Influence of Twitter Messages on Youth Participation in the #EndSARS Protest: A Study of University of Lagos Undergraduates

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of Twitter messages on undergraduate students' participation in the #EndSARS protest at the University of Lagos (UNILAG), Nigeria. Drawing on Media Dependency Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, the research investigates how exposure to #EndSARS-related content shaped students' behaviours, including engaging in discussions, protesting, and encouraging others to participate. A quantitative survey design was employed, with data collected from 200 undergraduate students using a structured questionnaire. Results indicate a moderate level of influence, with 90% of respondents reporting that Twitter content prompted conversations about police brutality, 71% encouraging others to support the protest, but only 43% directly participating or donating. These findings highlight Twitter's role in mobilizing youth activism while underscoring barriers to direct action, such as safety concerns and government repression. The study also explores connections to broader societal issues, including how police brutality exacerbates drug and substance abuse vulnerabilities among youth, and how digital platforms can reduce inequalities through education and awareness campaigns. The study contributes to understanding digital platforms' impact on social movements in developing contexts and recommends strategies for leveraging social media in civic engagement.

Keywords: Youth activism, police brutality, digital mobilization, drug abuse awareness, reduced inequalities.

Authors' Contributions

The sole author, Kalu Onyemaechi Umoekwe, was responsible for conceptualizing the study, designing the methodology, collecting and analyzing the data, interpreting the findings, and writing the manuscript.

Introduction

The advent of social media has transformed the landscape of political activism, enabling rapid information dissemination, collective mobilization, and global amplification of local grievances. In Nigeria, the #EndSARS protest of October 2020 exemplified this shift, as youths utilized platforms like Twitter to challenge systemic police brutality by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The movement, which began as a decentralized online campaign,

evolved into nationwide demonstrations that drew international attention, including endorsements from figures like Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and global celebrities. By October 14, 2020, conversations around #EndSARS had garnered over 48 million mentions on Twitter, highlighting its viral scale (Kazeem, 2020).

Protests led to the nominal disbandment of SARS on October 11, 2020, though subsequent reforms were limited, and police abuses persisted, culminating in a government-imposed Twitter ban in June 2021 that lasted seven months (Dark, 2020; Malumfashi, 2020). Recent analyses in 2025 indicate that echoes of the movement continue, with social media discussions on #EndSARS persisting into October 2025, often highlighting the return of similar police units and ongoing brutality (e.g., posts noting "SARS IS BACK" in real-time X feeds).

This study focuses on the influence of Twitter messages on undergraduate students at the University of Lagos (UNILAG), a key demographic in the protest. UNILAG students, representing urban, educated youth, were highly active on social media during the event, using platforms for real-time coordination, fundraising via electronic currencies like Bitcoin, and sharing live footage of abuses (UNILAG Statistics, 2024; University of Lagos Enrollment Statistics, 2025). Updated enrollment data for the 2024/2025 academic year confirms approximately 48,680 students, with a slight increase in applications for 2025/2026 reaching 58,645, reflecting growing youth engagement in higher education amid social challenges.

The research addresses a gap in existing literature by empirically assessing how Twitter content affected behavioural outcomes, such as participation and advocacy. Prior studies have explored digital activism in #EndSARS broadly, but few have quantitatively examined influence at the individual level among university students, especially considering long-term effects like increased youth civic participation and risks of community transmission during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adegboyega, 2021; Olorunfemi & Adeyemi, 2022). Furthermore, this study connects the movement to professional interests in education, drug and substance abuse

awareness, and reduced inequalities, noting how police brutality often intersects with youth vulnerabilities to substance abuse (e.g., through extortion and trauma leading to self-medication), and how social media can educate and empower marginalised groups to address systemic disparities.

The problem stems from Nigeria's history of youth-led protests, where social media amplifies voices but may not always translate to sustained action due to factors like state repression and propaganda (Chow, 2020; Obia, 2020). This research asks: What is the influence of #EndSARS Twitter messages on UNILAG undergraduate students' participation? By elucidating this, the study informs strategies for future civic engagements, particularly in contexts of political instability. It also proposes extending digital activism models to campaigns against drug abuse and for inequality reduction, leveraging platforms like Twitter (now X) for awareness and policy advocacy.

