Twitter, civil activisms and EndSARS protest in Nigeria as a developing democracy

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**Abstract:** The study examined how Twitter was used to organize the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. It also investigated the extent to which Twitter has promoted or degraded democracy in Nigeria through its support for enhancing freedom of expression and being a driver of social protests. The study adopted a qualitative approach using in-depth interview. Twenty Nigerian youths were purposely selected across the South-western states of Nigeria through snowballing technique. The study found that Twitter is effective for social protests as witnessed in the #EndSARS protest because it is a magnificent and functional tool that is powerful in creating a strong tie and thick engagement during and after the protest. However, the effect of Twitter is temporal as the ties it can create get weak by the day. The study concluded that Twitter can either enhance or degrade democracy depending on how its users, who are the core driver of change, use it in democratic process.

**Subjects:** Mass Communication; Political Communication; Information Technology

**Keywords:** Twitter; SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad); social activism; protests; social media; democracy; Nigeria

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**PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT**

This article reinforces the notion about the power of social media in general and Twitter in particular, especially in relation to democratic process and governance. It establishes that Twitter is now being used as a functional and effective instrument for mobilizing and inciting people for mass engagements and social protests through the emotive messages that are tweeted and posted in it. Since it can be used negatively as a tool of incitement, it can also be used as a positive tool for positive social change. This is the point this article has made for policy implication. In other words, instead of harsh response to the use and power of Twitter by governments of developing countries like Nigeria, such governments should rather come up with policies that will encourage the use of Twitter positively to support and drive governments’ goal for better national development.
1. Introduction

In the last 10 years, Twitter and Facebook have served as primary tools of protest and social activism against governments’ inaction in Nigeria. Twitter, in particular, has been used to organize and execute social protests that included the 2012 #OccupyNigeria protest on the removal of fuel subsidy, the 2020 Special Anti-Robbery Squad Protest (#EndSARS) and the latest #LiftTwitterBan protest.

The #EndSARS protest was particularly intriguing in the way Twitter was used to mobilize people within and outside Nigeria to participate in the protest. The protest, which was motivated to end the persistent brutality of SARS almost brought down the Nigeria Government. SARS in Nigeria police force was created mainly to fight serious crimes like armed robbery. The Squad became notorious for profiling youths and maltreating them with impunity.

As a result of the effectiveness of Twitter in making the #EndSARS protest very potent and threatening to the authority of the Nigeria government, the government banned the use of Twitter on July 4th, 2020. Generally, Nigerians think that government’s decision to ban Twitter and regulate the use of social media can be linked to its increased effective use for organizing protests against government’s actions and policies (Onuh-Yahaya, 2021).

The role of Twitter in initiating and executing potent social protests in Nigeria is not strange. Studies have confirmed that Twitter has been used both in developing and developed democracies of the world to stimulate and drive social protests (Hari, 2014). Twitter like other new media is now becoming an emerging political platform through which national and sub-national governments are being held accountable, responsive and responsible (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017; Suleiman, 2017; Uldam & Vestergaard, 2015). Thus, Twitter, like few other new media, has been transforming democratic process in Africa in the twenty-first century (Mangaga, 2012; Mustapha, 2012; Ya’u, 2012). For instance, there is evidence to suggest that online media played a very crucial role as alternative media through which Zimbabweans, both home and abroad, tackled the Mugabe government; thus fostering political participation among the marginalised group such as the youths (Mangaga, 2012; Mustapha, 2012). This is now to say that while political activism and citizens engagements with political office holders have come under threats in the mainstream media following excessive state legislations and criminalisation of dissident voices, the arrival of social networking sites including Facebook and Twitter has allowed unfettered and strong political activism through protests. This is, of course, because social media permit political messages to travel across several distances with unimaginable immediacy (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017).

Thus, social media “are increasingly playing the role of public sphere where public issues are debated outside the control and dominance of government” and people come together as “equal” in a public debate (Hari, 2014, p. 37). Twitter, in particular, has, therefore, now become the “new voice” of Nigerians through which they freely express their opinions and feelings about government corrupt practices and ways of governance; hence, gaining increased awareness and recognition globally. The use of social media for social activism has, of course, been a preeminent political phenomenon in Nigeria’ political sphere since the Arab spring revolution where Nigerians had taken a cue on how effective social media can be used to engage their government over misrule and bad policies (Hari, 2014). The use and instigation of social protests through Twitter was, for the first time, established with the success of the nationwide protest tagged the “Occupy Nigeria” in 2014 when citizens took to the street to protest against the removal subsidy from the Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) by the Federal Government. Since then, it has been from one social protests to another, which were coordinated and amplified through Twitter.

By and large, the rise in the use of Twitter for social activism in Nigeria has necessitated the need to investigate its effectiveness for organizing and executing social protests in the country. As Hari (2014) and Oloyede and Elega (2019) research had suggested further research to examine the use of hashtags and its significance on protests in Nigeria, there is also the need to explore dominant
themes in contents shared on Twitter in order to determine the extent to which the contents have made social protests in Nigeria so effective. There is also a particular need to investigate and understand the implication of the use of Twitter for social protests on Nigeria inchoate democracy (Dambo et al., 2020).

