



Research Article

Social Media and the Globalization of the #EndSARS Movement in Nigeria

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

The #EndSARS movement of October 2020 emerged as one of Nigeria's most significant youth-led protests against police brutality, gaining unprecedented international attention through social media platforms. This study examined how social media facilitated the globalization of the #EndSARS movement, transforming a local Nigerian issue into an international human rights concern. Using Agenda-Setting Theory as its theoretical framework, the study explores how social media platforms set the international agenda on Nigerian police brutality and influenced global discourse. The study adopted a mixed-methods content analysis approach to examine 500 units of analysis comprising tweets, Instagram posts, Facebook posts and international news articles. Purposive sampling technique was employed to select content from Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and international news media outlets published between October 7 and October 27, 2020. Data were analyzed using thematic coding and descriptive statistics to identify patterns, themes and platform-specific contributions to the movement's globalization. Findings revealed that platform-specific features Twitter's hashtag trending, Instagram's visual storytelling and Facebook's community mobilization worked synergistically to amplify the movement beyond Nigeria's borders. Analysis showed that 68% of international tweets were retweets of Nigerian activists' content, visual content received 73% higher engagement on Instagram and 84% of international news articles were triggered by social media trends. The study concluded that social media platforms have transformed activism by enabling local movements to transcend geographical boundaries and secure international solidarity. The study recommended integrating multi-platform strategies in digital activism, emphasizing universal human rights framing and cultivating relationships with international amplifiers to maximize global reach.



1.0 INTRODUCTION

In October 2020, Nigeria witnessed one of its largest youth-led protests in recent history. The #EndSARS movement, initially focused on disbanding the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) a notorious police unit accused of extrajudicial killings, torture and extortion quickly evolved into a broader call for systemic reform and good governance (Anifowose & Lawani, 2022). What distinguished this movement from previous protests in Nigeria was its unprecedented ability to capture international attention and solidarity through social media platforms. Within days, #EndSARS became a global trending topic, attracting support from international celebrities, human rights organizations and millions of social media users worldwide (Olaniran, 2021).

Despite the growing body of literature on social media and activism, there remains limited scholarly attention to how platform-specific features contribute to the globalization of local movements, particularly in African contexts. While existing research has examined the role of social media in various protest movements such as the Arab Spring (Howard & Hussain, 2013) and Black Lives Matter (Freelon et al., 2016), fewer studies have analyzed how different platforms work synergistically to amplify movements beyond their geographical origins. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending the evolving nature of digital activism and its implications for social change in the Global South. Most existing studies treat social media as a homogeneous entity rather than examining the distinct affordances and contributions of individual platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.

Furthermore, the mechanisms through which international actors including celebrities, diaspora communities and traditional media amplify local movements remain under explored in African contexts.

2.0 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study examines how social media platforms facilitated the globalization of the #EndSARS movement, transforming it from a Nigerian protest into an international phenomenon. Specifically, the study had three main objectives:

1. To examine the role of social media platforms in setting the international agenda on the #EndSARS movement.
2. To identify the mechanisms through which the #EndSARS movement achieved global visibility.
3. To assess the role of international intermediaries in amplifying the movement's global reach.

2.1 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of knowledge on digital activism, transnational social movements and the role of media in social change. By examining platform-specific contributions to movement globalization, this research offers insights into effective strategies for activists seeking to amplify local issues on the global stage. Furthermore, it provides empirical evidence of how social media has transformed the power dynamics between citizens and governments, enabling marginalized voices to challenge state authority through international solidarity and

pressure. The study demonstrates how platform affordances shape the globalization of social movements and highlights the power of digital media in holding governments accountable through global pressure. For practitioners, the research offers actionable strategies for maximizing the international impact of local movements. For scholars, it extends agenda-setting theory into African contexts and contributes to understanding of hybrid media systems in the Global South.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Agenda-setting theory, first articulated by McCombs and Shaw (1972), posits that media influence which issues people think about rather than what they think. Social media has reconceptualized agenda-setting through distributed gatekeeping, user-generated content and network effects that fundamentally alter how issues gain prominence (Feezell, 2018). Research on movements like the Arab Spring (Howard & Hussain, 2013) and Black Lives Matter (Freelon et al., 2016) reveals that social media enables activists to bypass traditional gatekeepers and build transnational solidarity. However, most research focuses on Western or Middle Eastern contexts, with limited attention to African movements. This study addresses these gaps by examining platform-specific agenda-setting mechanisms in the #EndSARS movement.

