

## The Role of Social Media in Civil Unrest in Nigeria (2020–2025)

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### Abstract

*Social media has significantly altered Nigeria's civic landscape, facilitating novel methods of digital activism and the organisation of protests. From 2020 to 2025, online movements transformed the methods by which citizens articulate dissent and organise for accountability. Despite its role in mobilizing civic action, social media in Nigeria remains limited as a tool for lasting political change due to repression, misinformation, and fragmented activism. Guided by the Networked Public Sphere Theory, this research utilised a quantitative approach through online surveys distributed via Google Forms to a sample of 60 respondents. The respondents comprised youth activists, journalists, and civil society representatives. The data were analysed using thematic and descriptive methods in Excel. The results show that social media sites like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter (X) act as catalysts for organising protests and fostering civic participation. However, the lasting effects and policy impact of digital activism are hampered by disinformation, surveillance, and a lack of organised leadership. As a result, social media remains limited by structural flaws even while it increases democratic participation and gives voice to under-represented groups. For Nigeria to become more democratic, the study recommends strengthening fact-checking systems, protecting digital rights, and combining online activism with real civic projects is essential.*

Keywords: Social media, digital activism, civil unrest, Nigeria, democracy.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, social media has profoundly reshaped the terrain of civic engagement and political mobilization across the globe. Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram have emerged as potent instruments through which citizens organize protests, amplify collective grievances, and demand accountability from state actors. Landmark movements like the Arab Spring (2011) and

#BlackLivesMatter (2020) exemplify how digital activism has redefined the modalities through which societies negotiate power and express dissent (Asamoah-Danso & Mistry, 2020; Njoku et al., 2025). Scholars such as Tufekci (2017) argue that these technologies have ushered in a new era of “networked protests,” where decentralized digital networks enable rapid mobilization without traditional hierarchical leadership. In Africa, social media has similarly emerged as a significant site of political contestation and civic mobilization,

particularly in countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria, where youth-led, online-driven movements have increasingly challenged entrenched state authority and called for governance reforms (Okafor et al., 2024). Movements such as #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall in South Africa, and #EndBadGovernanceInZimbabwe, illustrate how online spaces can become catalysts for offline action (Masango, 2023).

Nigeria stands out as one of the most dynamic arenas of digital activism in Africa. With over 33 million active social media users (Statista, 2024) and a median age of 18.1 years, the country's youthful demographic has fueled a vibrant, tech-driven culture of civic engagement. Historically, civil resistance in Nigeria has deep roots, ranging from the anti-colonial struggles of the 1940s to the pro-democracy protests of the 1990s. Yet, the digital revolution has fundamentally reshaped these traditions. The convergence of economic hardship, rising insecurity, and governance crises has created fertile ground for digital resistance. The #EndSARS protests of 2020 marked a watershed moment, demonstrating how decentralized, hashtag-based activism could mobilize millions within days and catalyze global solidarity (Njoku et al., 2025). Subsequent movements, including #OccupyLekkiTollGate (2021), #NorthIsBleeding (2022–2023), #JusticeForDeborah (2022), and more recently, #EndBadGovernance and #TenDaysOfRage (2024), underscore the centrality of social media in shaping Nigeria's protest ecology. These platforms have facilitated real-time coordination, emotional solidarity, and transnational amplification of local struggles, while simultaneously exposing activists to surveillance, misinformation, and state repression (Okafor et al., 2024; Jalo, 2025).

Scholars increasingly recognize the dual nature of digital activism. On one hand, social media democratizes information flows and lowers barriers to participation, fostering collective identity and visibility among marginalized populations (Njoku et al., 2025). On the other hand, algorithmic biases, unregulated virality, and susceptibility to manipulation pose significant challenges to truth, safety, and movement coherence (Jalo, 2025). In Nigeria, platforms such as X, Facebook, and WhatsApp have been particularly vulnerable to the spread of fake news and political propaganda, influencing public perception and voter behavior during critical moments such as the 2023 elections (Jalo, 2025). Therefore, understanding the role of social media in

Nigeria's civil unrest between 2020 and 2025 necessitates situating it within broader dynamics of governance, digital policy, and democratic transformation. Social media functions not only as an engine of empowerment but also as a contested space where narratives, identities, and power relations are continuously negotiated.

