

DIGITAL NATIVES AND ONLINE ACTIVISM: EVALUATING CELEBRITIES INFLUENCE IN MOBILIZING TWITTER USERS FOR #ENDSARS PROTEST DURING COVID-19 ERA IN ENUGU METROPOLIS



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Abstract

On Saturday 3 October 2020, a video showing a SARS police officer shooting a young Nigerian in front of Wetland Hotel, Ughelli, Delta State trended on the Internet. The trending video caused a public outcry on social media leading to online activism, especially on Twitter, with the #ENDSARS hashtag trending. On Thursday 8 October 2020, nationwide protests on #ENDSARS started after weeks of outrage and anger with videos and pictures showing police brutality, harassment and extortion in Nigeria. The protests were led predominantly by young Nigerians mostly the digital natives who started the activism online in different cities alongside many activists and celebrities. By Wednesday, 14 October 2020, the End SARS protests were still ongoing both online and offline with other digital natives in different parts of Nigeria intensifying their calls for reforms and accountability in police operations. This study was designed to determine how the involvement of celebrities influenced the participation of Twitter users in the protest in the Enugu metropolis. The core objectives of the study were to ascertain the level of exposure of the respondents to celebrity tweets on the #EndSARS protest and how this exposure influenced their actual participation in the protest notwithstanding the existence of Coronavirus pandemic that is easily transmitted in a compacted crowd. Anchored on Adaptive Structuration Theory, the study adopted the survey method in carrying out the study among Twitter users in Enugu metropolis with a population of 1,026,183 and a sample size of 382 determined using Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination table. The findings revealed that respondents were highly exposed to celebrity tweets on the #EndSARS protest which aroused emotions among them and made them join the protest both online and offline. The study recommended that digital natives should use the same energy they exerted during the #EndSARS protest to organize themselves for active political participation to be in a better position to change the system for the best.

Keywords: *Digital Natives, Online Activism, Celebrities Influence, Twitter Users, #EndSARS Protest, COVID-19 Era*

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Introduction

There are several labels to describe the young people of today. They include the digital natives, the net generation, the Google generation or the millennials. All of these terms are being used to highlight the significance and importance of new technologies within the lives of young people (Gibbons, 2007). For some, new technologies have been such a defining feature in the lives of younger generations that they predict a fundamental change in the way young people communicate, socialise, create and learn. They argue that this shift has profound implications for political awareness, social integration and institutional revolutions (Prensky, 2001a; Gibbons, 2007; Underwood, 2007).

According to Prensky (2001a), one of the more radical consequences of this technology-rich environment is a hypothesized change in the brain structure that means young people think and process information in fundamentally different ways compared to older generations (Prensky, 2001a; Prensky, 2001b). He explains, “Digital Natives are used to receiving information fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to “serious” work (2001a:1). Prensky defines this younger generation as the digital natives as they, are all “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (2001a, p.1).

Digital natives are “fluent in acquiring and learning all sorts of new technology” (Mete, Riegel, Kozen, and Polka, 2017, p.69). They are categorized as intuitive learners as they grew up with technological jargon and can quickly adapt to technological advances. Digital natives’ intuition also stems from their consistent use of electronic devices. Due to their multi-use of many of the tools, digital natives are comfortable with the quick transfer of information and multi-task with ease. The increased usage of social media among digital natives, specifically Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as Snapchat provide them with quick and easy methods for communication (Williams, Crittenden, Keo, and McCarty, 2012). This also highlights their preference for electronic interactions as opposed to face-to-face interactions. Digital natives enjoy social interactions, however, would prefer to use social media and other apps to facilitate communication. This is also evidenced in their usage of emoticons or emojis and slang in text (Williams, et al., 2012). Several scholars have shared their views on social media and digital natives especially as they describe the social media as the natural habitat of the natives. This is because they speak the language of the platforms and are apparently addicted to it that it has become their second nature (Ojohwoh, 2018; Odii, 2013).

