

Research Article

Digital Literacy and Civic Agency: Youth-led Hashtag Movements in Nigeria's #EndSARS Protest

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Abstract

Social media has transformed activism by facilitating the mobilisation of support, enabling challenges to power structures, and influencing public discourse. The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, which protested police brutality and governance failures, demonstrated the efficacy of hashtag activism as a form of digital advocacy. This study examines the role of digital literacy in promoting engagement, mobilisation strategies, and participation in the #EndSARS protest. It specifically analyses the use of Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram by digitally literate users for organising protests, disseminating real-time information, and countering misinformation. Employing qualitative content analysis of social media posts, digital campaign materials, and online discussions, this study investigates the role of digital literacy in message framing, audience engagement, and the overall sustainability of the movement. Individuals with higher digital literacy typically create mission-driven content that fosters significant engagement, using diverse media and algorithmic visibility to enhance content reach. However, the long-term success of the movement was hindered by challenges such as internet censorship, the digital divide, and state-sponsored misinformation campaigns. This research contributes to academic discussions on digital activism, online political participation, digital literacy, and social movements through its educational and community profile. It underscores the necessity of structured digital literacy curricula that enhance civic engagement and equip grassroots activists with essential digital skills.

Keywords: digital literacy; hashtag activism; online advocacy; #EndSARS; social movements

I. Introduction

The emergence of hashtag movements as a form of youth-led civic engagement has redefined political participation across global and local contexts. In Nigeria, the 2020 #EndSARS protest demonstrated a significant shift in the mode of civic engagement from physical protests to digitally enabled activism, propelled largely by the country's tech-savvy youth. While much has been written about the broader implications of social media and civic unrest, less attention has been devoted to the intersection of digital literacy and civic agency within such movements. This study centres digital literacy as the analytical pivot for understanding how Nigerian youth mobilised, strategised, and engaged in political resistance during the #EndSARS protest. Digital literacy is more than the ability to use social media or digital devices; it encompasses critical engagement, content creation, algorithmic awareness, and ethical information sharing (Hobbs, 2010; Mihailidis and Thevenin, 2013). In protest contexts, these skills become instrumental for youth to assert their civic agency. As Castells (2012) argues in his theory of networked movements, digital platforms provide the structural autonomy necessary for grassroots mobilisation. Yet, as Apata (2024) observes in her study on digital literacy, these skills are not evenly distributed across Nigeria's youth populations - raising questions of inclusion, exclusion, and effectiveness in digital resistance.

The phenomenon of hashtag activism has recently transformed social awareness and political engagement for many at the nexus of digital technology and grassroots activism. The interconnected nature of digital networks expands the opportunity to leverage social media platforms to raise awareness, garner support, and contest oppressive systems for individuals and communities. Therefore, this approach serves as an essential voice for the voiceless to create alternative doorways for political engagement and resistance. The #EndSARS campaign in Nigeria stands as a hallmark of youth-led digital activism on the African continent. It began in October 2020 as a nationwide protest that emerged from the youth as they attempted to #EndSARS, disbanding a police unit known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS is a rather violent police unit characterized by extrajudicial murders, extortion, and arbitrary arrests. In 2017, multiple hashtags emerged online, challenging SARS; however, the opportunity to end SARS in 2020 became more widespread than any other campaign. Fuelled by digital features allowing visibility and easier forms of organization, the campaign to protest began to spread like wildfire. Thus, social media allows for real-time updates, live documentation, storage for sharing experiences, intentional framing, and engagement with an international audience (Aubyn and Frimpong, 2022).

As the protest deepened, the Nigerian youths possessed increasingly more ownership of digital capabilities. They encrypted messaging to maintain privacy, created infographics streamed live to share information, and used peer-to-peer network to spread the word quickly. As such, it was not merely (or only) a way to organize a protest but information dissemination, civic engagement, coalition building, and political agenda setting. Therefore, the ability to operate within this digitalized realm - accessing, analysing, creating, and disseminating information relevant to operating in this new digital world - compounded the phenomena's success (Uwalaka and Nwala, 2025). In addition, this extends beyond operating in cyberspace; it requires comprehensive media literacy and ethical engagement in virtual and physical realities. In fact, #EndSARS has much in common with contemporaneous global hashtags that have changed the sociopolitical discourse - #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, #RhodesMustFall - and tried to effect political change, both in Africa and other countries in global space.

Despite the proliferation of youth-led digital activism across Africa, exemplified by #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, there remains a significant gap in understanding how digital literacy mediates civic agency within these contexts. While digital technologies have been lauded for enabling new forms of resistance, mere access to social media does not automatically translate into meaningful civic participation. In Nigeria, although the #EndSARS protests demonstrated unprecedented online coordination, message amplification, and international solidarity, questions persist about who was able to participate, how effectively, and with what outcomes, especially considering disparities in digital competence, algorithmic manipulation, and structural marginalisation. Current scholarship has tended to focus on protest outcomes and online visibility, rather than interrogating the foundational skills and literacies that underpin such engagement. This study therefore seeks to fill this critical gap by examining how digital literacy functioned not only as a technological affordance but as a determinant of civic inclusion, protest efficacy, and resistance sustainability during the #EndSARS movement.