Despite the growing influence of social media as a catalyst for civic engagement and democratic participation, its role in sustaining meaningful political change in Nigeria remains deeply problematic and insufficiently understood. Platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram have enabled unprecedented mobilization and visibility for protest movements, yet they have not consistently translated online momentum into institutional reforms or durable governance outcomes. Nigeria's digital activism, especially since 2020, has been characterized by a recurring cycle of mass mobilization, state repression, misinformation, and fragmentation dynamics that undermine the transformative potential of online resistance (Collins-Dike, Amadi, Whyte, Justice, & Mohammed, 2025; Moses, Shem, Ishaku, & Lazarus, 2024). Movements such as #EndSARS, #OccupyLekkiTollGate, #NorthIsBleeding, #JusticeForDeborah, and #EndBadGovernance exemplify both the vitality and volatility of Nigeria's digital protest culture. Although these movements galvanized national and international attention, most achieved limited policy impact. Scholars such as Uwalaka and Watkins (2024) argue that Nigerian digital activism often achieves visibility without sustainability, as state responses, ranging from digital surveillance to outright repression dampen civic participation. The government's temporary suspension of Twitter in 2021 and the selective enforcement of the Cybercrimes Act of 2015 reflect a growing trend of digital authoritarianism, where online spaces are increasingly policed to suppress dissent (Njoku et al., 2025; Collins-Dike et al., 2025).

Moreover, the proliferation of misinformation and emotionally charged but unverified content erodes credibility and public trust. Algorithmic amplification of outrage fosters polarization and impedes strategic coordination among activists, weakening the coherence of digital movements (Moses et al., 2024). The leaderless nature of these movements, while inclusive and decentralized, often results in weak negotiation structures and organizational fragmentation, making sustained engagement with political institutions difficult

(Uwalaka & Watkins, 2023). Consequently, the digital sphere in Nigeria mirrors a fragile equilibrium between empowerment and control, a space where civic energy thrives but rarely achieves institutional consolidation.

While social media has democratized access to information and enabled marginalized voices to participate in public discourse, it has also become a contested terrain where state actors deploy surveillance, censorship, and propaganda to neutralize dissent (Njoku et al., 2025; Collins-Dike et al., 2025).

This study, therefore, addresses the critical problem of how social media operates as both a tool of empowerment and an instrument of repression in Nigeria's civil unrest between 2020 and 2025. It seeks to uncover the mechanisms through which digital platforms facilitate mobilization and solidarity while simultaneously exposing activists to misinformation, surveillance, and structural fragility. By providing a multi-movement analysis of Nigeria's digital protest ecology, the study aims to fill a significant empirical and theoretical gap in understanding the implications of digital activism for democracy, governance, and civic transformation.

The aim of the research is to examine the role of social media in influencing, mobilizing, and sustaining civil unrest in Nigeria within this five-year period, focusing on how digital platforms shape activism, governance responses, and social transformation. It specifically seeks to examine how social media has shaped the mobilization, coordination, and framing of civil unrest in Nigeria; analyze the emotional, political, and structural consequences of digital activism on civic engagement and governance; and investigate how misinformation, surveillance, and decentralization influence the sustainability and impact of online-driven protests.

The study is significant as it deepens understanding of how social media reshapes civic engagement, activism, and governance in Nigeria's evolving democratic landscape. By analyzing the dual role of digital platforms as instruments of empowerment and control, the research contributes to scholarly discourse on digital activism, youth participation, and democratization in the Global South. Its findings will inform policymakers on the need for balanced digital governance frameworks that protect freedom of expression while addressing misinformation and online insecurity. Civil society organizations and activists will benefit from insights on sustaining online movements, managing risks of surveillance, and

enhancing strategic communication. Additionally, journalists, educators, and researchers will gain valuable knowledge on the intersections of technology, emotion, and power in contemporary protest movements, ultimately fostering more informed digital citizenship and accountability in Nigeria.

The scope of this research encompasses the role of social media in mobilizing, coordinating, and sustaining civil unrest in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025, with emphasis on major movements such as #EndSARS, #OccupyLekkiTollGate, #NorthIsBleeding, #JusticeForDeborah, and #EndBadGovernance. It focuses on digital activism across platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, emphasizing qualitative insights into online mobilization, emotional engagement, and governance response rather than quantitative metrics. Geographically, the study concentrates on key urban centers; Lagos, Abuja, Kano, and Port Harcourt, where most protests and online activism originated, while acknowledging the amplifying role of Nigeria's diaspora networks. By situating Nigeria's digital protest ecology within its broader socio-political context, the study highlights both the transformative potential and the inherent vulnerabilities of social media as a tool of civic mobilization and democratic expression.

