Citation:

Aboh, S. C. (2024). 'It will never be well with SARS': A discourse analytic study of the #EndSARS protests on social media. *Discourse & Society, 35*(2), 153–173. https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265231200994

"It will never be well with SARS": A discourse analytic study of the #EndSARS protests on social media

Abstract

This paper analyses the discursive strategies used by #EndSARS protesters in their tweets and Facebook comments to construct SARS officers, hold the Nigerian government accountable and demand social change. Informed by social media critical discourse analysis (SMCDA) and social movement theory, the analysis revealed three strategies: constructing SARS as oppressors, representing the Nigerian government as insensitive, and issuing a clarion call for action. The analysis shows that these strategies enabled the protesters to construct the victim-aggressor categorisation, thereby legitimising their resistance to police brutality and demand for change. The study also highlights how the protesters deployed local linguistic resources and ideologies to appeal to the emotions of other Nigerians to join the protest. The study demonstrates how digital political mobilisation can galvanise reform in Nigeria, where leaders and law enforcement agencies are held accountable for their (in)actions. This study contributes to the developing interdisciplinary studies on SMCDA and digital activism.

Keywords: collective action, digital activism, #EndSARS, political discourse, social media critical discourse analysis, social movement

1. Introduction

Social media has provided a platform for digital activism, as evidenced by the protests in Nigeria in October 2020, which demanded the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) (Uwalaka, 2022). Research on the #EndSARS protest aimed at highlighting the impact of the protest on people in the Niger Delta region (Okpalaeke and Aboh, 2022), the emotions exhibited before, during and after the protest (Eniayejuni, 2023), the political, economic and social factors that contributed to the protest (Aniche and Iwuoha, 2022), the legal issues surrounding the protest (Aidonojie et al., 2022; Richards and Eboibi, 2022), and the role of women during the protest (Nwakanma, 2022). These studies illustrate how social media helped mobilise and manage the protest and how protesters formed solidarity. The research also highlights how different emotions, such as fear and anger, were expressed before and during the protests.

A few research studies that adopted a discursive approach to the #EndSARS protest have focused on transitivity and critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Buhari's speech on #EndSARS (Alfred and Oyebola, 2021) and multimodal discourse analysis of WhatsApp shared messages on the protest (Okesola and Oyebode, 2023). Using CDA and systemic functional linguistics, Alfred

and Oyebola (2021) analysed Buhari's (then Nigerian president) speech on the #EndSARS protest to highlight the linguistic strategies used to portray power, ideology, and represent social actors. The analysis showed that while trying to restore his positive image and sway public opinion against protesters, Buhari's modality choices emphasised the government's commitment and authority and delegitimised protesters' actions. Okesola and Oyebode (2023) drew on appraisal theory and visual grammar to examine attitudes and opinions expressed through #EndSARS protest-related memes. The analysis of 30 memes collected from WhatsApp and Twitter found that the memes were predominantly used to negatively evaluate the state of affairs in Nigeria while positively portraying the protesters.

Despite this research on the #EndSARS protest, there is a dearth of research on the discursive strategies protesters used to represent the SARS officers, resist police brutality, hold the Nigerian government accountable, and demand social change. This study analyses the tweets and Facebook comments on the #EndSARS protest, highlighting the linguistic and sociocultural resources (such as Nigerian English expressions, metaphors, deixis, emojis, shared knowledge and values, social roles and identities, and community membership) employed by online protesters to advance their campaign to put an end to police brutality and bad governance. By examining these discursive strategies, the study highlights the role of language in civic engagement and shows how local linguistic resources and ideologies can contribute to digital activism. Local idioms, codeswitching between Standard British English and Nigerian Pidgin, loanwords and references to Nigerian's belief in fighting for one's rights characterise protest discourse in Nigeria (Chiluwa, 2015). This research extends the discursive approach to social media communication and digital activism to the Nigerian context, especially with respect to the #EndSARS protest. The next section provides a review of online protest discourse.

2. Online protest discourse

Social media and digital platforms function as political or protest tools, which nondominant and marginalised groups use to highlight repression and prejudice and resist such hegemonic discourses directed against them (Nartey, 2022). Resistant and emancipatory discourses by nondominant groups often arise when the oppressor is a constituted authority. Eamonn (2004) found that the Strangeways Prison riot in Manchester in April 1990 resulted from heightened dissatisfaction of inmates towards administrative disorganisation.

In Nigeria, several studies have demonstrated how Nigerians use social media to express their grievances and politically engage with the government. For example, Chiluwa (2015) adopted CDA to analyse 245 Facebook posts related to the 2012 "Occupy Nigeria" protests against removing fuel subsidies. The study showed that protesters employed discursive and linguistic strategies such as actor description, polarisation, codeswitching, metaphors and rhetorical questions to articulate their identity as the suffering masses, critique the government, argue against the subsidy removal, and compel continued mobilisation and dissent. Drawing on the concept of collective action framing, Egbunike and Olorunnisola (2015) found that social media focused more on a "generational transfer" motivation frame and used more "spectacle" frames in diagnosing the protests compared to the traditional media that provided more nuanced coverage, balancing (de)legitimation frames. Regarding the prognostic framing (proposed solutions to fix the problem),

the study concluded that people on social media insist on reverting fuel prices while traditional media advocated a compromise. In their multimodal discourse analytic study, Onanuga and Ademilokun (2014) found that, despite the seriousness of the protest, several Nigerians on social media used humour as a strategy to ridicule government officials, who were represented as the oppressors. These studies highlight how Nigerians utilised social media to react to a pressing issue that affected them.