The role of digital literacy in empowering Nigerian youth amid the #EndSARS protest is the central focus of this research. It delves into how proficient use of digital tools empowered the younger population to coordinate, rally, and uphold collective efforts utilizing resources such as hashtags, live videos, and visual aids. The study also delves into the challenges faced by groups with limited digital access, especially in rural or economically disadvantaged regions, due to obstacles related to infrastructure, finances, or literacy levels, and how these discrepancies influenced their involvement. The research also deliberates on the wider implications for policies and educational practices, proposing how insights from the #EndSARS movement can shape national approaches to embed digital literacy within civic instruction, enhance inclusive opportunities, and bolster youth engagement in democratic processes in Nigeria. Based on these objectives, the research is guided by the following questions:

1. How did Nigerian youth use digital literacy to exercise civic agency during the #EndSARS protest?
2. What were the enabling and constraining factors for digital participation in the movement?
3. In what ways did digital literacy shape the framing and amplification of protest narratives online?
4. What lessons can be drawn for future youth-led digital resistance movements in similar socio-political environments?

2. Castells' theory of networked social movements

Manuel Castells' theory of networked social movements offers a compelling framework for comprehending modern digital activism. In his influential publication, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (2012), Castells contends that digital technologies have facilitated the rise of novel kinds of civic involvement that are horizontal, decentralised, and autonomous. These movements emerge not from conventional institutional structures but from real-time, internet-enabled networks that enable collective mobilisation around common grievances and desires for transformation. This theoretical framework is particularly pertinent for comprehending digital activism, which signifies a departure from conventional civic activities such as voting or town hall involvement towards more dynamic and instantaneous modes of engagement, including social media campaigns, online petitions, and virtual protests. According to Jenkins (2006), digital platforms facilitate the creation of interest-based communities that surpass geographical limitations, promoting swift information dissemination and collaborative efforts. This growth has incited discourse over the extent of engagement in these areas, with critics such as Morozov (2009) cautioning against "slacktivism" - the inclination for superficial online actions to supplant meaningful, offline political involvement.

Castells' theory of networked social movements provides the essential understanding of the emergence and momentum of the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria within a digitally interconnected context. The theory emphasises the importance of horizontal, decentralised networks in facilitating civic mobilisation, which directly corresponds with the essence of the #EndSARS movement - a protest propelled not by formal institutions or political parties but by digitally literate youth who utilised social media as a realm of autonomy and defiance, showcasing the inspiring potential of digital activism. Digital literacy, in this context, operates as the infrastructure of participation - a prerequisite for civic agency in the digital age. Hobbs (2010) and Mihailidis and Thevenin (2013) have stressed that digital literacy goes beyond basic technological skills to include critical engagement, content creation, data ethics, and awareness of how digital algorithms shape visibility. Youth-led movements, such as #EndSARS in Nigeria, illustrate this vividly. The movement was not merely a spontaneous expression of outrage but a coordinated campaign that required high levels of digital fluency: the use of hashtags to create visibility, encryption apps to ensure security, and infographics to shape narratives.

The ability of Nigerian youth to trend #EndSARS globally, mobilise the diaspora, livestream police abuses, and circulate digital petitions on platforms like Change.org are all examples of civic agency rooted in technical capacity (Bello et al., 2023; Uwalaka and Nwala, 2025). Therefore, civic agency should not be conceptualised solely as an emotional or moral response to injustice, nor merely as the will to participate in public discourse. In the digital age, it increasingly depends on the ability to perform complex communicative acts across multiple platforms. As Apata (2024) argues, digital literacy determines not just if individuals participate in civic action but how effectively they do so. Without the capacity to curate content, understand platform affordances, or resist surveillance, the potential of networked movements to function as true spaces of resistance becomes unevenly distributed. Hence, the #EndSARS movement demonstrates that digital literacy is foundational to the realisation of civic agency in networked activism. It conditions who can speak, be heard, and organise in digitally mediated public spheres.

3. Digital literacy and the #EndSARS protest

Digital literacy encompasses a diverse array of competencies required to locate, assess, and generate information utilising digital technologies. It includes not only basic technical abilities but also critical thinking, ethical awareness, and the ability to engage wisely in digital environments. Digital literacy involves the capacity to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate, and create information safely and appropriately through digital technologies for employment, decent jobs, and entrepreneurship (UNESCO, 2018). It encompasses a range of skills, including critical thinking, online communication, and the ethical use of digital tools. In the Nigerian context, digital literacy is increasingly recognised as essential for empowering citizens to engage with digital platforms effectively, thereby enhancing their ability to participate in democratic processes and societal development (Apata, 2024).