To this end, this study examined how Twitter was used to organize the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. It also investigated the extent to which Twitter has promoted or degraded democracy in Nigeria through its support for enhancing freedom of expression, and being a driver of social protests. Against this background, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

(1) To what extent has Twitter been effective in mobilizing youths for activism and #EndSARS protest in Nigeria?
(2) To what extent has Twitter enhanced or degraded democracy in developing nations like Nigeria?

2. Literature review
The hashtag #EndSARS started trending on Twitter on 4 October 2020 with the posting of a video showing how SARS officials killed a young Nigerian motorist in Ugheli Delta state (after shooting him, dropping his body by the roadside and drove off in the victim’s SUG car) (George, 2020).

The video posted on 3 October 2020 sparked immediate reactions from Nigerians, but was denied by the Nigeria government who described the occurrence as “fake”, and arrested the young man who recorded and posted it (Van Dunem, 2021).

On the other hand, the Nigeria police reported that the victim in the video did not die and officers in the video were not SARS’ team (Kabir, 2020). This aggravated Nigerians’ anger and fueled the momentum of the activism on Twitter where the video was posted. As reported by Van Dunem (2021), the post reads:

“SARS just shot a young boy dead at Ughelli, Delta state, as we speak. In front of Wetland hotels. They left him for dead on the roadside and drove away with the deceased Lexus jeep. I have videos …”
—Chinyelugo (@AfricaOfficial2) October 3, 2020

According to George (2020), the October 3rd video caused an immediate trigger that made the hashtag #EndSARS go viral on social media platforms which then resulted in the massive street protests to call for the dissolution of SARS and to end police brutality, injustice and maltreatment. Likewise, the arrest of the young man who posted the video fueled the anger of the youths (Gladstone & Specia, 2020) and spread the hashtag #EndSARS globally, which, therefore, launched or resulted into the physical demonstration in major cities like Lagos and Abuja. Meanwhile, Vega (2020) observed that the hashtag #EndSARS, indeed, started as far back as 2017 when Nigerians were using it to share their experience on extortion, harassment, torture, illegal arrest and other violating behaviours of SARS’ officials. It only led to street demonstrations in 2020 when youths saw the need to take their online protests to the street in order to have greater impacts on government’s handling of the SARS unit of the Nigerian Police.

Thus, as various reports (Kazeem, 2020; Ojewale, 2020; Oloyede & Elega, 2019) have it, the #EndSARS protest was fueled by government’s unfulfilled promises to scrap SARS in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2019. Before the protest in October 2020, Amnesty International in June 2020 reported about 80 cases of mal-treatment, extra-judicial killings, torture, extortions, rape and diverse manners of human abuse and injustice perpetrated by SARS between January 2017 and May 2020 (Gladstone & Specia, 2020; Vega, 2020). SARS in their evil practice targeted youths wearing dreadlocks, tattoos or using expensive mobile gadgets or cars (Van Dunem, 2021; Vega, 2020; Sule, 2020). Young girls wearing expensive coloured hair were not left out as they were often
profiled and harassed as prostitutes. Also, queer men and women were harassed for looking masculine and feminine (Sule, 2020).

Twitter, as a platform through which organic society is formed, was credited with the success of the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria (Amnesty International, 2021). During the protest, Nigerians took to Twitter to narrate their ordeals and motivations to participate in the protest. Nigerian youths were motivated for the protest to demand for better police, government accountability and reform of certain institutions in the country (Okunola, 2020).

Sule (2020) of the Aljazeera News in her report, Different Agenda, One goal: How Nigerians United to #EndSARS, noted that many youths that joined the protest had experienced police brutality or had someone close to them who had bad experiences or ordeal with SARS officials for unjust reasons. In the report, Sule noted that a Nigerian Doctor who shared her experience on Twitter said that she was arrested by SARS because they found condoms in her bag after explaining that she was a medical doctor.

Corroborating Sule’s report, Kazeem (2020) and Olasupo (2021) noted that the #EndSARS protest was dominated by youths that had firsthand experience of SARS torture, arrest and brutality while some of them had people with similar experience. Therefore, social media only served as a tool of organizing the protest and updating people about the protest’s locations and plans. The key driver of the protest was the youths’ negative experiences. The unpleasant shared experiences of the youths metamorphosed into a connective action that manifested into the physical demonstration. This was why scholars considered social media as an “organizing platform” that motivate and enable users to express themselves freely and share their experiences and views on matter of public discourse which can then lead to connective action. Hence, social media platform like Twitter connects individuals with similar personal experience together; the connection therefore resulting into a connective action (Dambo et al., 2020).

The connective action is promoted by the contents shared by users (Dambo et al., 2020). This is why the #EndSARS protest was not limited to the Nigeria soil; rather it became a global phenomenon and enjoyed participations of both Nigerians and non-Nigerians in diaspora, who actively tweeted, retweeted and demonstrated on the streets of major cities during the protest. But even with this, can we then say Twitter is the sole cause of the social activism and massive participation in the protest? Can we say that Twitter contributed to the success of the protest?