Additional evidence of the role of social media for activism and social movement is observed in Ghana. In their study informed by social movement theory and CDA, Nartey and Yu (2023) found that Ghanaian youths used linguistic resources such as codeswitching, intensification, nomination/predication and metaphor to represent the Ghanaian government as irresponsible and portray the Ghanaian people as victims. Similar discursive constructions were reported by Bhatia and Ross (2022), who studied the framing of the Hong Kong anti-extradition bill protests in 2019 on Twitter using hashtags like #antiELAB, #HongKongProtests, and #NoChinaExtradition. Employing the discursive illusion framework, the study showed that protesters framed the then Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, as hard-hearted and untrustworthy, whereas she presented herself as caring and organised in her speeches. The study concluded that hashtag activism allowed protesters to disseminate their own narratives and build a collective identity during the protests. In the health context, Orlandi et al. (2022), drawing on the discursive mode of institutionalisation, analysed data from seven major anti-vaccine Facebook groups in Italy and found that the leaders of the social movement organisations used the fallacy of hasty generalisation to delegitimise pro-vaccine doctors and deinstitutionalise accepted behaviours. These studies indicate the extent to which social media have been used to resist repression and advance emancipatory discourses.

3. #EndSARS protest

Nigeria is a democratic country and protest is a common way for Nigerians to express their grievances toward government policies and actions. The country has experienced several protests such as the 1929 Aba Women's riot (which kicked against intolerable taxes), the 1989 student-led anti-government protests (against the increase in price of students' meal tickets), the June 12, 1993 protest against the annulment of the presidential election, and the January 2012 protest against the removal of the fuel subsidy (Adebowale, 2020; Okpalaeke and Aboh, 2022). The #EndSARS protest emerged as a continuation of this tradition, with Nigerians rising to address the deep-seated issues of police harassment and power abuse.

The #EndSARS protest is an online-planned and offline-executed social activism agenda by Nigerian youths against a division of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) known as SARS for its extrajudicial killings, extortion and brutality of Nigerian youths (Uwazuruike, 2020). Established in 1992, SARS' mission was to end car theft, armed robbery and kidnapping (Nnadozie, 2017). The NPF, especially SARS, has long been criticised for its corruption, extortion and suppression of separatist organisations such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and members of the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (Aniche and Iwuoha, 2022). Before the 2020 #EndSARS protest, Nigerian youths had communicated their dissatisfaction with SARS in 2013, 2014 and 2017 (Alfred and Oyebola, 2021). However, it was not until 2020 that the online activism metamorphosed into physical action. The protest was motivated by a viral video of SARS officers

killing a Nigerian youth in Delta State on 8th October 2020. This incident resulted in an online protest against SARS harassment (Ojedokun et al., 2021). A few days after the commencement of the online protest, youths, especially in southern Nigeria, took to the streets with placards to protest against police brutality and harassment of youths who were profiled for being fraudsters based on their clothes, tattoos and dreadlocks and becaused they owned iPhones (Abati, 2020). The protests were intense between late October and early November of 2020. The main demands by the protesters were the disbandment of SARS, punishment of those responsible for the deaths of youths, immediate release of all protesters who were in prison, and an end to bad governance and corruption (Aniche and Iwuoha, 2022). On 20th October 2020, the climax of the protests, protesters went to the Lekki Tollgate waving the Nigerian flag only to be killed by the Nigerian Army (Ukpong, 2020). This killing and the use of hashtags on social media, such as #EndSARS, #EndSARSNow, #EndPoliceBrutality, and #LekkiMassacre amplified the protests and attracted the attention of the international community. The protests, which started as a movement against police brutality, metamorphosed into a call for political revolution and social transformation, which led to the use of the hashtags #Fixpolitics and #EndBadGovernance (Okpalaeke and Aboh, 2022). The slogan used by the protesters was the Yoruba expression *Ṣọ̀rọ̀ Soke,* which means 'Speak Up,' highlighting the importance of taking action and speaking out against injustice (Okesola and Oyebode, 2023).

Despite government's initial promises to disband SARS, the protesters were sceptical and continued to demand justice for those killed at the Lekki Tollgate. This pressure forced the government to disband SARS and establish a new unit, Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT). The creation of SWAT was criticised by the protesters, who argued that SWAT was a rebranding of SARS, because it comprised members of the disbanded SARS (Ojedokun et al., 2021). However, the government maintained that SWAT would operate within the law and not be involved in human rights abuses (Omilana, 2020). There has been a bourgeoning number of studies on the protests. For instance, Aniche and Iwuoha (2022), in their study on the political, economic and social drivers of the #EndSARS protest, utilised the predatory state theory as the theoretical framework to analyse public hearings on police brutality in South East and South South states. They found that the political factors that led to the protest were the lack of trust between citizens and the government due to high levels of corruption and poor governance. The study also showed that economic conditions such as poverty, inequality and unemployment, and social factors, including online and offline mobilisation by youths and celebrities, heightened the protests. Examining the impact of the protest on people in the Niger Delta region, Okpalaeke and Aboh (2022), drawing on Castells' concept of network society, analysed 20 Niger Deltans' experience of the protest based on data drawn from Twitter and Facebook. The study showed that the protests' impact is evident in the attacks on government properties, burning of police stations, killing of protesters, and prison escapes.

Eniayejuni (2023) examined how positive and negative emotions expressed on Twitter varied across different phases of the protest. The sentiment analysis of tweets revealed that while trust was most frequent before the protests, anger was prominent during the actual protest period, and joy was the most common sentiment after the government announced reforms. Drawing on a feminist perspective, Nwakanma (2022) examined women's roles during the protest and concluded

that by joining the protests, women countered their systematic exclusion from political participation and leadership roles in Nigeria. While these studies provide political, emotional, legal and feminist perspectives on #EndSARS, there is a limited evidence of protesters' discursive strategies on social media to advance the movement and their demands. To fill this gap, this article examines the #EndSARS protest discourse on Facebook and Twitter. The protest highlights a manifestation of collective interests and opinions that reflect social and political issues. It can be argued that this instance of online protest discourse is an avenue for demanding respect for human rights and ending bad governance.