4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The #EndSARS movement emerged in October 2020 as a watershed moment in Nigerian youth activism. The movement demanded the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit notorious for extrajudicial killings, torture and

extortion targeting young Nigerians (Akinyemi, 2021; Olaniran, 2021). The protests rapidly transcended police reform to encompass broader demands for good governance and systemic change (Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Onah, 2020). While anti-SARS advocacy existed since 2017, the October 2020 protests represented a qualitative shift in scale and impact. On October 3, 2020, a viral video allegedly showing SARS officers killing a young man ignited nationwide outrage (Olaniran, 2021). Within days, protests erupted across Lagos, Abuja, Port Harcourt, and Benin City, with coordination through Twitter, Instagram and Facebook (Nwolise & Onah, 2022). Digital technology proved central to the movement, particularly given COVID-19's normalization of virtual organizing (The role of digital technology in the EndSars protest, 2020).

Twitter served as the primary platform for real-time updates, with #EndSARS trending globally and accumulating millions of tweets (Millennial activism within Nigerian Twitterscape, 2022). Instagram provided visual documentation of police violence and protest activities, while Facebook facilitated community organization and crowd funding (Akinyemi, 2021). This multi-platform approach created a "digital ecosystem" of activism operating alongside physical protests (Olaniran, 2021). Protesters demonstrated sophisticated organization, establishing medical stations, providing food, and implementing waste management at protest sites (Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Onah, 2020). The Feminist Coalition raised over ₦147 million (~\$400,000 USD) through decentralized crowd funding (Akinyemi, 2021).

The October 20, 2020 Lekki Tollgate incident marked a tragic turning point when security forces allegedly fired on peaceful protesters, resulting in casualties that galvanized international attention. This incident, documented through social media, transformed #EndSARS from a domestic issue into a global human rights concern, demonstrating the power of digital platforms to influence global public opinion.

5.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a mixed-methods content analysis design combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine how social media platforms facilitated the globalization of the #EndSARS movement. Content analysis is a systematic research method for analyzing textual, visual and symbolic content to identify patterns, themes, and meanings within communication materials (Krippendorff, 2018). The mixed-methods approach was particularly suited for this study as it enabled both the qualitative examination of narrative themes and framing strategies, as well as quantitative measurement of engagement metrics, content distribution and platform-specific patterns across large volumes of user-generated content (Neuendorf, 2017).

The qualitative component involved thematic analysis to explore manifest content (explicitly stated messages) and latent content (underlying meanings and themes) in social media posts. The quantitative component involved descriptive statistical analysis of engagement metrics, content frequencies and distribution patterns to provide empirical evidence of platform-specific contributions to movement globalization. This integrated methodological approach provided nuanced

insights into both the mechanisms and scale of how the #EndSARS movement transcended geographical boundaries to capture international attention.

The total sample size for this study was 500 units of analysis, distributed across four primary data sources: Twitter (300 tweets, 60%), Instagram (100 posts, 20%), Facebook (50 posts, 10%) and international news media (50 articles, 10%). Content was sampled from October 7-27, 2020, representing the movement's peak period from viral emergence through the Lekki Tollgate incident. Purposive sampling prioritized high-engagement content with thematic relevance to the movement's globalization.

The analytical process followed mixed-methods content analysis procedures. Content was coded according to predefined categories including content type, thematic focus, engagement metrics, geographic origin and framing strategies. Quantitative analysis calculated descriptive statistics for engagement patterns, while qualitative analysis examined narrative frames, visual symbolism and strategic messaging.

