

Social Media and Endsars Protest In Nigeria

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Abstract

Social media has been useful as a tool of mobilization and campaign in Nigeria. It has been a veritable means of lodging complaints against the unethical conduct of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a unit of the Nigeria Police Force. Between 2016 and October 2020, a series of online and offline protests was organised against the operation of SARS, through the EndSARS campaign. Adopting social responsibility media theory, the paper interrogated the impacts of social media on the EndSARS protest in Nigeria. The desk research method was used in obtaining data from secondary sources. The paper argued that social media served as a useful platform Nigerian youths deployed in organizing and mobilizing for a protest against the misconduct of the personnel of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad and also demanded for police reforms. Though, a useful platform against misconduct of SARS, it spread fake information which aggravated the protest which was against the intention of the protesters. The paper recommended compliance with the provisions of a series of police reforms, creation of adequate awareness and accessibility of internal channels by the Police Service Commission through which Nigerians can lodge their complaints against police officer brutality to protect fundamental rights. Nigeria Police Force should also make efforts to improve the method of handling protest to enhance the safety of all individuals. Also, the rule and regulations that control the abuse of social media should be put in place and strictly enforced to discourage people from posting fake news that will aggravate the security challenges in Nigeria.

Keywords: EndSARS, media, protest, SARS , social media

Introduction

With the emergence of Information Communication Technology innovation in Africa, the leverage of digital platform as a channel of communication has become noteworthy in all areas of human interactions particularly in commercial aspect of human engagements. Due to the accessibility and ability of individuals to express themselves and connect with others, social media gained popularity. These platforms have become a significant part of many people's lives

and are used for different purposes including communicating with friends and family, sharing thoughts and opinions, and networking. Utilisation of social platforms have assisted social groups and businesses to flourish through dissemination of facts and interaction in the modern world. They have provided a powerful tool for sharing information, raising awareness, and connecting with a broader audience (Ajisafe, Ojo &Monyani, (2021),.

October 2020 was known for civil unrest and mass riots in Nigeria caused by the EndSARS protest organised against police brutality (Ojedokun, Ogunleye & Aderinto, 2021). Nigerians have lodged complaints through the police complaints bureau, police public complaint telephone hotline numbers and online profiles yet citizens are continuously subjected to varying degree of abuses. Before October 2020, online and offline protests were organised to draw the attention of the Nigeria Police and federal government to the unprofessional conduct of SARS officials (Ezeamalu, 2017; Ogundipe, 2018). Police overbearing remains a prevalent problem in Nigeria in spite of several complaints and the need for reformation of the activities of its personnels (Ojedokun, Ogunleye & Aderinto, 2021). There are various channels through which citizens can seek police accountability such as the police complaints bureau, the police public complaints telephone hotline numbers, and online profiles. The police authority did not take any conscious step to correct the misconduct of the officers particularly the SARS involved in human rights violations (Ojedokun, Ogunleye & Aderinto, 2021). The negligence of the police authority to hold its personnels accountable led to the emergence of endsars protest.

The Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was set up in 1992 during the Retired General Ibrahim Babangida's regime in order to combat armed robbery prevalent in Lagos state (Mustapha, 2021). The SARS officers were carrying out their secret operation against violent crimes in civilian clothes and discreet vehicles without carrying weapons in public. They were primarily responsible for assisting in the apprehension of culprits and armed robbers. In 2002, SARS was extended to neighboring states to apprehend suspected criminals like armed robbers and hired assassins in order to prosecute them (Mustapha, 2021). The team rapidly began erecting obstacles and extorting money from the public.

The SARS officers began carrying weapons publicly and were subsequently accused of unlawful killings, rape, arbitrary arrests, and other illegal activities (Mustapha, 2021). In 2017, the #EndSARS was used to initiate online protest against the unprofessional conduct of the squad (Mustapha, 2021). The hashtag was used to create awareness about the abuse of power by SARS

personnel and to demand police reforms. Many Nigerians used the #EndSARS to keep record of SARS atrocities online and urged that the perpetrators of human rights violations be held accountable. Social media platforms were maximised by Nigerian youth to stage the EndSARS protest.