Various reports (Kazeem, 2020; Olasupo, 2021; Van Dunem, 2021) had it that the #EndSARS protest had 5 items on its agenda:

(i) To demand the immediate release of all detained protestors;
(ii) To get justice and compensation for the families of those killed by SARS;
(iii) To demand for the creation of independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of police misconduct;
(iv) To request that psychological evaluation of the disbanded SARS officers prior to their redeployment be conducted; and
(v) To request increment in police salary and compensation for protecting lives and property.

While some researchers described the protests as unsuccessful (Dambo et al., 2020), Van Dunem (2021) described the outcome of the movement as “ambiguous”. He stated that among the 5 items on the agenda of the protest, four were met except the demand for justice and compensation for the families of those killed by SARS.

The success of the #EndSARS protest as attributed to Twitter is premised on the way it was able to coordinate the protest across the nation and how it amplified the voice of the campaign globally.
(Obia, 2020). Just like in the Egyptian revolution, social media played a great role in the online mobilization of youth for the #EndSARS protest. Castells (2013) submitted that demonstrators in Egypt “recorded events with their mobile phones, and shared their videos with people in the country at large and around the world via YouTube and Facebook, often while live streaming. They deliberated on Facebook, coordinated through Twitter, and used blogs extensively to convey opinion and engage in debates” (p. 57). Similar to the roles of Twitter in the Egyptian revolution and other Arab Spring Revolution, the #EndSARS protest, as George (2020) noted, started online through tweets and retweets, then turned to the street protests, attracted attention of the international communities and received support in like manner. The mass protest got a retweet from Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey to support the movement and create awareness for its cause (Akindele, 2020). “Celebrities such as Beyonce and Rihanna had written messages of solidarity on their social media” in support of the protest towards achieving the goals of the protesters (Vega, 2020, p. 3).

The social connective power of Twitter was established and reinforced with the way the protesters were coordinated and cemented into a strong social activism by some non-government companies or group of individuals that volunteered and offered support to the protesters all through the demonstration in Lagos (Okunola, 2020).

From the foregoing, the role of the social media in modern democracy should be questioned. Do the social media enhance or degrade democratic process? There is no doubt, with what was documented about the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria, that the use of the social media, like Twitter and Facebook, significantly impact political process via mass demonstration. And this is not restricted to Nigeria alone. Ranging from the Tunisia “Jasmine revolution” 2010/2011, the electoral fraud protest in Iran 2009, dethronement of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in 2011, the fuel subsidy removal #OccupyNigeria protest in 2012 and to the recent @EndSARS protest in Nigeria in 2020 (Soriano, 2013), there is the evidence that the social media have become the new instruments of poltical process, even though scholars have not agreed among themselves on what should be the right evaluation of the evidence.

Over the years, scholars have debated on the effectiveness of social media as a driver of political change in modern democracy from two school of thoughts; “cyber-optimist” and “cyber-pessimist”. The cyber-optimists are of the opinion that the internet is the main force that drives and reinforces democratic practice in modern society. They believed that the internet and social media empower the isolated individuals at the grassroot and all the citizens to actively exercise their fundamental human rights of freedom of expression, thereby forcing the government to perform their responsibilities and taking actions through transparency and accountability (Sharp, 2011).

Championing the cyber-optimists’ school of thoughts is the chief executive of Google and most vibrant of the protesters against Hosni Mubarak dictatorial rule in Egypt, Wael Ghonim, who concluded after the successful revolution in 2011 that “if you want to liberate society, just give it internet” (Soriano, 2013). This statement implied that the success of the protest against Mubarak’s dictatorship and corrupt governance started on Twitter and on the anonymous Facebook account which he created (The New York Times, 2012). Accordingly, Ghonim’s statement on the internet described its transformative power drawn towards revolution through its formulative ability to instigate social uprising, collective and connective actions from diverse and heterogenous group of people whose opinions and goals align.

Furthermore, the opinion of the cyber-optimist supports Obia’s (2020) comments that Twitter serves as a coordinating platform for political disclosure and activist campaign in Nigeria. While examining the role of Twitter in the #EndSARS protest, Obia noted that Twitter was used in three ways during the protest: “to co-ordinate protests, to amplify the voice of the campaign globally, and to berate brands and public figures deemed to be opposed to the movement” (Obia, 2020,
p. 1). This submission agrees with the cyber-optimists’ argument that social media enable intergroup synergy and relation between individuals and groups beyond national borders. Various social protests, particularly the #EndSARS protest, enjoyed this kind of collaboration beyond national border as Nigerians in diaspora turned out massively to protest in different parts of the world. Quoting the former vice president of the United States, Al-Gore, Soriano (2013, p. 3) noted that since its early years, social media have been revered as a powerful tool that not just “spread participatory, but that also forge a new era of Athenian democracy”. That is, social media facilitate and encourage active participation of all citizens of a nation in the matter of governance.