## 2. Literature Review

### **Social Media and the Mobilization, Coordination, and Framing of Civil Unrest**

Social media has revolutionized how protests are conceived, organized, and sustained in Nigeria. Unlike traditional mobilization methods, which relied on hierarchical leadership structures and physical meetings, digital platforms enable decentralized and instantaneous coordination. According to Ajisebiyayo (2022), the #EndSARS movement's reliance on Twitter and WhatsApp allowed protesters to mobilize millions of Nigerians within days, effectively creating a leaderless yet organized digital community. This approach democratized participation, enabling citizens across geographic, gender, and class divides to contribute to a collective cause.

Lawal et al. (2025) further highlight how hashtag activism served as a framing mechanism that unified diverse grievances into coherent narratives. Hashtags such as #EndSARS, #EndBadGovernance, and #JusticeForDeborah became discursive anchors for

broader social and political frustrations. Through these digital symbols, activists were able to link police brutality, corruption, unemployment, and gender-based violence into a shared discourse of injustice. The framing of grievances through concise, emotionally resonant hashtags not only mobilized domestic support but also attracted global attention, making Nigeria's social movements part of a wider transnational dialogue on human rights and governance.

Social media's capacity for real-time coordination also reshaped protest logistics. These channels facilitate hyper-local organization, sharing live updates about protest locations, police presence, and safety tips. These digital infrastructures enabled agility and adaptability, allowing movements to sustain momentum despite government crackdowns. As Njoku et al. (2025) observe, the fluid, networked nature of online coordination replaced traditional leadership hierarchies with collective agency.

However, while decentralization increased participation, it also presented strategic limitations. Okoye and Adesina (2025) argue that the absence of a formal leadership structure weakened negotiation capacity, making it difficult for movements to engage effectively with state authorities. The result was often visibility without institutional impact, a pattern evident in the aftermath of #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance protests. Nonetheless, social media's role in enabling mobilization and framing grievances remains a defining feature of Nigeria's digital activism ecosystem.

### **Emotional, Political, and Structural Consequences of Digital Activism**

Digital activism in Nigeria thrives on emotional intensity. The viral nature of social media allows images and videos of injustice to evoke powerful emotions, anger, empathy, grief that galvanize public participation. Hashtags such as #NorthIsBleeding and #JusticeForDeborah exemplify how emotional storytelling creates solidarity and urgency. Ekeh and Molomo (2025) note that these emotionally charged narratives foster collective identity, transforming isolated incidents into symbols of systemic failure.

Moses, et al (2024) describe this dynamic as the "emotive architecture of digital protest," where outrage and empathy become catalysts for civic action. While such affective mobilization strengthens engagement, it can also foster polarization. The same emotional

intensity that drives participation can create echo chambers that hinder deliberation and compromise. Njoku et al. (2025), caution that emotional overexposure contributes to activist burnout and desensitization, weakening long-term participation.

Politically, social media activism has pressured the Nigerian government to respond more rapidly to civic unrest. Ekeh and Molomo (2025) highlight that digital movements have compelled authorities to issue statements, suspend controversial policies, or initiate inquiries albeit often symbolically. The #EndSARS protests, for instance, prompted the government to announce the disbandment of the SARS unit, though critics argue that the reform was largely cosmetic (Lawal et al., 2025).

Structurally, digital activism has also redefined the relationship between citizens and governance. It has expanded civic space, allowing previously marginalized voices, particularly women, youth, and diasporic Nigerians to participate in political discourse. Collins-Dike, et al (2025) contend that social media has become a parallel institution of accountability, where citizens publicly monitor and critique government actions. Yet, this empowerment exists within a broader framework of digital repression. State actors increasingly employ surveillance technologies, cyber laws, and online harassment to silence dissenting voices. Consequently, the emotional, political, and structural impacts of digital activism reveal both its transformative promise and its inherent fragility. It humanizes civic resistance but simultaneously exposes it to volatility, fatigue, and manipulation.