Social Media

Usman and Oghuvbu (2021) refer to social media as a means of interaction via online technology among people, generating and changing ideas and opinions in virtual communities and networks. Davis (2019) views social media as the set of interactive Internet applications that facilitate collaborative or individual creation, curation, and sharing of user-generated content. Examples of social media platforms are numerous and varied. Social media include Facebook, Friendster, Wikipedia, dating sites, Craigslist, recipe sharing sites (e.g. allrecipes.com), YouTube and Instagram.

Social media allow people to connect, produce or re-produce value through online conversation and collaboration with the ability to achieve massive scalability in real-time . Social media has developed into a large and influential force in changing the way people connect and communicate with different beings. According to Kasturi and Vardhan (2014), the traditional forms of large-scale communication declined with the emergence of social media because of the dominant influence it has over traditional media. As argued by Kasturi and Vardhan (2014) , the traditional forms of large-scale communication, exchange of information was only a monologue or a simple two-way conversation between two people. In traditional media, individuals used to share information or ideas about an organisation without using interactive means. Such communication was made mainly through one-to-one communication either in person or on the phone; either through the mail or e-mail.

Mustapha (2021) viewed social media are websites and computer programs which permit people to interact on the internet through a computer or mobile phone. Social media platforms include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Linkedin and many others. They are employed to solicit input on public safety-related issues and for community engagement and customer support. During an emergency, the media often serves as sources of information. Schwartz-Asher, et al (2020) conceptualised social media as web-based applications, promoting creation and exchange of user- generated content. Social media are internet tools and service that enable individuals to

engage, create content, share it and search for it (Olaewaju, Sanusi, Ajala & Oluwasanmi, 2024). Therefore, social media are used purposely to facilitate social interaction among a large number of diverse people via web-based technology exchanging ideas and opinions on the internet.

EndSARS Protest

Akanle and Shokoya (2025) described protest as a fundamental human right and a form of social demonstration that is carried. Unachukwu and Ezewudo (2024) conceptualised EndSARS as a combination of two words ‘end’ and ‘SARS’. ‘End’ means to bring to a stopping point while ‘SARS’ means the controversial Nigerian Police Unit that has been the target of nationwide protests, requesting that police brutality should be put to an end. EndSARS is a protest staged to disband, terminate the elite that has exploited and appropriated the collective patrimony to itself (Unachukwu and Ezewudo, 2024).

Oyebola (2022) refers to EndSARS as an anti-police movement propelled by the youths against police abuses and brutality on Nigerians. EndSARS protest is a protest movement that started in 2017 in Nigeria as a response to police brutality particularly the SARS (Ajisebiyawo, 2022). It marked the beginning of adopting a new approach of resolving the unethical behaviour of police officers by Nigerians. It was an unprecedented protest and it undoubtedly stands as a significant event in the Nigerian sociopolitical environment. Therefore, EndSARS protest means a social demonstration staged against police brutality by Nigerian youths to demand disbandment of SARS. With the establishment of SARS, Nigerians thought it would be of great benefit as unit of security architecture but later became a thorn in the flesh of the citizens particularly the youths.

.Social Responsibility Media Theory

The social responsibility media theory was developed in the 1940s by scholars such as Theodore Peterson, Wilbur Schramm, and others in the mid-20th century in the United States. It was a response to concerns about the role of media in the society. It stemmed from the American Commission on the “Freedom of the Press” (Mustapha, 2021).

This theory asserts that media organisations must act in the best interests of the society, promote ethical and responsible journalism, and follow due process for their work. Social media can be used to communicate people’s idea but they are not permitted to encroach on peoples’ rights or disrupt social systems. The theory asserts that media is used to speak for relegated

communities, and make influential institution answerable for their actions. The theory reiterates promotion of democratic values increases a more ethical and responsible media industry and encouraged media outlet to act as a watchdog for the betterment of the public. The theory is criticized for its difficulty in defining what exactly constitutes the “public interest” or how media organisations should be held accountable for it. The theory is suitable for this paper because it explains how social media was used to mobilise the youths against SARS brutality. The social responsibility media theory interprets how social media was used in raising awareness about police unethical conduct and mobilised support for the EndSARS protest, a demand for the dissolution of SARS officials, and the reform of police in Nigeria.