The two fundamental dimensions of digital literacy - critical digital literacy and media literacy - that constitute digital literacy are pertinent in this context. Critical digital literacy is described as the capacity to critically analyse digital information while recognising the economic and political contexts of its creation, as well as the inherent biases and power structures within it (Kellner and Share, 2007). It empowers citizens to scrutinise and critique the narratives they frequently encounter, fostering a more active and empathetic public. Critical digital literacy enables activists to analyse media messages, combat misinformation, and formulate alternative narratives that challenge dominant discourses (Kellner and Share, 2007) in the context of digital activism. In the present era, proficiency in digital capabilities has expanded to encompass more than just basic reading and writing skills. The events of the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria during 2020 illustrated how youths with digital proficiency leveraged social platforms to capture instances of police violence, rally support, and influence public conversations. Nevertheless, the movement shed light on disparities in digital accessibility, particularly affecting underserved rural populations and marginalised groups. Issues like inadequate technological resources and government monitoring impeded equal involvement.

4. Hashtag activism/digital activism movements among the youths

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed a significant shift in the way its youth engage with socio-political issues, marked by a transition from traditional street protests to digitally mediated forms of activism. This transformation, commonly referred to as hashtag activism or digital activism, represents a mode of political participation where individuals use social media platforms to raise awareness, mobilise support, and demand accountability from institutions. Hashtag activism, particularly among Nigerian

youth, reflects an emergent digital civic culture that seeks to contest injustice, express collective outrage, and influence policy through virtual networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012). Empirical studies underscore the centrality of digital platforms in the mobilisation strategies of Nigerian youth. According to Freelon, et al. (2016), social media serves three primary functions in protest movements: amplifying marginalised voices, aggregating fragmented publics, and facilitating real-time coordination. This triadic model is evident in the #EndSARS protests, where hashtags like #EndSARS, #SoroSoke, and #EndPoliceBrutality were not only tools of mobilisation but also repositories of collective memory. These hashtags indexed testimonies of state violence, coordinated protest logistics, and galvanised international solidarity (Aubyn and Frimpong, 2022).

A notable empirical study by Bello, et al. (2023) used machine learning techniques to analyse over 500,000 tweets related to #EndSARS. Their findings reveal that the movement was characterised by decentralised leadership, viral dissemination of user-generated content, and sustained engagement across diasporic and domestic networks. Such data-driven analyses illustrate how the spatial and temporal dynamics of digital activism differ from traditional protest forms. They also demonstrate the youth's sophisticated understanding of platform algorithms, content curation, and audience targeting skills that are underpinned by critical digital literacy (Apata, 2024). Digital activism in Nigeria has also been instrumental in fostering civic education. Uwalaka and Nwala (2025) contend that the #EndSARS protests functioned as a form of "digital public pedagogy," where young people used infographics, livestreams, and explanatory threads to educate peers about constitutional rights, protest etiquette, and historical context. This pedagogical dimension of activism challenges the perception of social media as merely a tool for performance or superficial engagement. It suggests that digital activism can also facilitate epistemic empowerment and the formation of informed publics (Mihailidis and Thevenin, 2013).

Despite its successes, digital activism in Nigeria faces several structural and ideological challenges. First, internet shutdowns and digital surveillance by the state pose existential threats to online movements. During the peak of the #EndSARS protests, reports emerged of coordinated attacks on digital infrastructure and the freezing of protest organisers' bank accounts, indicating a governmental strategy of digital repression (Ekoh and George, 2021). Second, the digital divide, marked by disparities in access to smartphones, data, and digital literacy, limits the inclusivity and representativeness of online activism. Marginalised communities, particularly in rural and low-income areas, often remain excluded from the digital public sphere (van Dijk and van Deursen, 2014). Another critical concern is the risk of "slacktivism," a term used to describe low-effort digital engagement that may not translate into substantive offline action (Morozov, 2009). While this critique is valid in certain contexts, the #EndSARS movement demonstrates that digitally mediated activism can result in significant offline outcomes, including public inquiries, institutional reforms, and changes in global perception. The movement's ability to attract endorsements from international celebrities, tech CEOs, and diaspora communities also illustrates the transnational reach of hashtag activism (Bosch, 2017).

Moreover, hashtag activism in Nigeria is not limited to #EndSARS alone. Other campaigns, such as #ArewaMeToo, #RevolutionNow, and #SecureNorth, have emerged to address issues ranging from gender-based violence to regional insecurity and corruption. These movements, though varying in scope and intensity, reflect a growing digital consciousness among Nigerian youth and an increasing willingness to challenge authority through digital means (Yékú, 2022).