4. Theoretical framework

This study is informed by social movement theory (SMT), which refers to a social phenomenon in which individuals collectively express their interests, concerns and criticisms and proffer solutions to perceived societal issues through various forms of collective actions (Cammaerts, 2015). SMT emphasises how groups of people collectively question the imbalance in social, economic, and political structures. In doing so, they utilise a range of social movement repertoires, including protests, rallies, pamphleteering or vigils (Tilly, 2004). The notion that social movements constitute a form of collective action echoes Tilly and Wood's (2003) view that social movements can create new forms of political repertoires and forge relations with sociopolitical actors at (inter)national levels. This collective action has been facilitated by the emergence of digital networked technologies, including social media, which have helped nondominant and marginalised groups to communicate independently and self-represent themselves (Cammaerts, 2015).

Consequently, the nature of network ties between actors within a social movement (which can be latent, weak, or strong, depending on their degree of motivation and involvement) affects the extent and strength of constructed collective identities. SMT captures the role of agency in social movements to understand the ability of individuals and groups to effect change in society. Social movement theorists argue that social movements are inspired by the need to address perceived inequality and power structures in existing institutions, which are identified as ideological opponents (della Porta and Diani, 2006). In his five-thematic conceptualisations of social media and activism, Cammaerts (2015) distinguishes between internet-based communicative practices, which are used to "attack ideological enemies, surveil the surveillers, and preserve protest artifacts" and internet-supported communicative practices used to "organise internally, recruit, and network, mobilise for and coordinated direct action; disseminate movement frames independently of the mainstream, and discuss/debate/decide" (Cammaerts, 2015: 1030). These communicative practices are important as they enable social movements to articulate their demands, reduce the costs of recruitment and participation of members inter(nationally) and facilitate the communication of aggrievances to the perceived oppressors (Cammaerts, 2015). He argues that the video documentation and dissemination of police violence, often observed in social movements, is a 'passive aggressive counter-tactic' (p. 1030) used to expose police brutality, which may get the attention of international media. By using SMT to analyse the discursive strategies used in the #EndSARS protest on Facebook and Twitter, this study highlights the societal imbalance made

salient by the protesters and extends the application of this theoretical approach to the Nigerian digital activism context.

5. Methodology

The data for this study comprise tweets, Facebook posts and comments taken from the #EndSARS protests. Facebook and Twitter were selected because they are the two most popular social media platforms where Nigerians were most active during the protests (Ikechukwu-Ibe, 2023). The tweets and Facebook posts analysed in this study covered the period: 30th September 2020 to 10th November 2020 because this time marked the build-up to the protest. It was also during this time the protests intensified, and when the tension eventually subsided (Aniche and Iwuoha, 2022). A total of 1000 posts comprising 500 tweets and 500 Facebook comments were collected to identify the discursive strategies used to construct the actions of SARS officers as well as protesters' demand for the disbandment of SARS and ending bad governance. The posts were obtained using the search function on Facebook and Twitter. Apart from the #EndSARS hashtag that formed the search term, other hashtags that accompanied the collected posts include #EndSARSNow, #EndPoliceBrutality, #FixPolitics, #EndBadGovernanceInNigeria, #LekkiMassacre, and #LekkiTollGate. I chose the first 12 posts in the search results for each day during the dates mentioned above resulting in a total of 1008 posts for Facebook and Twitter data. This approach helped ensure that a representative sample was obtained across the timeframe. However, eight posts were excluded from the analysis because they only contained references to other users (using the mention or tag function) rather than having substantive content. After numbering the selected posts sequentially, a thematic analysis was done by inductively generating initial codes and refining them through an iterative reading. These codes were subsequently grouped into themes based on the discursive strategies employed in the data until a saturation point was reached (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The examples presented in the analysis are representative instances of the themes that were identified. The study uses a qualitative approach and emphasises the linguistic analysis of the data; therefore, the sampled tweets and Facebook posts were deemed sufficient for discourse analysis (see Nartey, 2022). Most tweets and comments were written in English, except for some instances where expressions in Nigerian languages like Igbo, Yoruba, and Nigerian (Pidgin) English were utilised. In cases where non-English phrases are used, translations are provided in the analysis of data. Original grammatical errors and clippings in the posts were preserved to retain the authenticity of the data. Regarding the issue of internet research ethics, the posts from different netizens were anonymised and presented as a composite.

The study draws broadly on CDA for its analytical framework. CDA explores language in relation to power, social dominance, and inequality (van Dijk, 1996). Unlike other approaches to discourse analysis, CDA is not limited to contributing to a specific field, paradigm, or discourse theory; rather, it aims to address inequality in society by pointing out power differences. Despite the intricacies of power relations, CDA specifically examines power abuse - such as violations of laws, rules, and principles of democracy, equality, and justice by those in positions of power. The study adopts the SMCDA approach in the analysis of data. SMCDA draws on CDA and digital media studies to analyse meaning-making and discursive social media practices (KhosraviNik, 2022). It is an application of CDA principles to social media data to understand how digital

technologies may shape, influence and give voice to social and political ideologies. KhosraviNik (2017: 586) argues that the main point of SMCDA is that "*discourse is independent of the medium although the magnitude, penetrability, and formal aspects of its realised forms may be heavily influenced by the medium*" (emphasis in original).

As an extension of CDA, SMCDA maintains the core principles of CDA such as studying discourse in relation to social power, focusing on social issues and political/cultural contexts, analysing the linguistic structures of texts, taking a critical perspective to analyse ideology, and advocating social change (Bouvier, 2022; KhosraviNik, 2022). It adds to CDA in its focus on how power manifests in decentralised social media environments (as opposed to traditional media), and how social media offers opportunities for negotiating and challenging dominant discourses. It also focuses on the use of multimodal data such as emojis and images, and it deals with a more participatory, interactive communication model compared to the one-to-many model of traditional mass media (see KhosraviNik, 2017, 2022 for more details). As a framework that investigates the discursive construction of sociopolitical issues such as racism, power abuse, collective identity, and nationalism, SMCDA becomes an appropriate framework to analyse the discursive strategies used by #EndSARS protesters in their digital advocacy to end SARS.