On the other hand, the cyber-pessimists argued that the role of social media in generating activism in democracy is over-emphasized. Gladwell (2010) in her article “Why the revolution won’t be retweet” argued that “social change and protest require huge sacrifice such that one engages for a close friend i.e., a “strong tie” that cannot be threatened or broken by repressive authority. The theme of the argument is that actions that emanate from Twitter is built on weak ties that are not strong enough and incapable to survive “high-risk” activism (Soriano, 2013) or make any impact.

Similarly, Soriano argued that those online protesters (organized via social media) lack the will mind capable to survive any oppression for the social cause. That is, “when government repression and physical violence take place”, protesters “become quickly disrupted, or their actions are barely effective” (Soriano, 2013). This, however, contradicts George’s (2020) reports on the protesters’ actions during the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. George reported that “even in the face of violence and intimidation”, the protesters remained strong, vocal and increased in number as they were determined to put an end to police brutality.

With the increased use of social media for social activism and political protests in Nigeria, it is compelling to explain the phenomenon within the Uses and Gratification Theory of Blumler and Katz (1974). The theory clearly explains the logic behind audience selection and use of certain media. We can then invariably infer that Nigerians actively select and use Twitter to gratify their needs for political participation and engagement with their government.

Specifically, the theory presents an understanding of what Nigerians do with Twitter and why they use the media. Applicably, it explains Nigerians’ expectation and purpose for selecting and using Twitter (Boztepe Taskiran, 2019). Uses and Gratification Theory is considered as a “need seeking” approach, which fulfils the role of the media to “satisfy the needs and motivation” of its audience (Mehrad and Tajer, 2016). This means once again that Nigerians carefully select Twitter due to its capacity to satisfy their needs for social activism and protest.

Uses and Gratification Theory asks the questions such as (i) “why are people attracted to certain media? and (ii) what kind of satisfaction do media provide for people?” (Mehrad and Tajer, 2006). In relation to this study, we can ask why are Nigerians attracted to Twitter and what satisfaction does Twitter provide to Nigerians? As social media users, we can say the interactive, participatory, free access and connectivity affordances of social media give it an edge over traditional media; and therefore, make social media the most preferred media selected and used for social activism and protests in Nigeria.

So, Twitter is a powerful platform that helped Nigerians to demand for accountability and call out politicians (government) through tweets and retweet (Lawal, 2021). Accordingly, Nigerians youths’ attraction to Twitter for activism and social protest can be attributed to its capacity to satisfy their need for information and debates on political matter. This reflects Jurgen Harbamas’s public sphere concept, which is core in a democratic society. Twitter, indeed, has the most engaged users in Nigeria (Lawal, 2021), and this explains its prevalent use in Nigeria, particularly by the youth.
To this end, Twitter has been a source of news, social activism and protests to fight human rights abuse or molestation for Nigerians. Thus, their “needs create motivation” for an action and media selection (Mehrad and Tajer, 2016). Furthermore, Nigerians’ use of Twitter for protest can be described as a systematic approach of meeting the need to redefine and establish the importance of freedom of expression, critique of the government actions and policies and government accountability to the citizens in a democratic society.

Summarily, the democratisation of public opinions and issues among constituents in a deliberative democracy is inherently manifesting on Twitter. The platform provides a real-time tracking or aggregates of views which culminate into public opinion on issues that affect the generality of a society. This is seen in how Twitter was able to galvanize and build conviction that led to the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. Twitter has been confirmed to deepen democratic process (Bennett, 2012; Dahlgren, 2009; Fenton, 2008) and civic engagements (Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017; Uldam & Vestergaard, 2015), yet it has its drawbacks such as its interference in influencing an outcome of national election (Naugton, 2013). As Twitter is being accused of bolstering “echo chambers”, which are capable of weakening democratic process across the world, the effectiveness of corporate self-regulation has become necessary, thus suggesting “the need for coordinated and likely coercive government intervention” (Bloodgood & Masson, 2018).

3. Methodology
This study adopted a qualitative approach using in-depth interview. Data were collected mainly through a combination of interview guide and review of news reports and scientific studies on internet and social activism, and the protest from a global perspective. The interview method allowed the researchers to purposely select and collect rich and deep information from Nigerians that used Twitter and who actively participated in the #EndSARS protest either online or through the physical demonstration.

Therefore, 20 Nigerian youths were purposively selected across the South-western states of Nigeria as the initial sample size to get deep information on their: participation either through Twitter or physically, motivations, activities during the #EndSARS protest as well as their opinion on how Twitter enhances or degrades democracy in Nigeria. At least, four participants were purposively selected from each of the five states in the South-west part of the country, consisting of Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Ekiti and Lagos states. The purposive selection involved an element of snowballing as one Informant in each state identified another Informant who was qualified to participate in the study. The qualification criterion was that an Informant must be a youth who used Twitter and who actively participated in the #EndSARS protest, either online or by physical involvement.

Youth was operationalized as a young man between 18 and 35 years either in or out of school or university. Ultimately, 16 of the selected participants were male while the remaining four were female. Nigerian youths were selected as the sample of the study as it was evident that a majority of the people that participated and championed the protest were youths (Ojewale, 2020).