5. Cases of other hashtag activism as resistance and civic engagement in Africa and Global world

Hashtag activism has become an increasingly powerful tool for civic engagement, resistance, and social transformation. Leveraging digital technologies, youth and marginalised populations now mobilise, protest, and amplify their voices globally through viral campaigns. These digital actions often occur outside traditional institutional structures, operating instead via what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) term "connective action" - a digitally enabled form of collective mobilisation based on personal expression and networked communication. This section presents comparative empirical cases of hashtag activism in Nigeria, South Africa, the United States, and other global contexts, highlighting their causes, processes, benefits, and socio-political aftermaths.

a. #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall in South Africa: contesting colonial epistemology

In South Africa, the #FeesMustFall and #RhodesMustFall movements emerged as digital extensions of student protests demanding free and decolonised education. Beginning in 2015 at the University of Cape Town, #RhodesMustFall called for the removal of a statue of Cecil Rhodes, symbolising colonial domination. Nyamnjoh (2016) describes the protest as not merely about a statue but about reconfiguring South African academic institutions to reflect African epistemologies and challenge Eurocentric hegemonies. These movements demonstrated the power of hashtags to unify voices across geography. Bosch (2017) notes that Twitter and Facebook played pivotal roles in coordination, messaging, and countering dominant media narratives. The protests led to tangible changes, including increased funding for education and national debates about institutional racism. Gukurume and Maringira (2022) stress that digital technologies enabled marginalised students to challenge elitist education structures and reclaim representational space within South African universities.

Both movements illustrate the centrality of digital literacy in youth-led resistance. Where #FeesMustFall engaged debates around epistemic justice and access to education, #EndSARS was a fight for safety and dignity in the face of state violence. Nevertheless, the tactical use of livestreaming, hashtags, and online petitions in both movements demonstrates shared digital capacities. As Castells (2012) argues, such networked activism is only effective when participants can autonomously create and distribute content - something that both South African and Nigerian youth clearly mastered.

b. #ShutItAllDown (Namibia)

The #ShutItAllDown movement erupted in Namibia in October 2020 as a youth-led response to pervasive sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). The immediate trigger was the discovery of the remains of 22-year-old Shannon Wasserfall, which reignited public anger about long-standing issues of femicide and state inaction. Young Namibians, particularly women and non-binary individuals, mobilized through Twitter and Instagram using the hashtag #ShutItAllDown to organise demonstrations across major cities (Munyaradzi and Kapolo, 2023). Digital literacy played a crucial role in how the movement framed its demands, documented abuses, and broadcasted the protests, despite government crackdowns that included arrests and violent police dispersals.

Like #EndSARS, which responded to extrajudicial violence by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad in Nigeria, #ShutItAllDown capitalised on social media to transform individual pain into collective resistance. Both movements used hashtags not just to trend, but to archive testimonies, coordinate protests, and invite global solidarity. However, while #EndSARS spotlighted state policing, #ShutItAllDown challenged patriarchal violence and demanded structural reforms in law enforcement and justice systems. In both contexts, digital literacy was not merely a tool but a form of civic agency (Apata, 2024; Munyaradzi and Kapolo, 2023).

c. #FixTheCountry (Ghana)

#FixTheCountry emerged in Ghana in May 2021, sparked by frustrations with rising youth unemployment, political corruption, and inadequate infrastructure. Initially a digital campaign, the hashtag quickly became a rallying point for young Ghanaians dissatisfied with post-independence governance. Protesters utilised platforms like Twitter Spaces and TikTok to mobilise support, develop civic education content, and expose institutional failings (Sarpong and Agyeman, 2023). While #FixTheCountry and #EndSARS had different immediate causes - economic disenfranchisement versus police brutality - they shared similar trajectories in digital mobilization. Both leveraged Twitter as a primary tool for visibility and pressure-building. Notably, youth in both cases demonstrated high levels of digital competence in meme curation, livestreaming, and managing protest logistics online. The Ghanaian case, however, has so far yielded fewer institutional reforms than #EndSARS, pointing to the role of context in determining the efficacy of hashtag activism (Uwalaka and Nwala, 2025; Sarpong and Agyeman, 2023).

d. #BlackLivesMatter in the United States: reclaiming narratives of racial justice

The #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement, which began in 2013 following the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer, reignited globally after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. This movement epitomises the convergence of digital storytelling, protest coordination, and political pressure. Freelon et al. (2016) argue that social media allowed Black communities to bypass mainstream media gatekeeping, create counter-narratives, and cultivate transnational solidarity. Empirical analysis of BLM Twitter data has shown surges in public engagement correlating with high-profile police killings (Bonilla and Rosa, 2015). These surges produced both online awareness and offline mobilisation, with millions joining protests across 50 states. The campaign's outcomes include renewed legislative efforts on police reform and increased attention to systemic racism, showing how hashtag activism can translate into institutional change.