The analysis examined the discursive strategies employed in resisting police brutality and advocating for change. It considered how sociocultural and political contexts influenced the posts, one of the foci of SMCDA (KhosraviNik, 2022). Hence, the analysis focused on the discursive strategies protesters used to resist police brutality. Also, I considered the texts used in the posts, available multimodal elements like emojis, and the situational factors surrounding the production of the posts (e.g., purpose, participants, target audience). I considered the broader sociopolitical and historical context in which the discursive practices exemplified in the tweets and Facebook posts are situated. In doing this, I did not look at the posts in isolation but drew on the specific events to which the posts refer. The analysis also explored linguistic resources, including allusion, hyperbole, predication, local discourses, and argumentation, to unpack the digital discursive practice the posts performed. My presence in Nigeria during the time of the protests and my knowledge of Nigeria's sociopolitical landscape aided me in the analysis of data. While personal observations may help understand the protests, it is important to note that the analyses are rooted in, and contribute to, the existing academic literature on protest discourse. The objective is to synthesise first-hand observations with rigorous discourse analysis to offer a comprehensive and balanced interpretation of the event.

6. Analysis and discussion

A thematic analysis of the data yielded three discursive strategies, which Nigerian youths used to condemn the actions of SARS officers and the Nigerian government. These strategies are: constructing SARS as oppressors, representing the Nigerian government as insensitive, and issuing a clarion call for action. These strategies are discussed in turn.

6.1 Constructing SARS as oppressors

In their posts on the actions of SARS officers, the protesters constructed them as oppressors who treat Nigerians with disrespect. They condemned the actions of SARS and their abuse of power, as illustrated in the posts below:

(1) We cried together, we shared our stories, these things happened to us, these people violated us, suddenly you were not alone, people around the world shared our anger, felt our pain. Now they see us, they know what we want and they know we're not backing down #EndSARS

(2) They got away with what they did to Shiites and IPoB members - so they were emboldened to kill Lekki protesters, because they thought "nothing will happen". After all, "nothing happened" when they murdered Shiites, in broad daylight, in Abuja. #EndSARS

(3) Citizens are not safe in Nigeria becos of the police paid by their taxes and corporate wealth! This is rather shameful and dangerous, no respect for the rule of law! F-SARS profiling a Nigeria youth is pure terrorism and robbery. #EndSARS

(4) This story is so disheartening #EndSARSNow. How did SARS go from being a "special anti-robbery squad" to now directly robbing, illegal arresting, assaulting, kidnapping and killing innocent citizens? Nigeria as it exists today is a crime against humanity. Take your country back!

(5) Is it a crime to hustle and get rich in this country? we are been tormented by the very people whose salaries are paid from our taxes, it's like it's even a crime to be called a Nigerian, cos our government and its security agency respects foreigner more than they respect their own citizens

(6) It's obvious they are kidnappers, arm ROBBERS, rapist. Infact dey are d Criminals, jst imagine demanding 1m frm som1 dat did nothing, and finally collecting 100k frm dem. Ha God it will neva b well wit SARS. #Endsars now SARS are animals in human skin ND blood suckers. It shall nt b well with them and their families

The use of the nomination strategies realised by the noun phrases "they," "these people," and "SARS," "F-SARS" serves the function of naming the oppressor whose negative actions are condemned by the protesters. These negative actions are signalled by the predication strategies "violated us," "emboldened to kill," "is pure terrorism and robbery," "is a crime against humanity," and "are animals in human skin ND blood suckers" used to create a negative image of SARS officers and position them as an adversary. This negative evaluation reinforces the portrayal of SARS as inhumane and predatory and constructs them as a problem that needs to be addressed. This confirms Bhatia and Ross' (2022) finding that in protest discourse, the police are given labels with negative connotations. By using the pronouns "us," "we," and "our," the protesters construct themselves as victims of SARS' nefarious activities and also create a sense of unity and solidarity among victims of SARS brutality. It is also a strategy to show that protesters communicate a shared experience of several Nigerian youths. The solidarity implied by the plural pronouns index an ideology of collective activism and grassroots mobilisation as necessary to challenge structural oppression. As Cammaerts (2015: 1030) points out, "The interconnections between actors within networks are a crucial aspect of social movements and activism because they influence their impact

and their ability to sustain and coordinate social action." These categorisations of SARS officers as oppressors and predators portrayed them as those who violate the rights of Nigerians and those who bring chaos instead of law and order. They reveal an unequal power dynamic and ideology that positions the government and SARS as violators of human rights, whose actions negate democratic principles. The membership categorisation of protesters and SARS officers exemplifies van Dijk's (2004) point that in an intergroup context, individuals emphasise 'their' bad deeds while de-emphasising 'our' bad deeds. By emphasising the brutality of SARS, the protesters highlight the oppressive and unjust actions of SARS officers while amplifying the victimhood of protesters.

The construction of SARS as oppressors is further realised with ironic expressions such as "becos of the police paid by their taxes and corporate wealth" (3) and "security agency respects foreigner more than they respect their own citizens" (5). These expressions highlight the absurdity of the situation where security agents, who were expected to stop terrorism and robbery, are constructed as perpetrators of the crimes they were meant to fight against. These ironies enable the protesters to foreground the dehumanising actions of SARS officers and legitimise their protests. They reflect an ideology that SARS officers have become antithetical to their roles as protectors of Nigerians, and imply a worldview that distrusts and critiques law enforcement agencies. In addition to using irony as a rhetorical strategy to communicate their grievances, the protesters also use rhetorical questions such as "How did SARS go from being a "special anti-robbery squad" to now directly robbing, illegal arresting, assaulting, kidnapping and killing innocent citizens?" (4) and "Is it a crime to hustle and get rich in this country?" (5) to highlight the excesses of SARS officers and call into question the legitimacy of their actions. They may also serve to encourage the protesters to question the status quo and communicate their outrage. The contrast realised by these rhetorical strategies indicates that SARS officers have deviated from their roles and responsibilities, which are to prevent robbery and kidnapping to robbing, killing innocent citizens and harassing rich-looking individuals.