Digital native is a term used to describe a person who grew up in the digital era. In Nigeria, the start of the digital era parallels the liberalisation of the country’s telecom industry in 2001 (Idris, 2020). However, the exponential growth in the usage of technology and its smooth embrace by people born between 1980 and 2000 has

blurred the border between those that can be described as digital natives and digital immigrants in Nigeria. This is why Prensky (2001a) originally defined a digital native as being born on or after 1980, however, some scholars define individuals born between 1980 and 1990 as the "first generation of digital natives" (HelsperandEynon, 2009, p.7).

One of the emerging areas that this first generation of digital natives thrives in as a result of global political instabilities and a quest for a revolutionary movement is digital activism which is "an organized public effort, making collective claims on a target authority, in which civic initiators or supporters use digital media" (Edwards, Howard, and Joycen, 2013). Digital activism literature has proposed several frames for how social media impacts collective and connective action, including: providing mobilizing information and news not available in other media, assisting in the coordination of protests, helping users to join political causes, creating opportunities for debate, spreading enthusiasm and enabling emotional contagion (Bennett and Segerberg, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2016; Halupka, 2014, 2016).

One of the major digital activism campaigns initiated by digital natives in Nigeria was the popular #EndSARS protest. End SARS is a decentralized social movement and series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria. The slogan calls for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police with a long record of abuses (Omonobi and Erunke, 2017). The protest which takes its name from the slogan started in 2017 as a Twitter campaign using the hashtag #EndSARS to demand the disbanding of the unit by the Nigerian government (Salaudeen, 2017; Ogundipe, 2017).

After experiencing a revitalization in October 2020 following more revelations of the abuses of the unit, mass demonstrations occurred throughout the major cities of Nigeria, accompanied by vociferous outrage on social media platforms. About 28 million tweets bearing the hashtag have been accumulated on Twitter alone (Kazeem, 2020). Solidarity protests and demonstrations by Nigerians in diaspora and sympathizers occurred in many major cities of the world. The protest is notable for its patronage by a demographic that is made of entirely young Nigerians, the digital native (Busari, 2020; Jacobs and Shoki, 2020).

Celebrities such as Phino, Flavour and Zuby Michael among other celebrities were at the forefront of championing the course on Twitter where they have numerous followers that followed them to the street to perform the actual protest in Enugu, Nigeria which has a teeming youth population with a combination of factors such as unemployment, endemic poverty and rising cybercrime rates have negatively affected the way the youths are perceived. Therefore, digital natives possessing ostentatious items such as clothing, mobile devices and luxury vehicles are viewed as potential criminals, and they suffer harassment, extortion and other human rights violation at the hands of national security agents. Taking to social media, the youth started a digital activism campaign that morphed into a social movement. The #EndSARS revolution caught the attention of citizens in the diaspora, foreign

governments and international organizations, and this put the government under pressure. However, the protests ended abruptly, due to a multiplicity of factors including the government's attempts to silence the protesters rather than provide solutions to issues raised. While there has been a lot of work done on social media and political participation, the #EndSARS revolution has created a vacuum for studying the effects of digital activism, youth identity and conflict on political participation. Using the revolution as a pivot, this paper assessed how Nigerian celebrities influenced digital activism through their tweets on EndSARS protest among the digital natives in Enugu State.

Statement of the Problem

Research on the use of networked technologies by activists and protest movements situates itself at the “intersection between social context, political purpose and technological possibility” (Gillan, Pickerill and Webster, 2008: 151). What is possible, however, changes over time as a result of technological innovation by engineers and from the way users appropriate technologies and embed them in their everyday practices, retooling them to suit their needs and purposes. For instance, Twitter was not invented to coordinate protest events, but a social constructivist approach helps understand that technology innovation and practice is co-shaped by designers and users. The emergence of these platforms have created communities and redefined communication approaches. Digital natives emerged as a result of the communities created by new technologies. Digital activism also emerged as a result of online communities created by the emergence of new technologies. At the forefront of social media use like Twitter are celebrities who are replicas of opinion leaders among the digital natives who influenced digital activism. The #EndSARS protest started on Twitter fueled by these celebrities who have numerous followers. Whether the followership of celebrities on Twitter who tweeted about #EndSARS digital activism influenced the Twitter users' participation in the movement championed by celebrities in the Enugu metropolis is unknown. This is the gap this study was designed to fill.