e. #MeToo and Gender-Based Hashtag Movements, USA

The #MeToo movement originated in the United States but quickly gained global traction, serving as a digital forum for survivors of sexual harassment and violence to share their stories. It transformed the social media landscape by challenging rape culture and exposing power imbalances in workplaces, politics, and education. In Nigeria, the #ArewaMeToo movement mirrored this dynamic in the conservative northern region, where women used anonymity and hashtag-based storytelling to resist gender-based violence (Salihi, 2021). Despite backlash, this online mobilisation created a safe space for survivors, pushed conversations into mainstream media, and led to policy dialogues in several Nigerian states. Skogsberg (2016) identifies such activism as "justice-oriented youth literacies," where storytelling becomes a form of civic engagement and identity assertion.

f. #RevolutionNow and #SecureNorth: The Intersection of Security and Governance (Nigeria)

Beyond police brutality, Nigerian youths have employed hashtags such as #RevolutionNow and #SecureNorth to demand broader governance reforms. #RevolutionNow, led by Omoyele Sowore, sought an overhaul of Nigeria's political order. Though met with government repression, the campaign used hashtags to coordinate online protests and provoke public discourse on democracy and accountability. Similarly, #SecureNorth, initiated in response to insurgency, banditry, and mass abductions in northern Nigeria, highlighted regional security inequalities. In both cases, digital platforms functioned as alternative public spheres, enabling horizontal communication, dissent, and agenda-setting (Ibrahim and Shehu, 2022). These examples affirm the growing centrality of digital tools in political opposition and rights-based advocacy.

g. #ArabSpring: the digital genesis of popular uprisings

Although the Arab Spring began before the dominance of Twitter hashtags, movements like those in Egypt and Tunisia retroactively illustrate hashtag activism. The 2011 uprisings used Facebook and YouTube to broadcast state repression and mobilise mass participation. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) argue that digital platforms accelerated protest timelines, widened participation, and connected urban and rural activists. In Egypt, hashtags such as #Jan25 served as digital archives of collective

action, documenting not just events but identities. Despite setbacks, including authoritarian backlash, these cases established a precedent for subsequent digital movements across the Global South.

h. Digital activism and youth empowerment: a global synthesis

What unites these movements is their redefinition of civic engagement. Unlike traditional activism dependent on hierarchical leadership or institutional affiliation, hashtag activism thrives on participation, immediacy, and adaptability. Youths, who are digital natives, find in these platforms' tools for identity formation, solidarity building, and agency expression (Mihailidis and Thevenin, 2013). From the #ChileDespierta protests against inequality in Chile to #FridaysForFuture climate actions led by Greta Thunberg, the global South and North converge on one point: that hashtags are not just communicative devices but organising structures, pedagogical tools, and instruments of resistance. Each movement has leveraged the semiotics of hashtags to contest dominant ideologies, redefine citizenship, and pressure the state (Tufekci, 2017). Each of these hashtag movements - #ShutItAllDown in Namibia, #FixTheCountry in Ghana, and #FeesMustFall in South Africa - demonstrates the pivotal role of digital literacy in shaping modern civic agency. Thus, digital literacy enabled youth not only to articulate their grievances but also to engage transnational publics, co-create narratives, and build pressure for change.

6. Digital literacy and the mobilization of Nigerian youth

The increase in digital literacy in Nigeria, encompassing not only technical skills but also the capacity to explore and create within digital environments, has fostered a politically aware generation. According to Apata, (2021), digital literacies are now recognised alongside traditional literacies as essential skills that every language learner and teacher need to function effectively and productively in contemporary society. Empirical research indicates that Nigerian youth utilise platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram not only for social engagement but also for civic expression and the organisation of protests (Egbunike and Olorunnisola, 2021; Uwalaka, 2024). Digital literacy enables activists to strategically construct narratives, counter misinformation, and utilise visual storytelling - such as videos, posters, and memes - as persuasive tools. In a study examining how adults interacting with activist hashtags on Twitter perceive their ownership of significant markers of community action (e.g., #dreamers, #metoo), Ryland (2020) characterises hashtags as nascent "publics of practice" - interactive environments where digital literacy is both utilised and acquired. #EndSARS encompassed Nigerian teenagers live-streaming protests, conducting online fundraising, and documenting instances of police brutality - each representing a type of literacy. Their online practices reflected the concept of critical media literacy as articulated by Hobbs (2010) and Kellner and Share (2007), which encompasses an understanding of the power dynamics inherent in media portrayals and the interaction with online platforms to counteract them.