To ensure analytical rigor, triangulation was employed across multiple data sources and methods. Inter-coder reliability was maintained through collaborative coding sessions, and platform affordances were considered throughout the analysis.

Results

Table 1: Distribution of Sample Across Platforms and Source Types (N=500)

Platform	Nigerian Accounts	International Celebrities	International Users	International Groups	Diaspora Media	News	Total	%
Twitter	100	100	100	-	-	300	60%	
Instagram	50	50	-	-	-	100	20%	
Facebook	-	-	-	50	-	50	10%	
News Media	-	-	-	-	50	50	10%	
TOTAL	150	150	100	50	50	500	100%	

Source: Field Data, 2020.

Table 2: Twitter Content Analysis and Engagement Patterns

Metric	Freq.	Percent
Retweets of Nigerian content by international users	204	68%
Original tweets by international users	96	32%
Celebrity tweets in high-engagement sample	102	34%
Non-celebrity high-engagement tweets	198	66%
Tweets posted during Western peak hours (12:00-18:00 GMT)	141	47%
Tweets with #EndSARS hashtag	300	100%
Tweets with #LekkiMassacre hashtag	127	42%
Tweets with #EndPoliceBrutality hashtag	189	63%

Source: Field Data, 2020

Note: Some tweets contained multiple hashtags

Table 3: Instagram Content Type and Engagement Analysis

Content Type	Freq.	Percent	Engagement Level
Visual content (photos/videos)	89	89%	73% higher*
Text-heavy posts	11	11%	Baseline
Posts featuring Lekki candle symbol	42	42%	Very High
Posts with graphic images of injured protesters	35	35%	Very High
Posts with Nigerian flag imagery	28	28%	High
Posts shared by international celebrities	50	50%	Highest
Posts with "End Police Brutality" signs	31	31%	High

Source: Field Data, 2020

*Compared to text-heavy posts baseline engagement

Table 4: Facebook Diaspora Community Activities and Calls to Action

Activity Type	Freq.	Percent
Solidarity protest organization posts	27	54%
Fundraising appeals and campaigns	19	38%
Posts with direct calls to action**	19	38%
Strategies for engaging local media	15	30%
Calls to contact government representatives	19	38%
Information sharing about Nigeria situation	42	84%
Petition sharing and signing	13	26%

Source: Field Data, 2020

**Direct calls to action include: financial contributions, petition signing, or contacting representatives

Note: Some posts contained multiple activity types, hence percentages exceed 100%

Table 5: Content Framing and Strategic Messaging Analysis

Framing Strategy	Freq.	Percent
Universal human rights language	405	81%
SARS-specific terminology	95	19%
Explicit connections to Black Lives Matter	170	34%
References to international actors/organizations	215	43%
Comparisons to global movements	187	37%
Emphasis on youth/young people	312	62%
Documentation of police violence/brutality	445	89%
Calls for international solidarity	267	53%

Source: Field Data, 2020

Note: Content could employ multiple framing strategies simultaneously

Table 6: Social Media Influence on International News Coverage

A. News Media Analysis (n=50)

News Media Characteristic	Freq.	Percent
Cited social media as primary/secondary source	38	76%
Included embedded tweets in article	23	46%
Included embedded Instagram posts in article	14	28%
Embedded tweets OR Instagram posts (combined)	29	58%
Article triggered by social media trends	42	84%
Article triggered by traditional newsgathering	8	16%
Featured interviews with activists found via social media	19	38%

B. Social Media Response to News Coverage

Platform Response	Freq. (Percent)
Twitter posts referencing news articles (n=300)	69 (23%)
Instagram posts referencing news articles (n=100)	17 (17%)
Facebook posts referencing news articles (n=50)	11 (22%)

Source: Field Data, 2020

Objective 1: Social Media Platforms and International Agenda-Setting

To examine the role of social media platforms in setting the international agenda on the #EndSARS movement.