Objectives of the Study

The following objectives were designed for the study:

1. To ascertain the respondents' frequency of exposure to celebrity tweets #EndSARS protest in Enugu metropolis
2. To ascertain how the respondents reacted to the celebrity tweets they were exposed to on the #EndSARS protest in the Enugu metropolis
3. To determine the respondents' method of participation in the #EndSARS protest after exposure to celebrity tweets in the Enugu metropolis
4. To determine how exposure to celebrity tweets on EndSARS protest influenced respondent participation in the protest in Enugu metropolis

Theoretical Framework

Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) was adopted for this study. This is because the importance of influential, social exchange between politicians and users of social networking sites is implied by some of the tenets of Gerardine DeSanctis' and Marshall Scott Poole's (1994) Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST). A core premise of the AST is the idea that advanced information technologies, like social networking sites, enable multiparty participation and exchange in organizational activities through sophisticated information management (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994). It suggests that to nurture human interaction and communication, different society groups (systems) adapt information technologies (structure).

The AST proposes that this relationship between society and technology, or system and structure, is a two-sided exchange that leads society to a response or "movement" (Turner, 1986). Structures are both the medium and the outcome of social action, and systems are how this information is circulated. This exchange is not only about the technology, but also about how these technologies are used. It is the users who set the agenda for the kind of information they receive and respond to. In its basic form, the AST shows that the advancement of technological devices changes an organizational structure. Accordingly, the AST applies itself as a way to analyze the use and penetration of new media technologies in our society (DeSanctis and Poole, 1994).

Deborah, Bob and Renee (2003) explain that AST focuses on social structures, rules, and resources provided by technologies and institutions as the basis for human activity. The theory purports that structures in technology and structures in action are continually intertwined, continuously shaping each other. Desanctis and Poole (1994) use GDSS, Group Decision Support Systems, for the foundation of their research in AST. Deborah, Bob and Renee (2003) conclude that social structures provided by advanced information technology have two parts. Structural features are specific types of rules and resources, or capabilities, offered by the system. Spirit is the general intent about values and goals underlying a given set of structural features. Spirit helps users understand and interpret the meaning of technology. Examples of dimensions that characterize the spirit of a social structure include decision process, leadership, efficiency, conflict management, and atmosphere.

This theory is considered apt for the study because Twitter fits into the core premise of the AST which suggests that advanced information technologies, like social networking sites, enable multiparty participation and exchange in organizational activities through sophisticated information management. With multiparty participation enablement by Twitter, users can engage their leaders even without having to meet them face to face.

Literature Review

Digital Activism and the EndSARS Protest in Nigeria

Like the Arab Spring, digital activism scholars in Nigeria have indicated that social media platforms facilitated the Occupy Nigeria protest and more recently the #EndSARS protest. They credited the increase in social media use in Nigeria to have brought about a knowledgeable citizenry that empowered the citizens to join the protest. While take-up rates for Nigerian Twitter users have steadily increased over the past few years, numbers show that users have also increased in all other nanomedia such as microblogs. For example, of the 115 million mobile telephone subscribers in Nigeria in 2013, 35 million use their handheld devices to access internet data services (Business Day, 2013).

Digital activism studies in Nigeria found that the ‘socio-economic and political issues discussed by the online protesters motivated offline protesters during the protest’ (Ibrahim, 2013, p. 55); that social media was used during the protests as a result of ‘eroded trust in the mainstream media’ (Kombol, 2014, p. 102), that social media was ‘a driver for the protest’ (Hari, 2014, p. 33), 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 (Akor, 2014; Onwuegbuchi, 2012).

