyse their data (Bosch & Mutsvairo, 2017; Uwalaka, 2020a). The aim here, is to evaluate the themes that emerged from these tweets, posts, and comments about the first anniversary of the killing of protesters in Lekki Tollgate, Lagos Nigeria during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria.

5. Results

Social media contents from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Nairaland relating to the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests were analysed to understand themes that emerged from the tweets and posts of digital activists during the 2021 memorial protests in honour of those that were killed during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria.

Table 1 below, shows that majority of the posts and tweets were in honour of those that were killed during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. About fifty-four percent of the tweets and retweets, 66.8% of Facebook posts and comments as well as 57.7% of threads on Nairaland were about remembrance and the need to honour the fallen. The digital activists were vociferous in their posts and tweets and were committed in their stance to remember the compatriots that were killed during the protest in 2020. For example, an activist tweeted, ‘the bullets, the blood and tears. We will never forget’ Another tweeted, ‘let it be known that on this day last year, the Nigerian Government sent army tanks to attack unarmed, peaceful protestors in Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos, 7pm’. Another activist tweeted, ‘this is the picture of bullet that we removed from the chest of an #EndSARS protester who was shot. Luckily, he survived’. In a Facebook posts that garnered massive interest and reaction from Nigerians, a Nollywood actor in remembering those that were killed during the protests posted a photograph of himself and others with the following comment:

We stay on our knees, so our brothers and sisters who lost their lives in this struggle, can stand tall in heaven. You are not alone. I still maintain, Lekki Toll Plaza should be renamed Lekki Memorial Way and remain toll free. We’ve paid with our blood. How can they say that were are finished, when we have only begun. Aluta Continua, Victoria Ascerta!

These posts and tweets were made in honour of those that got harmed and killed during the protests. It showed that activists have not forgotten the killing of protesters in Lagos, Nigeria. Tweets and posts with outpouring of love and respect for those who were killed were overwhelming in the data set. For instance, a protester posted a thread on Nairaland, ‘we will never forget October 20, 2020! This post is dedicated to our fallen heroes who lost their lives during the protests. May their souls rest in peace’ while another Facebook posts simply but powerfully read, ‘we remember our fallen heroes of October 20, 2020. These posts and comments, as well as tweets and retweets demonstrate that Nigerian youths used social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Nairaland to pay their unalloyed respect to their killed compatriots last year.

Many posts and tweets depicted the obsecration theme. The activists beseeched and supplicated to their friends to punish the leaders in the polls. For example about 29.8% of Nairland posts, 22% of tweets and retweets, and 16.8% of Facebook posts and comments were posts and tweets that called Nigerian youths to action. Not to fight with guns but to fight politically in the voting booth. For example, a Facebook post reads, ‘imagine all the 36 States Houses of Assembly filled with 50% Nigerian youth with competence and character, will any State Governor call for protesting youths to be shot with impunity?’ Another protester tweeted, ‘only way we can make #EndSARSMemorial a real memorial is by getting our PVC and show these monsters how they messed up’. Yet another protester tweeted, ‘to those who survived, get your PVC’. These posts and tweets are calling on Nigerian youths to get their Permanent Voters card (PVC) in other to vote out those that perpetrated the killing and to vote into office young people with interest of the youths at heart. This political call to arms and obsecrating their friends, shows that Nigerian youths are taking their fights to the polling unit. This is a significant departure from the posture that the youths usually take in Nigeria.

There were posts and tweets which showed the anguish and how hurtful protesters are regarding the killing of their friends. For example, a protester tweeted a photograph of a young protester who was killed during the 2020 protests with the caption, ‘this guy’s unfortunate end brings me to tears each time I recall it’. Another Twitter users retweeted,

‘there’s no way I don’t cry when I see this guy’s picture. Damn! This one hit harrrrrrrrrr’. A Facebook user posted, ‘rest on Oke, you will surely get the justice you deserve very soon’ These posts and comments and many more showed the heartbreaking circumstances that led to the memorial protests. The sombreness, anguish and agony were evident in these posts and tweets.

Anger and frustration were another visible theme from the posts and tweets from digital activists with about 7% of Facebook posts and comments, 9.4% of tweets and retweet and 7.5% of posts on Nairaland appeared to be vexatious and piqued. For example, a Facebook user posted, ‘government has not done anything to end police brutality and meet the demands of the people’. Another digital activist tweeted, ‘my experience with the police one year after #EndSARS protests, is a gory one’. One Twitter user angrily tweeted, ‘government use people play Squid Game’ while another Facebook user posted with an angry emoji, ‘just young not a criminal’. These tweets and posts like many others, showed frustration against the government for not doing enough to assuage their pains. It was clear that the protesters believed that government has not reformed the police enough and that frustrated mainly of the protesters online.

There was a theme of praise for those helping protesters that were arrested during the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests. For encouraging the lawyers that are helping protesters, about 3.6% of Facebook posts, 14% of tweets and retweets, and 0.3% were praising and encouraged the lawyers who were helping protesters that were arrested to regain the freedom through the legal skills. For example, an activist tweeted, ‘join to celebrate dis lawyers dat have stood with #EndSARS movement, some of them, since d very beginning’. Another protester tweeted, ‘thank you at Barr. T*** and others. You guys did not rest until people arrested were released yesterday. You are a blessing to us’. One of the lawyers game update on those arrested:

Okay, so we’re leaving Pantl now. All 33 protsters are out. They were arraigned this night and were granted bail. We’ve been able to perfect same and everyone is on their way home. Thanks to the team for the awesome job.