The Informants in this study were interviewed one-on-one, using the interview guide for standardization, except three of them who opted for telephone interview due to the distance of their locations with that of the interviewer. More importantly, the three Informants that preferred telephone interview justified their preferred approach on the basis of their cautiousness against COVID-19 that was raging at the time of the research.

The 20 selected Informants provided deep and extensive information which answered the two questions this study sought answers for, while saturated point was reached at the beginning of extending the interview to the 21st person.

Thus, the interview method adopted in this study availed the researchers an opportunity to get broad knowledge and information of how the Informants made meanings of the social activism
and process during the protest. In addition, it helped the researchers to answer the question of “what” and “how”. Survey would not have been able to provide the deep and expressive responses needed to establish an understanding of the impact of Twitter on the motivation, stimulation of social protests in Nigeria and its effects on the growth of democracy in the country.

In analyzing the qualitative data collected in this study, the researchers focused on the major dimensions or themes that included: participation in social protests; effectiveness of the use of Twitter for mobilizing youths for social activism and protests; use of Twitter in the #EndSARS protest; motivation for participating in the protest through Twitter; strategies for using Twitter for mobilizing participants for the protest; success of the protest attributable to Twitter and Twitter’s impact or role in degrading or enhancing democracy in Nigeria as a developing nation.

4. Finding and discussion

4.1. Participation in social protests in Nigeria

Summarily, all the Informants for this study participated in the #EndSARS and #Endbadgovernance protests both online and physically on the streets, while 12 of them participated in the previous #OccupyNigeria protest both online or physically. Also, some of the participants noted that many people that they knew to have tweeted about the #Endbadgovernance were actively involved in the #EndSARS protest on the streets. Informant 1 noted that:

We are in the generation of #Sorosoke. Many of my friends on Twitter shared something about the protest even on Facebook. I participated in the protest both online and on the street. [Na God save me].

Another Informant, (Informant 6), who spoke extensively on his participation during the protest, submitted that:

What our leaders did during the lockdown was bad. They said in the news that they shared palliative to people, and we did not see anything. In my area, people that even collected the small food said it was not worth it all. We watched news. We saw how countries abroad cared for their people, gave them food and money, But in Nigeria, nothing at all. So, Twitter gave people the platform to speak their mind during #EndSARS. It was an opportunity to talk about all the atrocities of the police and call the government to rise to their duties to ensure justice is served. So, I tweeted and retweeted during the protest.

Comments above revealed the affordances of visibility and persistence of Twitter as a rich media. Furthermore, one of the Informants submitted that the #EndSARS protest was beyond ending police brutality but also to end bad governance. In his words, “we want an end to bad governance, unemployment, insecurity, poor economy and close the gap between the rich and the poor in this country”.

From a similar perspective, Informant 8 submitted that the protest was to tell the government that “enough of their inadequacies and bad leadership. They have no sympathy for us. No security, things are expensive. So, I am glad I protested … I can say categorically that the protest was successful”. Informant 8’s submission, however, contradicts Dambo et al.’s (2020) conclusion that the protest was unsuccessful.

Informant 14 expatiated the majority’s position that the protest was used by Nigerians to express their resentments against government’s insensitivities and bad governance. She noted that:

We are tired of the way things are in this country. My father usually tells me stories of how things were in his days. How companies begged people to work with them as they graduated from the university, but there is nothing like that again. No free education, no job, no light,
no security, food is expensive and a lot of things. Even first-class graduate is jobless in this country. It is frustrating! Now people that are supposed to protect us have turned into terrorists tormenting us. I am a youth, and I can never be silent. Mo tisoroko [I spoke up] Thank God, Twitter gave me the chance to do that. My participation in the #EndSARS protest was genuine, purposeful, and gave me satisfaction. Through it, we were able to tell the wicked politicians that they are not saved with their bad governance.

Informant 14’s revealing remarks confirmed the earlier submission in this study that the #EndSARS protest was an extension of the #EndBadGovernance agitation, which was also driven with the hashtag #sorosoke on social and traditional media. Gladstone and Specia (2020, p. 2) noted that Nigerians want “accountability from their elected leaders and an end to common practices of graft and bribery that permeate the Nigerian establishment that is considered one of the most corrupt”. So, Twitter was the last hope for Nigerians to express themselves freely as it has become an “influential political force” (Duraz, 2021). Also, Informant 14’s submission just like others in this study is a corroboration of the finding of Christine Tamir of Pew Research survey in (Tamir, 2018) that many Nigerians were unsatisfied with the way things are in Nigeria.

4.2. Effectiveness of Twitter in mobilizing youths for activism and social protests

All the Informants described social media as a very effective tool for protest and social activism. Accordingly, one of them (Informant 9) noted that Twitter platform is a magnificent and functional tool for creating instant bond and making news go viral with the use of hashtag. Similarly, Informant 13 submitted that Twitter is “very strong and powerful in mobilizing youths for protests and activism especially because of the hash tagging, which makes tweet go trending and gain more attention from people far and wide”. Supporting this notion, Informant 11 noted that:

I would say the platform was very active and instrumental to mobilizing youths for the protest in various locations across the country. Young people planned and pooled resources together via Twitter to organize and execute the nationwide protest.