Conversely, some studies have found that the mainstream media and not social media was a driver for digital activism such as the Occupy Nigeria protest and more recently, the #EndSARS protest (Egbunike, 2014; Egbunike and Olorunnisola, 2015). For example, Egbunike and Olorunnisola (2015) contend that the representatives of the mainstream media were better contributors to the prosecution of the protest. However, their study was based on how the mainstream media and social media framed the motivations, diagnosis and prognosis of the protest. As a result of the mainstream media practitioners being trained journalists, it becomes lucid and conventional that they will have the composure and finesse to frame the motivation, diagnosis and prognosis of the protest more than digital activists. Besides, digital activists arguably work in real-time, trying to ‘spread enthusiasm and facilitate emotional contagion’ (Gerbaudo, 2016, p. 254) and as a result, they may not be coherent in framing the motivation, diagnosis and prognosis of the protest.

To understand this further, it is pertinent that one interrogates the logic that necessitates actions such as the #EndSARS protest. Some scholars argue that for a collective action to impact contentious politics, it has to be a collective enterprise that involves the development of strong, thick, deliberative ties between participants or citizens (Hay, 2007; Stoker, 2006). Some other scholars (Gladwell, 2010, 2011; Morozov, 2014) argued that the shift in late modernity towards the atomization and personalization of politics stands in contrast to the thick collective capacity a healthy democratic system requires. From their perspective, the new social trends which prefer thin, loosely organized forms of engagement, can be disadvantageous to

effective governance, and in many ways, echo the growth of neoliberalism which defends a negative view of the state and its interventionist role.

Conversely, Bennett and his colleagues (Bennett, 2012; Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2014; Bennett et al., 2014) contend that communication and the means of communication can facilitate the development of organizational structures. According to them, the communication networks acts as an organization, and so, permits the development of connective action frames. Digitalized technology results in loosely interconnected, interpersonal networks that create outcomes that resemble those of collective action, yet are 'without the same role played by formal organizations or the need for exclusive, collective action framings' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2014, p. 35). This point is crucial, as it highlights how online forms of engagement can reflect the function of their traditional counterparts.

The 2020 EndSARS protest was largely effective due to the use of digital technology, particularly the internet. Nigerian youths tagged the 'sorosoke' generation started the protest from Twitter before taking it to the streets (Amnesty International, 2020).

On 9 October 2020, the #EndSARS hashtag trended globally on social media. A report analysis showed that the online protest was responsible for 48 million mentions and Tweets from 5 million unique authors on Twitter between 5 October and 14 October 2020. EndSARS protests, which started 8 October 2020, are still ongoing in major cities across the country and have attracted international mainstream media attention. It brought to the consciousness of the global world the injustice meted out on the Nigerian youth by SARS men and kept the Nigerian government on their tiptoes in a never seen before fashion.

The campaign has witnessed reactions on social media from international celebrities such as Cardi B, Beyoncé, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Rihanna, Trey Songz, Big Sean, Jidenna, John Boyega, Kanye West, Drake, Diddy, Lewis Hamilton, among others, including footballers, Marcus Rashford, Odion Ighalo, and Mesut Ozil (Bamidele, 2020; Odunsi, 2020; Rodriguez, 2020). The EndSARS protest was endorsed by Jack Dorsey, the C.E.O of Twitter with a unique emoji, and he promoted donations for the protest using Bitcoin (*Nigerian Tribune, 14 October 2020*). With the news that SARS had been disbanded, Nigerians took the news with a grain of salt and carried on with pressing their demands for total disengagement of the unit and wide-ranging reform of the force. The hashtag on social media changed from #EndSARS to #SARSMustEnd! With the announcement of a new unit, Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT), by the Nigerian Police to replace SARS, the hashtag for the protests quickly changed to #EndSWAT on Twitter (*Channels Television, 2020*).

Nwosu, (2020) also noted that on Thursday, 15 October 2020, Google Africa made a statement on its Twitter handle in support of the End SARS protests

condemning police intimidation, oppression, and brutality while urging the government to speedily intervene and resolve the crisis.