The rise of hashtag movements has expanded the scope of youth political participation in the nation. According to Ekoh and George (2021), #EndSARS represented a novel kind of digital resistance, as technology was employed to facilitate activism during COVID-19 lockdowns, enabling youngsters to engage while circumventing prohibitions on physical gatherings. From 2017 to 2025, Nigerian youth have increasingly utilised social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram not only for social connectivity but also as potent tools for civic engagement and political expression. By 2025, the average Nigerian spends approximately 3 hours and 49 minutes daily on social media, a duration that significantly exceeds the global average by 70%, reflecting the centrality of these platforms in youth culture (Exploding Topics, 2025). This high engagement is evident in platform usage statistics reported in April 2025, which showed Facebook leading with 69.8% usage, followed by YouTube (9.9%), Twitter (9.13%), and Instagram (6.28%) (StatCounter, 2025).

Beyond personal communication, social media has become a crucial infrastructure for digital activism in Nigeria. A recent empirical study conducted in Lagos State reveals that 96.7% of youth are aware of digital media platforms uses for political empowerment, 58.8% feel digitally empowered to participate in politics, and 76.4% actively use these platforms to express political opinions (RSIS International, 2023). These findings affirm that digital literacy and platform fluency have become indispensable for civic participation among Nigerian youth, as seen during movements like #EndSARS. Moreover, the educational role of social media is increasingly acknowledged, with 73.5% of Nigerian teenagers stating that platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook have supported their academic pursuits (Online Scientific Research, 2022). These statistics underline the multifaceted nature of social media use among young Nigerians - serving as a hub for learning, social interaction, and civic mobilisation.

7. Hashtags as learning spaces: the educational function of digital activism

Digital movements serve as informal learning environments beyond mere mobilisation. Expanding on Ryland's (2020) characterisation of activist hashtags as pedagogical tools that instruct users in civic engagement via participatory discourse and modelling, we contend that in the context of hashtag feminism, Twitter users are educated in feminist principles through civil discourse and exemplification. The research expands on the theories of public pedagogy and experiential learning (Giroux, 2004; Dewey, 1938) to illustrate how users acquire knowledge regarding protest norms, legal frameworks, and rhetorical methods through online participation. This perspective is crucial in Nigeria. These individuals acquired knowledge of protests by observing others, monitoring popular topics, and emulating digital influencers within their social media feeds. Skogsberg (2016) describes youth social media engagement as "justice-oriented literacies," wherein online presence cultivates civic identity and ethical consciousness. These literacies are particularly essential in environments with minimal or government-regulated formal civic education. This is why social media platforms like Twitter serve as environments where civic competency, media literacy, and political knowledge are collaboratively developed. For marginalised youth in Nigeria, hashtags serve as an alternate framework for resistance in political discourse.

8. From #OccupyNigeria to #EndSARS to #Obidient: the genealogy of Nigerian digital movements

#EndSARS did not emerge in isolation. This aligns with the lineage of internet protests in Nigeria, encompassing #OccupyNigeria (2012), #BringBackOurGirls (2014), and, most recently, the #Obidient movement (2023), which has associated itself with Peter Obi's presidential candidacy. Each action illustrates the increasing digital literacy and organisational sophistication of Nigerian youth (Bangura, 2022). #EndSARS is distinguished by its egalitarian leadership framework, promptness, adaptability, and emphasis on accountability and governance changes. The protest was not only a condemnation of police brutality but also a symbolic repudiation of the overarching dysfunction inside official institutions. Aubyn and Frimpong (2022) demonstrated how digital platforms enabled demonstrators to document, preserve, and verify atrocities, so challenging state narratives and establishing a collective history of resistance. Nonetheless, as Yékú (2022) warns, the analysis of hashtags postmortem also exposes the fragility of digital triumphs. Movements are at risk of being co-opted, overlooked, or suppressed by algorithmic mechanisms and state surveillance. Consequently, examining the constant preservation and reactivation of digital memory throughout movements is crucial for comprehending the durability of youth-led activism.

9. Methodology

This qualitative study investigated the influence of digital literacy on the strategies and outcomes of the #EndSARS protest movement in Nigeria. This is particularly applicable to social movements, discourse, and human agency occurring within the evolving landscape of digital environments (Creswell and Poth, 2018), rendering a qualitative approach especially appropriate. It facilitates comprehensive analytical examination of the expressions, meanings, and relationships generated by participants as they occur within the socio-political context of online activism. A multi-source approach was implemented, encompassing social media, content associated with digital campaigns, and narratives from influencers. Social media posts were gathered from Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, spanning from October 1 to November 30, 2020, coinciding with the peak of the #EndSARS protests. Various forms of activism were examined using campaign materials, including posters, infographics, and livestream screenshots. We examined public narratives from prominent individuals, including significant Nigerian activists, artists, and digital campaigners, to ascertain how messages were formulated and disseminated. A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify pertinent hashtags (#EndSARS, #SARSMustEnd, #EndBadGovernance), accounts, and platforms. Twitter was prioritised due to its significance inside the organisation and the visibility of the protests (Uwalaka, 2024; Ekoh and George, 2021), while Instagram and Facebook offered insights into visual content and wider demographic participation. Similarly, thematic content analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), guided the analytical process. This involved systematic coding and categorisation of digital data to uncover patterns in how activists used digital literacy skills to frame grievances, build solidarity, and coordinate action.