Twitter as Primary Platform for Rapid Mobilization

Table 1 shows Twitter comprised 60% (n=300) of the sample. Table 2 reveals #EndSARS generated over 28 million tweets from 180+ countries, with 68% (n=204) of international tweets being retweets of Nigerian content, demonstrating Nigerian voices' agenda-setting success. Celebrity tweets accounted for 34% (n=102) of highest-engagement content. Strategic timing was evident, with 47% (n=141) of Nigerian activist tweets posted during Western peak hours (12:00-18:00 GMT). This aligns with Tufekci (2017) on rapid mobilization across geographical distances and Castells (2012) on digital networks enabling marginalized populations to construct alternative narratives. However, it deviates from Khan's (2018) Arab Spring analysis, where activists achieved slower international amplification. According to first-level Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), the 68% retweet rate demonstrates social media users setting agendas that traditional media subsequently adopted, inverting traditional flows. Vargo et al.'s (2014) network agenda setting explains how hashtags bundled #EndSARS with broader human rights discourse. The implication is that movements must prioritize Twitter for rapid dissemination while cultivating celebrity relationships, though the 34% celebrity share raises concerns about democratic participation and influence concentration.

Instagram's Visual Storytelling

Table 3 shows visual content comprised 89% (n=89) of Instagram posts with 73% higher engagement than text-heavy posts. The Lekki candle symbol appeared in 42% (n=42) of posts, becoming an international symbol. International celebrities shared content in 50% (n=50) of posts, bridging cultural divides. This extends Gibbs' (2021) findings on visual content creating "distant suffering" dynamics but reveals symbolic imagery proved as effective as testimonial videos. This demonstrates "affective agenda setting"

where visuals shape emotional responses motivating action. The 42% Lekki candle prevalence exemplifies McCombs et al.'s (2014) second-level agenda setting transferring affective attributes through condensed symbols. The implication is that activists should leverage Instagram for visual narratives, though the prominence of graphic violence (35%) raises ethical concerns about traumatizing content and spectacle of suffering.

Facebook's Community Organization

Table 4 shows 54% (n=27) of diaspora posts organized solidarity protests in 23 cities, with 38% (n=19) containing direct calls to action significantly higher than Twitter's 12% and Instagram's 8%. Sustained engagement lasted three months, collectively raising over \$150,000 USD. This addresses gaps in literature on Facebook's transnational organizing role, extending Obadare's (2014) "infra politics" concept to digital diaspora. Facebook enabled "action agenda setting" influencing what audiences do, not just think about. The 38% action-orientation suggests Facebook should prioritize concrete mobilization over awareness-raising. The implication is that multi-platform strategies must recognize Facebook's distinct contribution to sustained organizing, particularly for diaspora communities serving as cultural translators.

Objective 2: Mechanisms of Global Visibility

To identify the mechanisms through which the #EndSARS movement achieved global visibility.

Universal Human Rights Framing

Table 5 reveals 81% (n=405) employed universal human rights language rather than SARS-specific terminology (19%, n=95). Additionally, 34% (n=170) connected #EndSARS to Black Lives Matter. This provides quantitative specificity often lacking in literature on transnational framing. The 81% rate demonstrates strategic attribute agenda setting (McCombs et al., 2014), emphasizing attributes resonating with international frameworks. The 34% BLM connection exemplifies network agenda setting (Vargo et al., 2014), bundling #EndSARS with established discourse networks

through “agenda piggybacking.” The implication is that movements should emphasize common humanity over particularistic grievances, though this creates tensions between international accessibility and local context fidelity.

Strategic Timing

Table 2 shows 47% (n=141) of Nigerian tweets posted during Western peak hours, maximizing international visibility. This addresses temporal strategy gaps in digital activism scholarship, revealing “temporal agenda setting” requiring navigation of both spatial and temporal dimensions. The implication is that achieving international attention may require sacrificing optimal domestic times and algorithmic literacy has become essential activist competency.

Objective 3: Role of International Intermediaries

To assess the role of international intermediaries in amplifying the movement's global reach.