Although the protest was cut short untimely on 20 October 2020 due to the Lekki Toll Gate Shooting, it lasted that long due to the internet. Mobilization of protesters, communication, and real-time updates took place via social media. Equally, funds to keep the protest going were raised on the internet. The #EndSARS Online Radio provided entertainment when needed and communication for youth protesting from remote places. Protesters were also connected to safe spaces to hide when there is chaos via the internet. And this is not forgetting that petitions played a huge role in getting the attention of international bodies, and they were signed on the internet.

Methodology

For this study, the survey research method was adopted to investigate celebrities' influence in mobilizing Twitter users for the #EndSARS protest in the Enugu metropolis. The survey was chosen because of its appropriateness in studying the attitudes and opinion of a large population of people hence its relevance to the study. Enugu Metropolis is the capital city of Enugu State located in South-Eastern Nigeria.

According to the 2006 Nigerian census, the Enugu metropolitan area has an estimated population of 722,664. However, since this population is not current, the researcher adopted the United Nations Development Programme Projected Population Index (PPI) of 2.28% to get the current population figure of the city which is 1,026,183. This was adopted as the population for this study.

A sample of 382 people who use Twitter and was exposed to #EndSARS tweets was selected for the study. This sample was arrived at using a table of sample size determination developed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). The table establishes sample sizes against their corresponding population. The sample of 382 was drawn through the purposive sampling technique. The reason for the use of purposive sampling techniques is that the technique is the appropriate strategy the researcher used in getting the samples of Twitter users who were exposed to tweets on the #EndSARS protest in the Enugu metropolis. Nwodu (2006) notes that the purposive sampling technique is often called judgmental sampling because respondents are selected on the condition that they meet certain criteria. This means that the researcher was at liberty to meet the purpose of the research.

Data Presentation

Research Question One:

What is the respondents' frequency of exposure to celebrity tweets on the #EndSARS protest in the Enugu metropolis?

Table 2: Respondents' frequency of exposure to celebrity tweets on #EndSARS

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Daily (High exposure)	320	90.00
Weekly (Medium exposure)	20	6.00
Monthly (Low exposure)	10	3.00
Can't Say (Neutral)	5	1.00
Total	355	100

The import of the data in Table 2 is that out of the 355 respondents that use Twitter in the Enugu metropolis, the majority were exposed to celebrity tweets on #EndSARS on daily basis resulting in high exposure.

Research Question Two

How did the respondents react to the celebrity tweets they were exposed to on the #EndSARS protest?

Table 3: How respondents reacted to celebrity tweets on #EndSARS

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Liked	22	6.00
Commented	15	4.00
Retweeted	17	5.00
All of the above	301	85.00
Total	355	100

Data in Table 3 imply that the majority of Twitter users in the Enugu metropolis reacted to the celebrity tweets on EndSARS in a manner that made the hashtag go viral and created a wider reach even to the international community.

Research Question Three

What is the respondents' mode of participation in the #EndSARS protest after exposure to celebrity tweets in the Enugu metropolis?

Table 4: Respondents' mode of participation in #EndSARS protest

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Online Protest	15	4.00
Offline Protest	20	6.00
Both	320	90.00
Total	355	100

The implication of data on Table 4 is that majority of the respondents took part in the online activism on Twitter by liking, commenting and retweeting celebrity tweets on the EndSARS protest and also took part in the physical protest that took place in Enugu metropolis which was led by some celebrities who tweeted about EndSARS that the users were exposed to.

Research Question Four

How did exposure to celebrity tweets on the #EndSARS protest influence respondent participation in the protest in the Enugu metropolis?

Table 5: How exposure to celebrity tweets on #EndSARS protest influenced respondent participation

Response	Frequency	Percentage
By creating awareness	19	5.00
By arousing emotions	16	5.00
By taking the lead	12	3.00
All of the above	308	87.00
Total	355	100.00

Data in Table 5 imply that exposure to celebrity tweets on EndSARS protest has an overbearing influence on their followers who joined them to participate in the street protest in the Enugu metropolis. This may be because they see celebrities as their role models.