In another submission that highlighted the extent of Twitter’s effectiveness in mobilizing youths’ participation in the protest, Informant 12 significantly noted that the success of the protest cannot be dissociated from Twitter. He observed that aside international figures who retweeted posts and led a fundraising for the protest, many local companies supported the protest and this encouraged Nigerians’ youths to grow in numbers for the protest. He further observed that:

Protesters were fed at the physical site with delicious meals. People ate as much as they desired. Also, there was an emergency response team on ground to take care of the mental health and so much more. Many organizations, groups and individuals supported the protest, and strong connection and mobilizations were created and sustained via Twitter. This largely contributed to the success of the protest. The protest was well planned and organized via social media and it was going on well before it was hijacked and turned into something else.

This comment confirmed that one of the key factors that also drove the increased participation for the activism was the strong support provided for the campaign via Twitter. Fundraising was raised on Twitter; companies and celebrities were mobilized on Twitter to give support to the protest; and youths were incited to turn out in large numbers for the protest on the streets. Companies like Dominion Pizza shared free meal, Feminist Coalition group donated fund to support the protests (Okunola, 2020). Likewise, the core part of the protest was “pushing hashtag” to international figures and organizations and how young Nigerians mobilized support from tech companies, non-governmental organisations, health care providers, food vendors and more (Kazeem, 2020). Hence, how Twitter was effectively used driving the campaign message, gaining global attention, organizing support globally and pushing people out to the street cannot be relegated or considered as mere slacktivism.

Evidently, the sharing of information and “hash tagging” of keywords significantly influenced peoples’ evaluation of the campaign and the need for their involvement in the physical protest and
social activism. Indeed, the messages on Twitter adequately worked on the emotion of the majority of youths who were suffering from the bad governance of the Nigerian government, and who essentially had suffered from the brutality of the SARS. Thus, people were automatically moved and attracted to the campaign due to personal and shared experiences, which they shared on Twitter. To some extent, this finding corroborated Henrik’s (2011) argument that it is premature and overrated to describe all social activism as “slacktivism” that is incapable of resulting into real political participation and commitment.

The scholar noted that though citizens’ engagement in politics in a democratic society are not necessarily exclusive to offline and online participation, there has been no evidence that online participation in politics has a “damaging” effect on civic offline engagement in politics or replacing their physical participation in any form.

Contrary to this submission, Twitter expanded the #EndSARS protest and increased the number of campaign activists through hash tagging, tweet and retweet during the campaign, thereby creating a “fertile ground” for direct involvement and participation in the protest and social activism (Henrik, 2011).

4.3. Extent to which Twitter expanded or degraded democracy in developing nations like Nigeria
Finding shows that many of the protesters believed that Twitter enhances democracy in Nigeria by enabling freedom of speech, giving voice to the voiceless, and providing equal rights for every citizen to be directly involved in public debate on political matters. One of the Informants in this study (Informant 18) submitted that Twitter is a highly engaging and interactive platform in Nigeria. Accordingly, the Informant established that “Nigerian youths are highly interactive, expressive and engaging on Twitter. They talk freely about anyone be it a politician or celebrity”.

Similarly, Informant 1 noted that “youth could raise intelligent conversation and engage in opinion exchange between individuals via threads (i.e., posts made consecutively on the platform) freely without fear and harassment from government”. In relation to this assertion, Informant 4 asserted that “Twitter is the best platform when it comes to logical reasoning, public debate and presentation of fact freely on any political issue or politician”. In another submission, another Informant noted that “I have seen a spark of interests in the Nigerian politics that can be attributed to conversations/interactions from Twitter. So, I think it is re-awakening the interests of people in governance and general politics of the country”. This submission corroborates Anderson et al.’s (2020) statement that the internet is the “key venue” where citizens engage in political discussion and debates. Hence, Twitter strengthens free speech and facilitates transparent, responsive and participatory governance. Informant 2 who spoke succinctly on the impact of Twitter in democracy in Nigeria submitted that:

Everyone is free and powerful on Twitter … it is a haven where you find solace, talk freely and share your reasoning and opinion and that is one of the fundamental human rights citizens must enjoy in democracy. Twitter offers us that in Nigerian … it was the only thing we were enjoying.

This Informant’s submission confirms Hari’s (2014) comment that social media is the new voice of Nigerians and a public sphere for debating issues outside the control and dominance of government. In the same vein, Chinchinla, former president of Costa Rica in 2019, observed that “freedom to speak empowers citizens, individually or collectively to advance their interests and shape institutions whose decisions impact their lives”. Thus, Twitter is a powerful tool that facilitates civic participatory in governance. Therefore, this study addresses United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong institutions.
While the effect of social media on citizens participation in democratic government is still a matter of concern among political theorists and researchers (Henrik, 2011), we cannot undermine the affordances of social media, especially Twitter in aiding free flow of information and ideas of numerous topics ranging from economy, business, politics, governance among others, In short, social media have increasingly become the platform which users rely on for breaking news and check their opinion on public matters and on elected officials. It is a virtual square for political meetings gathering and all civic related activities (Anderson et al., 2008).