### **Misinformation, Surveillance, and Decentralization in Online Movements**

A recurring theme in literature on digital activism in Nigeria is the destabilizing effect of misinformation and surveillance. The viral, participatory nature of social media; while empowering, also facilitates the rapid spread of unverified content. During the #EndSARS protests, for example, Adekoya (2021) documented the circulation of false narratives that distorted the movement's goals and sowed confusion among participants. Similarly, Onigbinde and Oloyede (2024) argue that algorithmic amplification of sensational content exacerbates polarization, often overshadowing verified information.

**FactCheck Africa (2024) has shown that**

**misinformation** campaigns have been strategically deployed by state-linked actors to delegitimize protests and deter public participation. Such disinformation not only weakens trust within movements but also provides justification for government crackdowns under the guise of “national security.” The result is a vicious cycle where misinformation both empowers and undermines resistance.

Surveillance and censorship represent another dimension of this challenge. The Nigerian government’s suspension of Twitter in 2021 and its selective enforcement of the Cybercrimes Act (2015) are cited by scholars as key examples of digital authoritarianism (Njoku et al., 2025). These measures aim to monitor, control, and criminalize online dissent. Collins-Dike et al. (2025), note that this form of repression reflects a broader trend of “networked authoritarianism,” where regimes adopt digital tools to both manage and manipulate civic participation.

Despite these constraints, digital activism in Nigeria persists. The resilience of online communities demonstrates the adaptive capacity of citizens under restrictive conditions. However, the decentralized structure that enables inclusivity also imposes strategic limits. Uwalaka and Watkins (2023) and Okoye and Adesina (2025) emphasize that leaderless movements often struggle to sustain pressure after initial mobilization peaks. Without defined representation or institutional pathways for negotiation, protests risk dissipating once digital momentum declines. Hence, while social media empowers collective action, the sustainability of online-driven protests is threatened by misinformation, fragmentation, and state surveillance.

The challenge lays in transforming digital energy into enduring political outcomes, a process that remains elusive in Nigeria’s contemporary protest culture.

### **Diaspora Networks and Transnational Amplification**

An emerging strand of scholarship highlights the importance of Nigeria’s diaspora in amplifying domestic civic struggles. Lawal et al. (2025) observe that diaspora communities play pivotal roles in crowdfunding, international advocacy, and media visibility. Through retweets, online petitions, and global solidarity campaigns, Nigerians abroad extend the reach of domestic movements and pressure international institutions to respond. Ajisebiyawo (2022) asserts that digital activism transcends national boundaries, creating “transnational solidarity networks” that connect

### **Nigeria’s local struggles with global human rights discourses.**

Diaspora engagement during the #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance movements exemplifies this phenomenon. Protests were organized simultaneously in London, New York, and Toronto, leveraging global media to frame the unrest as a universal demand for justice and governance reform. These transnational linkages underscore the globalization of civic resistance and the capacity of social media to construct virtual communities across borders.

### **Digital Activism and Democratic Transformation**

Despite its contradictions, digital activism has profoundly reshaped Nigeria’s democratic discourse. By decentralizing political participation and amplifying marginalized voices, social media has expanded civic space and redefined the notion of citizenship. Njoku et al. (2025) argue that digital platforms have introduced new mechanisms of accountability, where governance is continuously scrutinized in real time by the public. Moses et al. (2024) describe social media as both a “mirror and a motor” of democratic transformation, reflecting societal tensions while driving demands for reform.

Nevertheless, the institutionalization of these democratic gains remains uneven. The visibility of online activism does not always translate into structural change. Many movements achieve symbolic victories but struggle to sustain pressure in the absence of cohesive leadership and policy engagement. This paradox underscores the need for strategic synthesis between digital spontaneity and organized political participation.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of this study rests on the Networked Public Sphere Theory, proposed by Yochai Benkler (2006). He argues that the rise of networked technologies particularly social media, has reconfigured the public sphere from a hierarchical, one-directional model dominated by traditional media and state institutions into a decentralized, participatory, and interactive system (Benkler, 2006; Benkler, 2007).

In this networked environment, citizens are no longer passive recipients of information but active participants in the creation, dissemination, and framing of narratives that shape political and social discourse. The theory emphasizes distributed information production and

horizontal communication, contrasting with the Habermasian conception of the public sphere, which relied on elite-controlled channels (Friemel & Neuberger, 2023). Social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram exemplify this transformation by enabling real-time engagement, collective framing, and mass coordination across geographic and socio-economic boundaries (Abubakar, 2025).