Discussion of Findings

Findings from research question one revealed that there is high exposure to celebrity tweets on #EndSARS as the respondents use Twitter on daily basis during the #EndSARS protest. This resulted in wide coverage which aided the mobilization of Twitter users for the protest. This finding consolidates the assertion of Nwabueze and Ezebuenyi, (2012) who note that new media promise a whole new and interesting political horizon characterized by boundless possibilities and opportunities for the proper participatory political process. This emerging trend transcends the old order and tends to bring both the politicians and the electorate into a closer bond without physical contact, leading to a more robust and sophisticated political process

Finding from research question two revealed that the majority of Twitter users in the Enugu metropolis reacted to the celebrity tweets on EndSARS in a manner that made the hashtag go viral and created a wider reach even to the international community. This finding supports the position of Kazeem (2020) who notes that the campaigns have also been sustained online where they initially began as the #EndSARS hashtag yielded 28 million tweets in just one weekend. A core part of the campaign has included pushing hashtags to global figures to tap into larger, international platforms. The move yielded result with celebrities, from Premier League footballers in England and American hip hop stars like Kanye West and P Daddy to Oscar-winning Hollywood actress also sharing the hashtag and lending their support on Twitter.

Finding from research question three revealed that that majority of the respondents took part in the online activism on Twitter by liking, commenting and retweeting celebrity tweets on the EndSARS protest and also took part in the physical

protest that took place in Enugu metropolis which was led by some celebrities who tweeted about EndSARS that the users were exposed to. This finding confirms the assertion of Kazeem (2020) who avers that one of the core components of the ongoing protests has been the seamless transition between online and offline campaigns. Mainly using Twitter and WhatsApp, young people have rallied and mobilized waves of protests to locations across the country with pretty simple formulas. Kazeem further observes that the protests have spread to other states across the country similarly with social media also deployed as a key tool for organizing. And there has been little reason to offer extra motivation to galvanize young people to show up for these protests: the notoriety of SARS is such that millions of young Nigerians have either had gory personal experiences or know someone who has.

Finding from research question four revealed that exposure to celebrity tweets on EndSARS protest has an overbearing influence on their followers who joined them to participate in the street protest in Enugu metropolis as most of the respondents see the celebrities as their role models. This finding confirms that the assertion of Brown and Olubanji (2020) who observe that the subsequent decision by a couple of musicians to lead protests against #EndSARS galvanized young people in a country where celebrities enjoy enormous respect. While these celebrities spurred the movement in the initial days, protesters rejected any attempt to have centralized leadership or spokespersons. The demonstrations were hence 'leaderless': any young person with a smartphone deemed capable of organizing protests in his community. The protesters themselves have ascribed the success of the movement to their idea that 'we are all leaders', believing that a centralized leadership could have sold out the struggle.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have established that digital natives are the core drivers of the largest online activism in Nigeria in form of the #EndSARS protest which began hashtag on Twitter as early as 2017. It has been also established that among the digital natives, celebrities influence the participation of their followers in both the online and offline protests that took place in the various locations in the country especially the Enugu metropolis. The study further established that digital technologies and social media platforms have redefined social engagements and movements aimed at demanding better governance from the leaders of nations. Twitter particularly was famous for escalating and serving as an instrument for mobilizing its users for the online activism and the physical protest that ensued. These, however, are emerging trends in the use of social media networks in 21st century Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the researcher made the following recommendations:

1. Digital natives should use Twitter and other social media platforms to mobilize themselves for a national dialogue that will bring about a better bargain for the youths of the country.
2. Digital Natives should use the same spirit and platform they used in organizing online activism to organize themselves for active political participation to be in a better position to change the system for the best.
3. Celebrities should be more active politically since the majority of the youths see them as role models to lead the political revolution in Nigeria
4. Further studies should be conducted to reveal how other opinion leaders influenced the escalation of the protest through online engagements.

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