Meanwhile, Ethan (2014) described online activism in a modality of a “thin” versus “thick” engagement and concluded that the online activism is a thin engagement that cannot bring about a political change nor enhance democratic process. Zuckerman described the thin engagement as a weak one that requires participants only to change their profile picture on social media, sign a petition online and just showing up for the mass engagement. This implies that the participants in any form of social protest are just getting themselves in the protest just for the fun of it; just because they are being pushed to participate. They are not purposeful or empowered; and thus, social protests cannot bring about any radical change. However, Tufekci (2014) disagreed with Zuckerman’s assertion of a thin engagement and added that she believed that many protesters would dispute Zuckerman’s claim, too.

Considering the enormous efforts and energy that thousands of the protesters exerted during and after the #EndSARS protest, the engagement “was neither easy nor thin”. According to Tufekci (2014), movement participants do not see their job as simply to show up to the rally, to sign the petition, or to change profile picture … they see their own agency as crucial; there is no sense of delegation, or acceptance of tell me what to do. According to her, mass engagement is often thick; in fact, almost overly thick. Everyone that participates in any social protest aspires to be empowered, and many cherish this empowerment. Tufekci’s observation is similar to the submission of many of the informants in this study because their submissions revealed that they saw the need to be involved in the movement as crucial and significant, not as one that has been cajoled to do so. Likewise, findings of this study revealed that the network #EndSARS created during and after the protest was strong, effective and remain thick even to the time of this study.

In October 2021, Nigerians marked the #EndSARS anniversary in remembrance and honour of the victims that lost their lives in the 20 October 2020 Lekki massacre and also called for the release of over 300 victims arrested and imprisoned by the Nigeria government for participating in the protest. In the same October, Lagos State Governor, Babajide Sawo-Olu, invited youths and other stakeholders for a peace walk in commemoration of the #EndSARS protest, and this invite was bluntly and publicly rejected by the youths. This rejection is an indication that the protesters who are still connected in purpose are empowered. For instance, in response to the Governor's invite, one of the youth activist, who championed the #EndSARS protest and also led another protest in February 2021 to protest the reopening of Lekki toll gate but was arrested, rejected the governor’s invite via a tweet that reads:

I humbly decline the invitation of Mr. Governor. The government in itself set up a panel. The panel has made recommendations. I believe that genuine peacemaking will begin by first implementing the recommendations of the panel. Then, we can begin to trust the government. Finally, I’m not at war with anyone. Not with the government, police or politicians. All we are asking is that our leaders place value on our lives as citizens and lead us with love, fairness truth and justice, to enable all Nigerians live a better life in peace and unity. (Source: Punch Newspaper Online, 30 November 2021)

Another Nigeria youth that participated in organizing the protest, Folarin Falana, popularly known as @falzthebadguy, also rejected the invite, describing the peace walk as a joke. He insisted that justice must be served for all victims of police brutality (Punch Newspaper, 2021). From the foregoing, we can deduce that social media movements do not produce a thin or weak tie. This
was why Tufekci (2014) concluded that “it's a myth that current protest movements are formed through weaker ties … or that current protesters do not make strong ties through them”. While it might be difficult for protesters in yesteryear movement to stay in touch with each other, “many new movement participants now keep in contact with people they first met in protests through affordances of social media. Many people come to these spontaneous protests in friend groups and furthermore, activate their own social networks through social media’ (p. 205). While it is evident that protesters are still connected, which we call networking, the question is what difference does this networking bring? For instance, is there any political movement capable of changing the living conditions of unemployment, poor governance or poverty status of citizens?

From the ongoing, we can deduce that the extent of Twitter's effectiveness in enhancing democracy is though great, but temporal. Though people that were connected through the #EndSARS protest are still connected, living conditions in Nigeria is getting worst, and the thick engagement and networking are incapable of instigating a long-term change that can impact the quality of life of Nigerians. Instead, government’s response to the protest has ultimately generated fear and anxiety in people. The first three or four weeks after the protest, police were not on the road. In fact, they were scared to be identified with the police force. Many of them feared to put on their uniform due to the torture they suffered from the protesters during the movement. Now they are back on the streets molesting and intimidating Nigerians. Over 300 #EndSARS victims (which include innocent youths) were picked after the protest and dispersed across different prisons in Nigeria without trials. In fact, Nigerians are now scared of participating in any form of protest as a result of the fear the government has created in them. So, as thick and strong the movement was, as created by Twitter, it is now getting weak as people cannot come together powerfully again, cannot sustain their cohesion or get aggressive as they were during #EndSARS as a result of the fear government’s response has created. No wonder, Gladwell (2010, p. 46) insisted that “social media make it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to make any impact”.

Nevertheless, the findings on whether or not Twitter is degrading or enhancing democratic process in Nigeria corroborated existing literatures on social media, particularly Twitter (Jackson, 2020; Chinchilla, 2020; Anderson et al., 2018), which established it as a dynamic tool of political liberation and discord in a multicultural society like Nigeria, though its impact is temporal and weak.