The hashtags "#EndSars, #EndSARSNow" constitute an important part of online activism because they connect other protesters to fight for a common cause (Cammaerts, 2015). By using the hashtags, they contribute to the collective action aimed at resisting police brutality and oppression (Bhatia and Ross, 2022). I argue that these hashtags enable the protesters to reach a global audience and form a digital community of individuals who share the same ideology. Example (1) highlights how people around the world have felt protesters' anger and pain, which has emboldened them not to back down and keep hoping that their voices will be heard. This expression of hope illustrates how important anticipating change is in changing grievances into proactive measures (Eniayejuni, 2023). The benefit of digital activism lies in its potential to enhance the capacity of protesters to coordinate their activities on a transnational scale, thereby enabling them to connect with other organisations and establish extensive networks that surmount temporal and spatial limitations (Cammaerts, 2015). The use of the phrase "Ha God it will neva b well wit SARS" (6) carries an emotional charge that illustrates the pain of the protesters and show the belief in the Nigerian sociocultural context that the actions of individuals can affect their families.

The construction of SARS officers as oppressors and enemies is augmented with emotional appeals and evidence-based criticisms using protesters' personal experience of SARS oppression. The posts below demonstrate this point:

(7) Ooh my God this is unfair on our children, #EndSarsNow, what has innocent children that we parents are trying to make their future great done to the police, please this brutality, unlawful and hatred stop and search must stop

(8) This exact same situation happened to my brother...He was in an Ubar taxi when the police stopped him forced him into their vehicle.... They took him on Friday till Monday toured him, no contact to his family allowed, we thought he was dead 😭 😭 😭

(9) A guy came to Lagos 3 years ago so last year he decided to travel home […] before he reach his village the Federal SARS stopped the bus check on everybody then ask the driver to drop him, they then took him to an unknown destination that how they shaved his hair and collected all his savings for the 3years… he was unable to see his family since then

(10) It will never be well with SARS officials and their generation. I was kidnapped along the road in Onitsha and I was told to pay #100000 as ransom before 6pm otherwise I will be wasted without trace. I had no option than to release all the money in my possession meant for my child's dedication

(11) The same thing happened to me in Lagos. On the 5th of March 2018. At exactly 4pm They took N100k from me and threatened to kill me if I don't cooperate with them. End police brutality.

(12) 90% percent of the kidnapping that happen in Nigeria are conducted by the police.

(13) It will never be well with SARS, this boy's experience is similar to my son's own,they held him hostage in their hide out for 24hrs only to release him after paying them money.

The accounts in these posts seek to provide evidence of the actions of SARS as oppressors, which may serve the function of motivating others to join the anti-SARS movement. By sharing their own experiences, or those of their friends and families, the protesters demonstrate that SARS brutality is not just abstract but affects people in real ways. It confirms Orlandi et al.'s (2022) position that online protesters use arguments based on personal experience to frame their discourse. The evidence-based personal experiences reveal an ideology that values lived experiences as a legitimate form of 'truth' to expose police oppression and brutality. The use of the phrases "kidnap" (10), "hide out" (13), "ransom" (10), "threatened to kill" (11), and "wasted without trace" (10) are referential expressions that index criminal activities. These linguistic resources highlight how SARS officers, who are expected to safeguard the lives of Nigerians, are the people posing harm to them. They position SARS as thieves and robbers who exploit vulnerable citizens through violence, unlawful detention and those who condemn Nigerians without trial or concrete evidence. The phrase "wasted without trace" is a Nigerian English expression that expresses the act of getting rid of someone, usually by killing and dumping them in a place where they may not be found. To highlight the height of this inhumane treatment, (12) used the hyperbole "90% of the kidnapping" to show the extent to which SARS officers have kidnapped many innocent citizens. The hyperbole demonstrates how individuals can exaggerate issues to which they are emotionally attached. These

personal experiences legitimise protesters' call to disband SARS and make salient the urgency needed in addressing human rights abuse and injustice committed by SARS officers.

The psychological impact of SARS brutality and oppression is evident in (9), where the victim has been deprived of seeing his family because of his encounter with SARS officers. The protester's account indicates that looking good is interpreted by SARS officers as a characteristic of a criminal, a membership categorisation technique employed because of their alleged plans to extort the individual. The use of the interjection "ooh" (7) and the crying emoji (8) is instructive. From a pragmatic perspective, "Ooh" is a sign of exasperation and outrage, which the protester used to express the threat SARS brutality has on the future and well-being of Nigerian youths. The crying emoji is a multimodal representation of the psychological state the protester and family members may have gone through when they thought their brother was dead. Multimodally expressing sorrow is one of the resources social media offers users in creating a vivid picture of their emotional state, highlighting their status as victims of undemocratic actions (KhosraviNik, 2017). Through these posts, the protesters show how SARS officers oppress Nigerians they were expected to protect and legitimise their decision to demand SARS' disbandment as part of their just cause for freedom (Nartey and Yu, 2023).

6.2 Representing the Nigerian government as insensitive

Another discursive strategy employed by the protesters to criticise the activities of SARS officers is the insensitivity of the Nigerian government who allegedly intimidate peaceful protesters and do nothing against terrorist attacks on innocent Nigerians.