EndSARS Protest in Nigeria: A brief Overview

The basic reason for the EndSARS protest was the persistent police ruthlessness and misconduct in Nigeria. A division of the Nigeria Police Force, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) was charged with prevalent human rights abuses, extrajudicial killings, and extortion for a number of years (Muhammed, 2017; Ogundipe, 2018; Olawoyin, 2018; Onyekwena, 2018; Cheta, 2023). The unit was known to target the youths who are perceived to be internet fraudsters, resulting to an increasing sense of frustration and anger among young people in Nigeria. EndSARS protest was prompted by diverse cases of abuse and harassment by SARS officials, which were broadly circulated on social media. The stories of the experiences shared by SARS victims and their loved ones through social media fuelled the protests online and offline to a greater degree that hoodlums, sponsored by a set of selfish individuals took advantage of the protests and started looting public and private treasuries, destroying properties. Young Nigerians were stirred up via Twitter and Facebook to participate in the EndSARS protest against police excesses. Twitter, Chief executive officer, Jack Twitter Dorsey, assisted the protest by creating a particular emoji for the protest and soliciting financial contributions for the protesters in Bitcoins. This act has caused his business and bitcoin to lose ground in Nigeria as the Federal government placed a ban on them (Usman & Oghuvbu, 2021).

Unachukwu and Ezewudo (2024); Usman and Ogbuvbu (2021), Amnesty International gave a report in 2016 that people in the custody of SARS experienced different kinds of physical

assaults. The high rate of unemployment and low economic opportunity increased the widespread anger and dissatisfaction in the midst of youths. Absence of culpability and fairness for affected individuals of police cruelty further ignited the need for change. In the face of SARS brutality, the Nigeria Police failed to hold its personnel accountable which triggered the protest by the youths. The subsequent wave of the #EndSARS protest which ignited widespread riots and civil unrest in Nigeria was triggered by a viral video showing SARS officials in Ughelli town, Delta state killing a man in October 3, 2020 (Okon, 2020). There was another report of the killing of Daniel Chibuike, a musician in the Elelenwo area in Portharcourt (Usman & Oghuvbu, 2021). These occurrences influence a rekindled strong feeling of anger which brought the matter of SARS cruelty to the limelight of national and international attention resulting to protest across Nigeria and in the diaspora. Many Nigerian youths involved in the nationwide EndSARS protests which began on Thursday, October 8, 2020 in the major cities of Nigeria such as Lagos, Abuja, Ibadan, and others.

The protest represented a demand for accountability, justice, and meaningful reforms within the wider society. The protesters in Lagos gathered and spent the night at the Lagos State Government House entrance in Alausa until they were addressed by the Deputy State Governor, Femi Hamzat. The Deputy Governor addressed the protesters by acknowledging the police officers misconduct, condemned the acts and expressed the readiness of the state government to eliminate the threat at the early stage. The Inspector General of Police, announced on Sunday, October 11, 2020, the formal termination of SARS Operatives but the protesters did not take the announcement seriously. The reason was because an announcement was made previously without implementation and the protesters did not want to be taken for fools. A representative of the Nigerian police department, Frank Uba, on Tuesday, October 13, 2020 announced the establishment of Special Weapon and Tactics Team (SWAT) to handle the responsibility of disbandment of SARS. The protesters regarded the development as a prank because they believed it was only the nomenclature that changed while the SARS personnel still remained (Usman & Ogbuvbu, 2021). Important personalities such as the former President, Muhammadu Buhari, the Senate President, Ahmed Lawan and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Femi Gbajabiamila demanded that the protest come to an end. State Judicial Panel of Inquiry was authorised to consider the reports of abuses leveled against the SARS by the 36 states of Nigeria (Oyebola, 2022).

Assessment of Social Media in EndSARS Protest in Nigeria

In organising and mobilising EndSARS protest in Nigeria, social media played a very important role. Nigerian youths utilised Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook to circulate information, organise protests, spread awareness about police cruelty. The #EndSARS went viral, assisted to intensify the voices of protesters and captivated international attention to the issue. According to Adeleke (2017), over 100,000 followers were attracted by the Twitter hashtag across cities in Nigeria. Social media platforms enabled individuals to communicate their personal stories of police cruelty, which mobilise support for the protest. The popularity gained by the social media during the #EndSARS protest outwitted traditional media, making it an essential tool for campaigning by attracting international celebrities, politicians, diplomats, media corporations to pressure the Nigerian government to address EndSARS protesters and their demands. Nigeria government responded to the impacts of social media on EndSARS protest by preventing international travels by the protest leaders and also froze their financial assets (Conciliation Resources, 2024). For instance, Twitter was banned for seven months in Nigeria between June 2021 and January 2022 for generating fund and creating logo for the EndSARS protest. Nigerian government attempted to regulate the use of social media via legislation like the upgraded Defamatory and Offensive Publications Act (1966), Cyber Crimes Prohibition and Prevention Act (2015), and Anti- Social Media Bill of 2019 (Conciliation Resources, 2024).