So, considering the transformative and critical role that Twitter had played on political process in developing nations, as exemplified in the Arab spring revolution, #OccupyNigeria and the recent #EndSARS campaign in Nigeria, it is safe to conclude that the impact of Twitter in enhancing democracy outweighs its negative role of degrading democratic process. The negative role is essentially its amenability for inciting hatred and violence as well as repressive response that it might induce from government.

Specifically, many of the Informants observed that fake news can easily be circulated on social media, thereby causing a negative impact in the society. Informant 2, for instance, noted that “… during the Lekki shooting, I read that Eniola Badmus was shot … in fact, her image was 'photoshopped' and circulated all over social media. Meanwhile it was fake …”. Eniola Badmus is a popular Nollywood actress. This was why Sean Illing (2020) submitted that Twitter is what you make of it as it could be a liberating tool and destructive weapon or playground for political provocateurs. Similarly, Chinchilla (2020) also suggested that the “adverse relationship” between social media and democracy is beyond “anecdotal” as extremist can use it to incite hatred, violence and manipulate public elections and debate on social media in a democratic society. Furthermore, she noted that social media generally provide “a ripe environment for virulent reproduction” and circulation of hate speech and fake news".
5. Conclusion
The relationship between social media and democracy has been examined from a global perspective among scholars and researchers with different narratives on social media’s capacity for degrading or promoting democracy and affecting citizen’s offline participation in politics. This study examined the situation in Nigeria with focus on how Twitter was used for the 2020 #EndSARS protest on police brutality. Findings from this study established that Twitter serves as a tool for organizing the protest and updating people about the protest locations. It was powerfully and effectively used to mobilize youths through hash tagging that made emotive messages go viral and impactful on many youths far and wide. With the way Twitter was used during the #EndSARS protest, this study also established that Twitter enhances democracy in Nigeria as the citizens overtime have found the platform as a rich media that is instrumental and transformational in driving change and promoting democracy. Since users are in charge of political change, Twitter serves the purpose and intent of the users. Nevertheless, the impact of Twitter in enhancing democracy is effective but temporal.

This study questioned the argument of the cyber-pessimists that asserted that online protest is based on weak ties that cannot survive attack from repressive government. Also, it interrogated the argument that described social activism and online protest as slacktivism incapable of effecting changes and inhibiting citizens’ real commitment and physical participation in politics. However, it concluded that the strong tie and networking created from the social activism will eventually become weak overtime and the change will become temporal.

This study challenged Dambo et al.’s (2020) submission that the #EndSARS protest was unsuccessful. The #EndSARS protest was a continuation of the #EndSARSgovernance campaign, which also ran on Twitter to protest against poor governance, bad leadership and unemployment. Hence, there was a correlation between the two protests, which were instigated and fueled by the citizens’ state of mind when the initial SARS video was posted. That is, Nigerians were already dissatisfied with the situation of things in the country. So, while Twitter serves as a tool for organizing the protest and updating people about the protest locations, the key driver of the protest was the youths’ firsthand experience of SARS’s torture, poor governance and general dissatisfaction on the current situation of things in Nigeria.

Consequently, the strong tie and connective actions that were witnessed during the #EndSARS protest was an outcome of peoples’ experience and the connective power of Twitter to link together people with shared experience in a jiffy. Therefore, Twitter was effective in mobilizing youths for the protest.

Also, it is clear that the #EndSARS campaign was successful as the purpose of the campaign, which was to scrap SARS unit completely and introduce psychology test in the Nigerian police training exercise, were implemented. In fact, four items out of the five items agenda for the protest were achieved. The intensity and effectiveness of the protest forced the president, Mohammed Buhari, to make a national broadcast where he conceded to grant the requests of the protesters, particularly the disbandment or scrapping of SARS unit. Dambo et al. (2020) and Van Dunem (2021), indeed, confirmed that among the 5 items on the agenda of the protest, four were met except the demand for justice and compensation for the families of those killed by SARS, which, of course, Lagos State is pursuing for implementation.

6. Limitation and recommendations
This study conducted in-depth interview with youths that participated in the protest either online or offline without considering their shared experience of SARS’ torture/maltreatment. Future research can explore a focus group discussion with Nigerian youths that not only participated in the protest, but also had firsthand experience of SARS’ maltreatment in order to re-examine and isolate the effectiveness of Twitter in mobilizing youths for social protests in developing countries. In other words, there is a need to understand further the extent to which social media in general
can mobilize people for social protest and regime change when we isolate the peoples’ firsthand experience of bad governance.

Based on the finding that Twitter can be misused for negative effect on democracy, the study recommended that the use of Twitter in developing countries must come with some cautions. Citizens are advised not to misuse the freedom that social media offer for participatory governance and accountability. Citizens must use social media cautiously to drive social change and not cause disruption through incitement of hatred and falsehood. It is only when caution is taken against the misuse of Twitter that we can therefore conclude that it is a good instrument for enhancing nascent democracies in developing nations like Nigeria.

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