(14) General @MBuhari's government arrests Boko Haram members and send these hardened killers for rehabilitation. The same government arrests #EndSARS protesters and sends peaceful protesters straight to jail. In Buhari's Nigeria, terror pays and honour brings pains! #LekkiMassaccre

(15) God punish una generation, useless leaders, your children will never know happiness. I always think Buhari was a good man not knowing he is a devil. continue using thugs and force personnel to kill innocent youth. God will surely judge you all

(16) Bandits: We've killed citizens. Govenment: Please let's negotiate. Citizens: They're killing us, #EndSARS Government: How could you? Die!

(17) So just to clarify, we asked SARS to stop killing us, we asked the government to hold SARS accountable and then the government orchestrated the killings, arrests and kidnappings of more people #EndSARS

(18) It took federal government just one month to get the sponsors of #EndSARS protesters and also freezed their accounts, but for almost 8yrs, the accounts of Boko haram sponsors, and those behind hoarding of palliatives are still unknown.

(19) A democratic government responded to peaceful protesters be sending the military to kill them. Frozen their account. Ceased their passport. This is not a democratic government, it's another military junta. #EndSARS

By drawing from a range of rhetorical devices such as irony, metaphor, and religious references, the protesters demonstrate their frustration and disbelief in the selective actions of the government, evidenced by how long it took them to arrest sponsors of the protest (18) but avoiding to bring justice upon Boko Haram sponsors for over eight years. This demonstration illustrates how anger and frustration are factors that motivate people to protest (Eniayejuni, 2023). This discursive positioning constructs the government as accomplices to police brutality and their insensitivity to the plight of Nigerians. Boko Haram is a terrorist group in Nigeria known for its kidnapping and bombing activities, especially in Northeastern Nigeria. This construction of the government as co-oppressors of Nigerians is further realised by re-echoing the demands of the protesters in (17), which can be interpreted as a strategy to show that the protesters are fighting for a cause, which they have communicated to the government. It then suggests that the government knows the agitations of the protesters but has chosen to support SARS in its human rights abuse. This framing of the government's response reveals the beliefs that governmental duties should prioritise citizens equally and evokes a worldview critical of corruption and selective justice.

The alleged insensitivity and irresponsibility of the government are intensified by using the irony "terror pays and honour bring pains" (14) to demonstrate how the government is more lenient to Boko Haram members but cruel to peaceful protesters. Drawing on an intertextual reference to the government's rehabilitation of terrorists, the protesters provide an evidence-based criticism of the government's irresponsibility in safeguarding the life and property of its citizens. By invoking the wrath of God on the leaders' lineage and children and referring to them as useless (15), the protesters use emotional appeals to highlight the extent of their anger and a sense of reliance on divine intervention to bring the government to justice. Eamonn (2004, p. 35) notes that if the oppressor is a constituted authority, the oppressed resist this authority by "their own means or with the help of others to attain a certain state of happiness." The use of expressions that border on morality, "I always think Buhari was a good man not knowing he his a devil" (15), highlights the insensitivity of the government and how disappointed protesters are. Furthermore, the direct ironic quotations in (16) demonstrate the government's hypocritical response to violence, signalled by its perceived willingness to negotiate with bandits and unwillingness to address the demands of peaceful protesters whom SARS officers are oppressing and killing.

The use of the contrast "democratic government" and "military junta" in (19) expresses the dictatorship of the government, which is inconsistent with democratic principles. This membership categorisation strategy is owing to government's defiance of democratic process, evidenced by their use of the military to kill protesters, freeze their accounts, and seize their passports without trial (19), acts that are considered illegal prosecutorial strategies (Richards and Eboibi, 2022). By framing the government as undemocratic and attributing the suffering of Nigerians to their insensitivity, the protesters demonstrate their deep distrust in the government and justify their call for change.

In addition to criticising the inaction of the government towards the menace of Boko Haram and their quick response toward arresting and killing protesters, the protesters foreground the government's lack of accountability by protecting SARS officers from facing the consequences of their oppression. The following posts illustrate this point:

(20) If there has been any doubt in your mind as to the true nature of the Nigerian government, the aftermath of the #EndSARS protests should clear such doubt — the Nigerian Government is an ENEMY of the people. Resigning our collective welfare to politicians is SUICIDE #FixPolitics

(21) That massacre that happened on the 20th, I couldn't sleep for more than 2 hours daily for 5 days. It messed with me so much. I can't even imagine how much more the people that witnessed it live. Only for the governor to lie about it and the president to be mute??? 💔 #EndSARS

(22) Arrest were made of those that looted govt and private properties but no arrest yet of those that looted the lives of our youths at lekki toll gate. Hmm. We've wicked government. #EndSARS. Selfish greed leaders

(23) The government is picking up #EndSARS protesters. But thugs caught on camera with machetes, politicians caught on camera shooting and killing people, policemen caught on camera executing people.

(24) Yesterday made it a month since the #EndSARS protests started. How the government has so far responded: -twist the narrative + attempt to bury the truth -arrest protesters -kill Nigerians -yet to #EndSARS

(25) Because we foolishly could not press home our demand to fulfilment during the #EndSARS Protest.. The Nigerian government has not arrested anyone and till this moment no one is held accountable for these genocide.

In the above posts, the protesters moved from identifying "the Nigerian government" as the macro enemy to naming "the governor" and "the president" (21) as the political actors responsible for not arresting those who killed protesters. This nomination strategy serves to highlight ideological enemies (Cammaerts, 2015). In these tweets, the protesters express their hopelessness and despair while questioning the government's lack of accountability. The tweets highlight the protesters' belief in justice, accountability and the need for change and they exemplify how the government has twisted the narrative, buried the truth, become mute, lied about the killings, arrested protesters and not arrested those responsible for the death of protesters. By constructing the government as liars, the protesters position their accounts as the *only* version. This act of naming the oppressors and shaming their actions is interpreted as a strategy for exposing them to public shame (Nartey and Yu, 2023). It also suggests that the government is more interested in manipulating the narrative and suppressing dissent than in addressing the concerns of citizens. This confirms Alfred and Oyebola's (2021) finding that political actors focus more on the subjective self-presentation of their political choices than on objectively portraying the protests and the protesters. Positioning government actors as insensitive and corrupt implies an ideology valuing representative governance accountable to its citizens and demonstrates the role social media plays in enabling citizens to speak truth to power without the restrictions that characterise traditional media (Cammaerts, 2015; KhosraviNik, 2022).