These tweets and posts show the solidarity shown to those arrested and the paeen that grateful protester showered on the lawyers. The comments further buttress the argument that social media platforms are increasingly becoming a solidarity vehicle particularly during contentious politics. It also shows the comradeship protesters showed to one another during the protests.

Table 1. Themes from posts and tweets about the memorial protests

Themes	Facebook (%)	Twitter (%)	Nairaland (%)
Remembrance	4004 (66.7)	4600 (53.5)	5828 (57.8)
Obsecration	1010 (16.8)	1890 (22)	3001 (29.8)
Piqued and Vexed	560 (9.4)	600 (7)	765 (7.5)
Hurt	170 (2.8)	300 (3.4)	401 (4)
Help those arrested	220 (3.6)	1200 (14)	40 (0.3)
Others	36 (0.6)	10 (0.1)	53 (0.6)
Total	6,000 (100)	8,600 (100)	10,000 (100)

From Table 2 below, it was evident in the dataset that there was a significant relationship between celebrity protesters and the virality of the posts and tweets regarding the protests. Posts and tweets by a celebrity that participated in the protests or mainstream media tweets or posts online regarding the participation of a celebrity had greater chance of receiving substantial reactions. There was a positive connection between tweets and posts from celebrities and increased reactions to the posts. This means that celebrities joining the protests, tweeting and posting about the protests led to increased positive valence and reactions about the protests. There were robust positive hedonic shift towards the protests’ goals once a celebrity is involved.

Among the many celebrities in Nigeria, Mr Macaroni, a comedian in Nigeria topped the reaction lists. His tweets and posts received more retweets, more comments, likes, replies, etc. He received on average 90,585 Facebook reactions, 239,000 Twitter reactions, and 592,837 Instagram reactions on his posts and tweets about the protests. He was followed by Punch Newspaper online. The stories from Punch Newspaper that got incredibly high reactions were stories about celebrities’ protests actions during the protest. D.J Switch, Falz, and Alex Ekubo complete the top five protesters with the highest reactions. This means that protesters were following the lead of celebrities. This is surprising given that conventional wisdom in social movement dictates that such individualistic protests were averse to leadership or official spokepeople.

Table 2. Users with most reactions

User	Facebook Reactions	Twitter Reactions	Instagram Reactions
Mr Macaroni	90,585	239,000	592,837
*Punch Newspaper	200,789	162,892	300,675
D.J Switch	18,171	158,000	700,000
Falz	18,171	17,230	200,787
Alex Ekubo	80,721	14,902	88,970

*Topics about celebrities joining the protests

6. Discussion

This study demonstrates that digital activists on Facebook, Twitter and Nairaland were in anguish and agony leading to a sombre mood during the 2021 #EndSARSMemorial protests in Nigeria. The study further revealed that the protesters were angry, imprecating the leaders and showed reverence to their fallen colleagues in a form of remembrance. While the protesters honoured their compatriots, they hurled imprecation and a seething smack at the police, military and Federal Government of Nigeria for their abysmal handling of the protests in 2020 and the killing of their subjects. This showed great solidarity spirit even at the points of arrests. The study reveals that protesters are already planning how they will punish the Nigerian leaders in the next national election. This they are doing by calling on Nigerian youths to pick up their Permanent Voters Cards. This reflects other findings where protest participation increases political engagement and efficacy (Uwalaka, 2021; Wasserman et al., 2018).



Credits: D.J Switch Instagram

Figure 1. Sample tweets and Posts

Results from this study support the argument that online leaders are crucial and affect the success of a social movement. The result confirms the argument that digital activists despise ‘official spokespeople’ as they forbid organisationally brokered networks (Castells, 2012). That said, this study uncovers and confirms that those digital activists that participated in the protests accepted celebrities as leaders of the protests (Dambo et al., 2021) or what some calls ‘Techno-Ethusiasts’ (Uwalaka, 2020b, p. 241). This finding contrasts the submissions of some scholars (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) who blanketly argue that online activists despise celebrities and spokespeople. Findings from this study caution that digital activists’ gripe against traditional leadership is more nuanced and should be carefully defined and explained, and that if the phenomenon is not meticulously considered, it will likely lead to erroneous extrapolations instead of a more robust analysis that will aid in deepening understanding and enriching the literature. The way protesters celebrated those that died during the 2020 protests and the relationship between celebrity posts and tweets and increased interest in the protests as well as increased cohesion and solidarity.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that protests are now personalised and solitary and that they do not only occur from developing strong and thick ideologies, but rather through loose ties, shared experience, and rage. Through the common struggles, spirit of comradeship and common devotedness that elicits outrage against their shared problem. The study validates social media platforms as drivers of protest in Nigeria, that they are eliminating the cost of initiating and coordinating connective and collective actions in Nigeria and bring about interaction and socialisation that ignite social movements actions in Nigeria.

The study illustrates that social media acts as a solidarity vehicle and platform where protesters plan, coordinate and show their reverence to fallen friends during a protest action. The study demonstrates that protesters in Nigeria expressed their anguish and agony, remembered their fallen friends, imprecated the authorities, and called for action against the political class. Finally, the study shows that Nigerian youths are increasingly raising their political knowledge, efficacy, and participation, and are planning on how to vote out the current crop of political leaders.

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