10. Findings and discussion

This section presents and interprets the thematic findings of the study, based on an in-depth qualitative analysis of social media content, digital campaign materials, and influencer narratives drawn from the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. The themes highlight the interrelationship between digital literacy, youth political agency, technological challenges, and the durability of online resistance communities.

Table 1: Thematic findings and discussion table

Theme	Key Insights	Illustrative Examples
Digital literacy as a catalyst for mobilization	Tech-savvy users maximized visibility using Twitter algorithms, hashtags, and visual content; strategic posts and graphic campaigns mobilized national attention during #EndSARS.	Use of #EndSARS by influencers like FK Abudu, DJ Switch's livestream from Lekki Toll Gate, and coordinated Twitter trends.
Youth engagement and online empowerment	Youth-led digital skill sharing emerged through peer engagement; Instagram Lives, Twitter Spaces, and Telegram groups served as informal training grounds.	Volunteer-run design collectives producing protest visuals, real-time mapping of police brutality locations, and digital mentorship threads.
Challenges in digital advocacy	Major obstacles included government surveillance, social media blackouts, and misinformation campaigns; rural areas experienced limited access to digital tools.	October 2020 internet shutdown threats; disinformation counter-campaigns launched by youth collectives like Feminist Coalition.

Sustaining activism through digital communities	Online communities sustained momentum through hashtag virality, live protests, and digital memorialization; offline actions like fundraising and legal aid were coordinated via digital platforms.	Sustained use of hashtags months after protests, diaspora engagement, and the creation of virtual protest archives and petition websites.
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Theme 1: Digital literacy as a catalyst for mobilisation

This theme advances the paper's conclusions, which illustrate that digital literacy was essential for the visibility, coordination, and strategic framing of the #EndSARS movement. Users proficient in digital literacy - some acquainted with algorithms from Twitter's platform, some skilled in graphic editing tools, and further individuals experienced in real-time livestreaming - were important in sustaining online momentum. New-media influencers such as FK Abudu, Rinu Oduala, and DJ Switch (all pivotal figures) understood not just how to amplify their ideas but also how to tailor their content forms to effectively engage broader audiences (Uwalaka, 2024). Digital means were employed for the immediate documentation of state brutality, shown as DJ Switch's livestream of the Lekki Toll Gate shooting on Instagram on October 20, 2020. This act of digital witnessing not only provoked national outcry but also garnered international condemnation. Digital technologies during #EndSARS, as noted by Ekoh and George (2021), functioned as both "archives of protest" and "platforms of legitimacy," contesting official narratives. This aligns with Castells' (2012) theory of networked movements, where the internet serves as a site of autonomy and resistance. Hashtags such as #EndSARS and #LekkiMassacre allowed for distributed coordination across Nigeria's urban centres, thereby bypassing the need for traditional, centralised leadership. Strategic uses of visuals, infographics, and tweets were not spontaneous; rather, they were informed by an evolving digital literacy shaped by previous movements like #OccupyNigeria and #BringBackOurGirls.

Theme 2: Youth engagement and online empowerment

The second theme emphasises the sharing of digital skills, tools, and resources by young Nigerians in collaborative and decentralised ways during the protests. Instagram Live sessions, Twitter Spaces, Telegram forums, and WhatsApp broadcasts turned into ad hoc venues of digital mentorship and civic learning. Protesters shared tips on how to obscure faces in protest images, avoid surveillance, raise money anonymously through cryptocurrencies, and report police violence without endangering oneself (Ryland, 2020; Skogsberg, 2016). This learning process as a collective entity reflects Ryland's (2020) description of "publics of practice" where users do not only consume information, but rather actively co-produce the political discourse and learn through action. Feminist coalition, a youth-led group that was a driving force behind the protests, embodies this empowerment new dynamic model. They functioned openly, sharing real-time financial statements, allocating resources from food and medical supplies to legal aid, all organised digitally. These practices highlighted how individual expression became possible but also efficiency within an organization.

The rise of youth-led digital collectives - graphic designers, video editors, data analysts - also reshaped the landscape of the protests. Using their creative skills, these volunteers created eye-catching posters, protest flyers, and awareness kits, usually in local languages, which helped localise the movement's messaging. This echoes the work of Bosch (2017), who similarly documented youth-led digital collectives emerging during #FeesMustFall in South Africa, where participation through online creativity became a means of resistance. This recasts youth not only as protestors but as public intellectuals and political agents.