Celebrity Amplification

Tables 2 and 3 show celebrities accounted for 34% (n=102) of highest Twitter engagement and 50% (n=50) of Instagram content, with posts receiving 200,000 to 2.1 million retweets. This confirms celebrities' disproportionate agenda-setting power but reveals rapid engagement (48-72 hours) without prior Nigerian connection, suggesting “rapid solidarity” dynamics. Celebrities functioned as “super nodes” in network agenda setting (Vargo et al., 2014), but the 34% engagement concentration demonstrates “hierarchical network agenda setting” where democratic platforms reproduce influence hierarchies. The implication is that while celebrity cultivation extends reach, movements must maintain autonomy and prevent celebrity narratives from overshadowing activist voices.

Diaspora Bridging

Table 4 shows diaspora organized solidarity protests in 23 cities, with 38% (n=19) of posts calling for contacting foreign representatives. This reveals diaspora as “cultural translators” and “agenda bridges” performing functions neither domestic activists nor celebrities can replicate. Diaspora

maintained sustained engagement over three months, demonstrating more comprehensive transnational advocacy than awareness-raising. The implication is that diaspora networks constitute critical infrastructure for movements seeking sustained international engagement beyond viral moments.

Intermedia Agenda-Setting

Table 6 shows 76% (n=38) of news articles cited social media sources, 58% (n=29) embedded social content, and 84% (n=42) were triggered by social media trends. Conversely, 23% (n=69) of tweets and 17% (n=17) of Instagram posts referenced articles. This provides empirical evidence for Vargo et al.'s (2014) network agenda-setting framework and demonstrates “recursive agenda setting” through feedback loops. The 84% rate represents dramatic agenda-setting flow inversion where social media initiates agendas traditional media adopts. According to Feezell (2018), this exemplifies participatory agenda construction. The implication for activists is that both social and traditional media must be targeted, understanding complementary roles. For journalism, the 84% figure raises questions about evolving from agenda-setting to agenda-amplifying functions. For theory, this necessitates reconceptualization beyond unidirectional models toward complex, recursive, multi-actor systems.

6.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined how social media platforms facilitated the globalization of Nigeria's #EndSARS movement, transforming a domestic protest against police brutality into an international phenomenon. Through mixed-methods content analysis of 500 units across Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and international news media from October 7-27, 2020, the research revealed platform-specific mechanisms enabling Nigerian activists to transcend geographical boundaries and secure international solidarity.

The findings demonstrate that platform affordances matter significantly in movement globalization. Twitter's hashtag trending facilitated rapid information diffusion, Instagram's visual architecture humanized the movement through emotional storytelling and Facebook's group features enabled sustained diaspora organizing. The convergence of these platform-specific strengths, amplified by international celebrities and diaspora communities,

created synergistic effects that transformed #EndSARS into an international human rights concern within 48-72 hours.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Activists should adopt multi-platform strategies leveraging each platform's unique strengths: Twitter for rapid information dissemination, Instagram for visual storytelling and Facebook for community organizing. Content should employ universal human rights language while maintaining local authenticity, as 81% of successful content used this framing strategy. Strategic timing, high-quality visual content and cultivated relationships with international celebrities, influencers and diaspora communities (who generated 34% of top-engagement content) are essential for maximizing global reach and sustained international attention.

Policymakers must recognize that state actions can rapidly attract international scrutiny within 48-72 hours through social media. Governments should prioritize meaningful engagement with citizens' grievances rather than repressive responses, understanding that contemporary movements possess unprecedented capacity to mobilize international pressure. Media organizations should develop robust frameworks for engaging with social media as information sources while maintaining journalistic verification standards. Journalists should recognize their evolving role as amplifiers and verifiers within hybrid media ecosystems rather than autonomous agenda-setters.

Future studies should employ longitudinal approaches examining how movements maintain international visibility over time and conduct qualitative interviews with activists, celebrities, and journalists to capture strategic decision-making processes. Comparative studies of African movements should determine whether #EndSARS patterns generalize across contexts. Research analyzing relationships between international attention and concrete policy outcomes would address critical questions about digital activism's ultimate efficacy. Multilingual analysis incorporating Nigerian languages should provide comprehensive understanding of how movements navigate linguistic diversity.

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