The protester in (21) expresses the psychological effect the killings of protesters had on him as he "couldn't sleep for more than 2 hours daily for 5 days". This point indicates how security agents

responded to the protest against police brutality by using other forms of brutality. The use of the heartbroken emoji (21), which may function to generate outrage, grief, and solidarity, is a multimodal representation of how protesters' hearts were shattered owing to the killings and government's denial. It indicates an ideological distance between the protester and the government. It is possible that the government's denial and construction of illusion ruined the protester's expectation of fairness and justice. The emoji represents an ideology of activism that strategically expresses collective emotion and constructs the government as morally deficient for disregarding the real trauma of its citizens. The psychological effect of this denial is heightened by protesters' conviction that protesters were killed since "thugs [were] caught on camera with machetes, politicians [were] caught on camera shooting and killing people, policemen caught on camera executing people" (23). This evidence-based criticism highlights the severity of the situation and legitimises protesters' call for emancipation. By criticising the government for lying and for their inaction, the protesters underline the government's lack of accountability and their insensitivity to their plight. The use of the adjectives "wicked," "selfish," and "greed" is a membership categorisation strategy the protesters use to make salient the government's positioning of their personal interests over the citizens' interests.

6.3 Issuing a clarion call for action

The protesters issued a clarion call to other protesters and Nigerians to be dogged in their agitation for a reformed Nigeria, on the one hand, and called on the government to address their concerns, on the other hand. The following posts illustrate protesters' call for collective action:

(26) Deep Sighs. If you are tired of protest, don't be tired of prayers. These evil men are not resting... They keep telling fresh lies to vindicate themselves. Judgement of God must sound Loud this time. You will all implicate yourselves. One by one #EndSARS

(27) The Nigerian youths' #EndSARS protest has a well chosen slogan, "Soro s'oke!" i.e. Speak up! based on Proverbs 31:8-9: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

(28) It touches down to grassroot Enlightenment! Don't leave a gathering/single person without Enlightenment them on the importance of good governance and election 2023! SOROSOKE is a criteria to make heaven!

(29) Seems y'all have moved on and forgotten abt our quest for a better Nigeria, our quest to end the bad governance from those cr@zy leaders, Our fallen heroes didn't fall for nothing. Tweet, RT and comment. #endsars

(30) Our PVC, Social Media, Grassroots Awareness and many more will be our best weapons in 2023, but they will try to suppress each and every one of them. #EndSARS

(31) We need more than #EndSARS, we need to make government accountable at all levels… In fact, SARS is just a symptom, we need to tackle the root cause.

The posts above highlight protesters' demands from other Nigerians and co-protesters, which include speaking up, enlightening people at the grassroots, ending bad governance by publicising

the #EndSARS protest on social media, and getting their permanent voters' card to vote out the present government during the 2023 elections. The use of the Yoruba phrase "Soro soke," (27, 28) which means 'speak up' strengthens the need to be vocal against police brutality. The use of this linguistic expression that indexes the sociolinguistic milieu of the protest discourse is interpreted as a strategy to ensure that the protest messages resonated widely and that the demands are adequately communicated. I argue that the use of local language demonstrates how the #EndSARS movement utilises language and sentiment specific to local communities in Nigeria to mobilise civic engagement. It also shows how "activist discourses are most persuasively narrativised when they capitalise on local sentiment and language features characteristic of local communities and audiences" (Nartey, 2022, p. 385).

The need for collective action against the oppression of SARS officers and the alleged insensitivity of the government is further underscored by the use of heaven as a reward (28) and the invocation that the oppressors "are not resting" (26) as a motivation. To buttress the importance of collective action, (26) offers the alternative of praying to those tired of protesting. This suggests that the protester believes that the demands for good governance are both political and spiritual. It also indicates that although other Nigerians do not want to participate in the protest, they should consider doing so for God, for the helpless and for those who have died during the protest. The calls for collective action and speaking out reveal an ideology of grassroots activism and people power as vehicles for social change, aligning with a transnational view of activism (Cammaerts, 2015). I argue that these tweets demonstrate the protesters' understanding that the success of their demands requires a collective effort from every member of society, a common feature of social movements (della Porta and Diani, 2006). This discursive positioning also represents the protesters as selfless individuals who aim to emancipate Nigerians from bad government. It illustrates an African sense of community where "an individual is incomplete unless they maintain an active connection with the society they are a part of" (Okpalaeke and Aboh, 2022: 4). By invoking the "judgment of God," asking Nigerians to pray (26), referencing the Bible (27), and using the heaven as a reward (28), the protesters use religious references to create a moral and spiritual imperative for their demands. It demonstrates protesters' belief that God supports their struggle for justice and that appealing to Nigerians' religious beliefs may help mobilise more people for the cause. It also illustrates how powerless the protesters feel in calling for change and how they rely on divine intervention.

The *herofication* of the dead protesters further reinforces the importance of collective action, which suggests that those who died did not die in vain and that their death should motivate them to join the protest to end bad governance. The membership categorisation of dead protesters as heroes and the portrayal of politicians as 'bad' aligns with the relational fact of ideology where there is solidarity among the in-group and antagonism toward the outgroup. The portrayal of protesters as selfless heroes reflects an ideology that political activism requires personal sacrifice and constructs an ascetic worldview that hardship and martyrdom is necessary for justice and social change (Ganaah et al., 2023). Although the demand for the disbandment of SARS inspired the protest, (31) indicates that #EndSARS is not just a protest for ending police brutality but for ending bad governance in general. The metaphorical construction of SARS as a disease and the

government as its aetiology in (31) amplifies the urgency for continued joint action and suggests that the root cause of police brutality is systemic rather than isolated incidents of individual actors.