Theme 3: Challenges in digital advocacy

The #EndSARS protests revealed significant challenges in digital advocacy, particularly around access, safety, and sustainability. While youth-led collectives effectively utilised Instagram Live, Twitter Spaces, WhatsApp, and Telegram for decentralised coordination, gaps in digital literacy and infrastructure limited wider participation. Notably, the government's digital repression - surveillance, online censorship, and internet shutdowns - compromised activist safety and transparency. Even with tools like cryptocurrency and encrypted communication, many lacked the training to use them securely, increasing their vulnerability. Furthermore, as Ryland (2020) notes, digital "publics of practice" often rely on experiential learning, which risks exclusion of digitally marginalised voices. The creative outputs from youth collectives - graphic design, video campaigns, multilingual resources - were powerful yet unevenly distributed across rural-urban divides. These challenges suggest a need for sustainable digital education, localised tools, and civic tech infrastructures to ensure inclusivity and resilience in future movements. Without such structural support, the promise of digital activism may remain unrealised for many.

Theme 4: Sustaining activism through digital communities

The most notable achievement of the #EndSARS campaign was the continuation of activity following the conclusion of the physical protests. This subject examines how digital communities, hashtags, and diasporic networks sustained the movement's momentum and objectives during 2021-2022. The persistent utilisation of hashtags (e.g., #EndSARS, #LekkiMassacre, #JusticeForVictims) established digital memorials to significant events throughout the peak of the protest. These served as archives of resistance and venues for communal mourning, preserving the narratives of victims from erasure. In this context, diaspora groups were essential, utilising their connections to global platforms and institutions to amplify Nigerian views. Numerous individuals globally participated in demonstrations supporting the revolt in London, Toronto, Berlin, and Washington, DC, exemplifying transnational solidarity.

(Aubyn and Frimpong, 2022). Additionally, civic involvement following the protests originated from the digital community established during the events.

A significant number participated in electoral education initiatives such as #RegisterToVote and the #Obidient movement, signifying a transition from protest to policy involvement. Civil disturbance movements originating from grievances, as noted by Bangura (2022), can evolve into legitimate avenues for peacebuilding and political engagement if their digital infrastructure is preserved. Platforms such as Change.org and GoFundMe were utilised to initiate offline activities, including legal defence funding, victim support initiatives, and public health awareness. The correlations between online activities and offline consequences substantiate Castells' (2012) assertion that digital networks, despite their virtual nature, can produce tangible repercussions. However, sustaining these digital communities requires combating platform fatigue, censorship, and algorithmic repression. As internet activism matures, innovative strategies for maintaining momentum, establishing coalitions, and cultivating institutional power without succumbing to co-optation or fatigue are essential.

11. Implications of the study for policy, sustainable development goals, and future research

This work provides essential insights with extensive implications for public policy, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and future scholarly research. The findings highlight the pressing necessity for policies that safeguard digital rights, ensure equal access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), and enhance civic education in Nigeria. Governments and civil society must invest in digital infrastructure and literacy education, especially in rural and marginalised regions, to bridge the participation gap and facilitate inclusive civic involvement. The research corresponds with multiple Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The research underscores that digital literacy enables adolescents to organise, advocate, and engage effectively in democratic processes, hence endorsing policies that promote inclusive, participatory communities. It promotes the incorporation of critical digital literacy into official educational curricula to cultivate active citizenship and accountability. This research paves the way for further investigations into the long-term effects of digital activism on institutional reform and political behaviour in Nigeria and throughout Africa.

12. Conclusion

The research delved into how the digital literacy of young individuals in Nigeria played a vital role during the #EndSARS protests, emphasising the effective utilization of hashtags, live videos, and visual representations to organise civic engagement. Drawing from Castells' concept of interconnected social movements, it posited that proficiency in digital tools is fundamental for engaging in civic activities in today's digital era. Despite certain constraints, like limited primary data and platform specificity to Twitter, the results highlighted the profound impact of online activism in challenging oppression and nurturing solidarity. Subsequent studies should focus on immersive fieldwork, cross-border assessments, and policy-oriented evaluations to enhance digital literacy training and broaden the inclusive involvement of young people in Africa's online civic sphere.

Declarations:

- Originality statement: I, Stella Bolanle, APATA confirm that this manuscript is original, has not been previously published, and is not under review elsewhere.
- Author approval statement: I, Stella Bolanle APATA, confirm that all authors have read and approved the submitted manuscript, and the author order has been agreed upon by all co-authors.
- Conflict of interest disclosure: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this research. No financial, personal, or institutional relationships influenced the study's design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation. This disclosure affirms the objectivity and academic integrity of the work presented in this paper.
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