A major impact of the social media on the EndSARS Protest was that it led to the dissolution of SARS officers by the Inspector General of Police, Muhammed Adamu on 11th October 2020 (Adepegba & Oyero, 2020). Social media helped in drawing national and global attention to police excesses in Nigeria (Ojedokun, Ogunleye & Aderinto (2021).

Social media provided ample opportunity for the main victims and witnesses of police cruelty to publicly make their complaints and ensured the guilty officers were held accountable. It created awareness to police officials that any of their impolite behaviour could be video-recorded and sent to the general public online (Peters & Ojedokun, 2019). In addition, social media made the police officers cautious against human rights abuses as their misconduct could be recorded and shared widely online.

The SARS officials were arrested and prosecuted for professional misconduct. Some ex-SARS officials found guilty of engaging in unprofessional conduct were made answerable for their actions by extreme tension exerted on the Nigeria Police Force by the protesters. For example, on 20 October 2020. A Panel was set up on SARS, saddled with the duties of investigating allegations of human rights abuse against SARS officers and recommended the removal of 35 of them out of Nigeria Police Force; prosecute 33 personnel and demoting 23 (Ikhilae, 2020). The mass action caused by the EndSARS campaign compelled some governors to personally constitute a Judiciary investigatory panel to probe incidents of police cruelty and extrajudicial actions carried out by SARS official assigned to their specific states (*This Day*, 2020). Moreover, social media prompted the Nigerian government decision to bring reformation to the Nigeria Police Force and enhance the working conditions of police personnel ((Ojedokun, Ogunleye & Aderinto, 2021). In addition, Oyero (2020) revealed that in order to improve the welfare of the officers of Nigeria Police, President Muhammadu Buhari in a national address on October 22, 2020 instructed the National Salaries, Income, and Wages Commission to immediately create a new salary scale for police officials in the country. The Inspector General of Police, in November 4, 2020 issued a directive for the removal of police personnel assigned to certain politicians, organisations, and important individuals in the country as requested by the EndSARS protesters (Ayitogo, 2020). One of the detrimental impacts of social media on EndASRS was that it spread fake news. This could be seen in the case of the Lekki shooting in which a lot of videos showed people were killed. Contrarily, those acclaimed to have died in the shooting came out to say they were alive (Usman & Oghuvbu, 2021). The protest led to what was referred to as lekki massacre where some unarmed youth protesters were gunned down by some yet-to-be-identified men of the Nigerian army (Oyebola, 2022). The Amnesty International gave a report that at least 12 people were killed from the shootings at the Lekki Toll Gate on Tuesday, October 20, 2020 by a group of armed forces personnel (Oyebola, 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Social media played a crucial role in the organisation and mobilisation of the EndSARS movement in Nigeria by using it to spread information, coordinate protests and create awareness on the police brutality and demanded police reform. The EndSARS movement through social media platforms eventually led to the dissolution of SARS and the police officers found guilty

were penalised. Apart from mobilizing the EndSARS protest, in a negative way, social media became a tool for spreading fake information, stories and exaggeration of incidents like the Lekki massacre. In order to forestall future occurrence of such protests and check the misuse of social networking platforms, compliance with the provisions of police reforms is important in protecting citizen's rights. While non-compliance should be reported to relevant authorities for appropriate sanction.

Police Service Commission should raise sufficient awareness and provides internal channels for individuals to forward their complaints and seek redress against subsequent police officer excesses. The Nigeria Police Force must endeavour to improve the skill of its officers in handling protest which always results in injury and death. Regular in-service training should be organised for policemen to boost professionalism in order to ensure the overall safety of the general public. Government should ensure that speedy fair trial of EndSARS protesters detained to prevent further infringement of their rights. The rules and regulations that monitor the misuse of social network platforms should be put in place and enforced strictly to prevent people from posting fake and exaggerated incidents online. Social media users need to be enlightened on how to use it ethically and question the accuracy and legitimacy of the information they come across online before sharing.

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