The call for action is also extended to the Nigerian government to address the grievances of the protesters, as demonstrated in the posts below:

(32) I'm lost for words. @Mbuhari Shame on you. You have failed the country you're supposed to lead. Your silence speaks volumes. RIP to all those who lost their lives today. #EndSARS

(33) The entire top echelon of the police should be disbanded, esp the IGP should be sacked for incompetence to serve as a deterrent to the entire force. The SARS foot soldiers robbing people on the streets couldn't have been doing what they were doing without the knowledge and connivance of their bosses in the office.

(34) Nigerian government should learn from other countries that ignored the demand of their citizens before it becomes an example too, learn from Belarus, Honk Kong, Mali, Egypt etc, give the matter the right approach or expect the wrath of the depressed citizens.

(35) My dear.... police and sars is not our only problem, our problem here in Nigeria is our leaders starting from president to the house..no plan for youths joblessness have been the order of the days no good road no lights educational level zero name dem…

Drawing on several rhetorical strategies such as emotional appeals evidenced by the use of "drained" and "lost for words" (32) and repetition of the #EndSARS hashtags, the protesters appeal to the emotions of the Nigerian president by expressing frustration, sadness, disappointment and anger over police brutality and create a sense of urgency in addressing the issue. This implies that the government needs to quickly intervene and salvage what is left of the ruins supposedly caused by SARS. The urgent request for the president's intervention is backed up with demands for not only disbanding SARS but punishing those who perpetrated violence on Nigerians and sacking the inspector general of police (33), categorised as an accomplice of the brutality against youths. By alluding to other countries, such as Belarus, Hong Kong, Mali and Egypt, who ignored the demands of their citizens (34), the protester reinforces the need for urgent action before the protests escalate. It shows the protesters' resolve to continue repeating their demands until they are met. In addition to the emotional appeals employed in the tweets, the protesters use logos as a rhetorical strategy to appeal to the reason and logic of the government by referring to the protest artifacts showing that SARS indeed brutalised Nigerians, thus justifying the call for them to be punished and dismissed from the police force.

Utilising hyperbolic expressions such as "no plan for youth joblessness," "no good roads," and "educational level zero" (35), the protesters highlight declining aspects of the economy, which the government needs to address with urgency. They also emphasise the severity of the issues at hand. By moving away from demands to put an end to SARS, to addressing joblessness, poor infrastructure and education, the protesters show an understanding of the interconnectedness of issues plaguing Nigeria, and how they all contribute to systemic oppression and inequality. This holistic approach to activism highlights the protesters' recognition that social change requires a multifaceted approach. This unselfish call for police reform and social transformation frames the

protesters as selfless advocates for the greater good of Nigerian society, a common strategy protesters use to construct a positive face for themselves (Osisanwo and Iyoha, 2020).

7. Conclusion

This study examined the discursive strategies #EndSARS protesters used to represent SARS officers, hold the government accountable and demand social change. Three strategies were identified: (1) Constructing SARS as oppressors, (2) Representing the government as insensitive, and (3) Issuing a clarion call for change. These strategies were realised by different linguistic resources such as emotion-based and evidence-based criticisms, intensification, legitimation, polarisation, irony, hyperbole, metaphor and allusion. These resources enabled the online protesters to construct themselves as victims and SARS officers as aggressors, thereby legitimising the call for social transformation. Through their protests, Nigerian youths demonstrated their value for human rights and freedom and their unity in their ideological position of criticising the government and SARS officers (van Dijk, 2001). Echoing previous research (Chiluwa, 2015; Nartey and Yu, 2023), the study highlighted how protesters exploited indigenous linguistic expressions as their mantra as well as sociocultural resources to appeal to the emotions and logic of Nigerians to join the #EndSARS movement. However, this protest distinguished itself through cultural references and faith-based frames to recruit new members and feed their struggle for change. This study provided evidence to support the growing consensus in the literature that social media has allowed individuals to participate in political matters and engage in activism, thereby potentially impacting public opinion (Cammaerts, 2015; Chiluwa, 2015).

The involvement of Nigerian youths during the #EndSARS protests in political critiques and coordination of dissent on Twitter and Facebook against police brutality confirms the position of social media as an important platform for counter-hegemonic narratives and oppositional civic engagement, particularly in nations such as Nigeria, where traditional media channels may be susceptible to government censorship or regulation (KhosraviNik, 2022). In line with SMT and SMCDA, the study has shown how Twitter and Facebook enabled the #EndSARS protesters to use a range of textual and multimodal (especially emojis) resources to coordinate themselves both online and offline to demand an end to police brutality. The protesters' naming and negative construction of SARS officers and the government, as well as their dissemination of instances of police brutality in the forms of personal experience, videos and images, aligned with Cammaerts' (2015) point that social media allows social movements to attack their ideological enemies and preserve protest artifacts in case of future protests. The research also demonstrates how digital political mobilisation can galvanise reform in Nigeria, where leaders and law enforcement agencies are held accountable for their (in)actions. This study thus contributes to the literature on discursive analysis of digital activism in Nigeria and extends the developing interdisciplinary studies on social media critical discourse studies and activism. The present study analysed only the discourse by the protesters. While it was not the aim of this study to ascertain the veracity of the protesters' claims, the analysis of their posts provides valuable insights into their grievances and demands. Further research may explore the responses of the government to the protest and demands of #EndSARS protesters to provide a more balanced perspective of protesters' accounts.

Comparative analysis of the #EndSARS and #BlackLivesMatter protests could also be examined to understand discursive commonalities and differences.

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