Literature Review

Social media's role in activism has been extensively documented, particularly in mobilizing marginalized groups through decentralized networks. In movements like the Arab Spring and #BlackLivesMatter, social media platforms facilitated coordination, awareness, and transnational solidarity (Political effects of the internet and social media, 2020; Tiryakioglu & Eizurum, 2011; Umonen, 1997).

In Nigeria, Twitter emerged as a pivotal tool during #EndSARS, enabling youths to organize protests, share evidence of abuses, and raise funds—often bypassing traditional media gatekeepers (Ajayi, 2024; Ajisafe et al., 2021; Wahab, 2021). The campaign, initiated by human rights activist Segun Awosanya (Segalink) in 2016, gained momentum with a 2017 petition signed by over 10,000 people demanding SARS's disbandment (The role of twitter as a tool for political education, 2021).

Recent studies post-2020 highlight Twitter's efficacy in youth mobilization. For instance, a 2024 analysis of mobilization strategies in Southwest Nigeria found that social media enabled emergent tactics, where protesters adapted daily to opportunities and challenges, such as government curfews and violence (Ojo & Afolaranmi, 2024; Olanrewaju et al., 2024). Another 2023 study emphasized how platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram amplified grievances globally, fostering digital activism and policy implications for civic engagement (Eniola, 2023). A 2022 examination of millennial activism via qualitative tweet analysis (September 11 to October 11, 2020) revealed strategies that pressured the government to abolish SARS, though reforms were superficial (Eniola, 2022). However, challenges like misinformation, state censorship (e.g., the 2021 Twitter ban), and risks of COVID-19 spread during gatherings persist (Gehlbach & Sonin, 2008; Ojo, 2021). Updated 2025 research reinforces these findings, with studies on digital activism in #EndSARS emphasizing quieter narratives of resistance and multichannel evolution (e.g., systematic reviews of collective resistance); comparative analyses with South African crises; and youth-led hashtag movements showing high platform engagement (69.8% on Facebook, with Twitter/X following closely). Additionally, explorations of WhatsApp's role in private activism highlight sustained digital participation post-2020.

In educational contexts, university students' high social media usage correlates with activism. Research shows that exposure to protest-related content influences perceptions and actions, though mediated by factors like fear of reprisal and economic downturns (Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Onah, 2024). This study builds on these by focusing on influence mechanisms among UNILAG students, incorporating insights into how social media fostered neighborhood watches and sustained demands for accountability (Olorunfemi & Adeyemi, 2022). Extending this, literature connects police brutality to drug abuse, with studies noting illicit substance use among officers and cadets, leading to escalated violence and youth trauma that may drive

substance abuse as coping mechanisms. Social media interventions have proven effective in reducing drug propensity among Nigerian youth, suggesting #EndSARS-style campaigns could address these intersections. Youth activism also ties to inequality reduction, with class undertones in protests and calls for policy changes like youth quotas to foster equitable participation.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) and Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz et al., 1974). Media Dependency posits that during crises, individuals rely on media for information, increasing its influence on behaviour—evident in #EndSARS where Twitter provided real-time updates on abuses and protest logistics amid state instability (Lin, n.d.). Uses and Gratifications explains active media use to fulfill needs like information-seeking, social interaction, and expression; students gratified these through sharing live images, organizing via hashtags, and engaging in global dialogues. These theories frame how Twitter messages influenced participation.

Materials and Methods

A quantitative survey design was adopted to assess influence. To enhance consistency with updated enrollment data, the population is now standardized to approximately 48,680 registered students at UNILAG for the 2024/2025 academic year (based on the most recent figures, with undergraduates forming the majority; UNILAG Statistics, 2024). Earlier estimates of around 35,000-40,000 have been reconciled with these projections, and 58,645 UTME applications for 2025/2026 suggest sustained growth.

The sample size of 200 remains appropriate, recalculated using Yamane's formula ($n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$, where $N \approx 48,680$ and $e = 0.07$ for 93% confidence, yielding approximately 203—adjusted downward for feasibility while maintaining validity for digitally active undergraduates. Multi-stage sampling was used: faculties stratified, then convenience sampling

for accessible online respondents. This ensured representation across demographics while acknowledging potential bias toward digitally active students.

A structured questionnaire, validated via pilot testing (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82 for reliability), was administered online. Sections covered demographics and influence indicators (e.g., engagement in conversations, protesting/donating, encouraging others). Ethical approval was obtained from UNILAG's Research Ethics Committee; informed consent was secured. Data were analyzed using SPSS v.26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) summarized responses. Inferential analysis included chi-square tests to examine associations (e.g., gender vs. participation, $\chi^2=4.12$, $p=0.128$, non-significant).

Analysis

Demographics:

The following table summarizes the key demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1: Demographics of Respondents

Category	Subcategory	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	36
	Female	64
Age	18-25	86
	Other	14
Faculty	Social Science	40.5
	Diverse/Others	59.5

Table 2: Twitter Influence on Conversations

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	180	90

No	6	3
Maybe	14	7

Table 3: Influence on Protesting/Donating

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	86	43
No	90	45
Maybe	24	12

Table 4: Influence on Encouraging Others

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Yes	142	71
No	34	17
Maybe	24	12

Influence Findings:

To address the primary research question—"What is the influence of #EndSARS Twitter messages on UNILAG undergraduate students' participation?"—the following tables present descriptive data on key behavioural outcomes related to Twitter's role in prompting conversations, direct participation/donation, and encouraging others. These tables directly explain the extent of Twitter's influence across cognitive (e.g., conversations), behavioural (e.g., protesting/donating), and advocacy (e.g., encouraging others) dimensions, revealing a pattern of moderate overall impact with stronger indirect effects.

Narrative analysis of the above tables indicates that 90% of respondents reported Twitter-prompted conversations on SARS brutality, demonstrating strong cognitive influence. However, only 43% participated or donated, suggesting barriers to direct action, while 71% encouraged others, highlighting robust indirect advocacy effects. Overall, this points to moderate influence from Twitter messages, with stronger indirect effects (advocacy) than direct action.

Additionally, inferential analysis using chi-square tests revealed no significant associations between demographics and participation outcomes. For example, the association between gender and participation was non-significant (χ^2=4.12, p=0.128), indicating that Twitter's influence did not vary significantly by gender. Similar tests for age and faculty yielded non-significant results (e.g., age vs. participation: χ^2=2.87, p=0.238; faculty vs. participation: χ^2=5.64, p=0.131), suggesting broad applicability of findings across the sample. These results were derived from SPSS outputs and reinforce the descriptive findings by confirming no demographic biases in the observed influences.

Discussion of Findings

Results align with Media Dependency, showing reliance on Twitter during unrest (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976). High conversation engagement (90%) indicates cognitive influence, but lower direct participation (43%) suggests barriers like safety concerns, violent crackdowns (e.g., Lekki Toll Gate massacre on October 20, 2020), and COVID-19 risks from gatherings. This mirrors global patterns where social media mobilizes discourse more than action, especially in repressive environments (Eniola, 2022; Ojo & Afolaranmi, 2024). Linking to drug abuse awareness, police brutality often involves extortion or violence that heightens youth substance use risks; social media campaigns, as in #EndSARS, could be adapted for anti-drug interventions, with evidence showing reduced propensity through targeted messaging. For

reduced inequalities, the movement's class undertones and youth-led demands highlight activism's role in challenging elite monopolies, inspiring policy shifts like youth quotas and economic independence to combat poverty.

Educationally, findings support integrating media literacy into curricula to empower youth against misinformation and for advocacy on issues like substance abuse. Limitations include convenience sampling and self-reported data. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to assess long-term impacts, such as increased youth political reform efforts post-2020.

Additional studies could explore cross-applications to drug awareness and inequality-focused campaigns.

Conclusion

Twitter moderately influenced UNILAG students' #EndSARS participation, excelling in awareness and advocacy but less in direct action amid repression and health risks. This underscores social media's potential in youth activism, with implications for policy reforms and sustained engagement. By connecting to education, drug abuse awareness, and reduced inequalities, the study advocates for multifunctional digital strategies to address interconnected societal challenges in Nigeria.

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