Applied to the Nigerian context, the theory illuminates how social media has redefined civic resistance between 2020 and 2025. Movements such as #EndSARS, #NorthIsBleeding, #JusticeForDeborah, and #EndBadGovernance demonstrate the operational dynamics of the networked public sphere. Through decentralized digital networks, Nigerian youths bypassed state-controlled media, mobilized at unprecedented speed, and framed collective grievances into coherent national and transnational campaigns (Njoku, et al 2025; Lawal, et al, 2025).

The major tenets of the theory; decentralization, participatory communication, and collective intelligence are evident in Nigeria's digital protest culture. Decentralization ensures that no single actor monopolizes narrative control, fostering inclusivity and spontaneous mobilization. Participatory communication enables collective storytelling and co-construction of meaning, as seen in the symbolic power of hashtags like #EndSARS. Collective intelligence reflects the capacity of distributed networks to self-organize, share information, and adapt to shifting political contexts—attributes visible in the organic coordination of protests via WhatsApp, Telegram, and Twitter Spaces (Moses, et al, 2024).

However, the theory is not without critique. Scholars such as Hindman (2009) and Morozov (2011), caution against idealizing digital networks as inherently democratic. They argue that online participation is shaped by algorithmic hierarchies, digital divides, and performative activism, which may reinforce existing inequalities rather than dismantle them. Moreover, the same technological affordances that enable openness also facilitate surveillance and misinformation. Governments can infiltrate or manipulate digital spaces to monitor dissent and spread propaganda, as evidenced by Nigeria's periodic restrictions on online platforms and its use of the Cybercrimes Act (2015) to criminalize online speech (Onigbinde & Oloyede, 2024; FactCheck Africa, 2024).

These limitations make the theory particularly relevant for analyzing Nigeria's digital unrest. The paradoxes it highlights, empowerment versus repression, inclusion versus fragmentation mirror the realities of Nigerian social media activism. In the wake of movements like #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance, the internet has functioned as both a space of liberation and a site of contestation. Citizens have used digital tools to document abuses, coordinate resistance, and demand reform, even as the state has responded with censorship, arrests, and disinformation (Collins-Dike, et al, 2025).

By grounding this study in the Networked Public Sphere Theory, a robust conceptual foundation is established for examining how digital technologies mediate the processes of mobilization, coordination, and sustainability in civil unrest. It aligns directly with the study's objectives: to analyze how social media shapes civic participation, to explore the emotional and political consequences of digital activism, and to assess how misinformation and surveillance constrain online movements.

#### 4. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative survey research design to explore the role of social media in shaping, mobilizing, and sustaining civil unrest in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025. The design was selected for its effectiveness in capturing broad patterns of digital engagement and perceptions of governance among active social media users. Given the digital nature of the research focus, an online survey administered via Google Forms was deemed appropriate. The survey targeted Nigerian youth and digital activists aged 18–40, who were either participants in or close observers of major movements such as #EndSARS, #NorthIsBleeding,

#JusticeForDeborah, and #EndBadGovernance. This demographic was chosen due to its prominence in Nigeria's online civic discourse and protest culture.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to engage 60 respondents through activist networks on Twitter (X), Facebook, and WhatsApp. This approach ensured that the study engaged individuals with firsthand experience in digital mobilization. The survey instrument comprised both structured and semi-structured questions designed to assess three core areas: patterns of mobilization and coordination via social media; emotional and political consequences of online activism; and the impact of misinformation, surveillance, and decentralization on

movement sustainability.

Data collected through Google Forms were exported to Microsoft Excel for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages, were used to summarize the responses. Results were presented using tables and bar charts to visually illustrate trends aligned with the study’s objectives. This analytical approach provided clear and accessible insights into how digital platforms influence civic engagement, emotional solidarity, and collective resistance in Nigeria’s evolving protest ecology.

### 5. Results

#### Social Media and the Mobilization, Coordination,

**Table 1: Frequency of Platform Use for Protest Mobilization (2020–2025)**

Social Media Platform	Percentage of Respondents Using Platform for Protest (%)	Rank
Twitter (X)	80	1st
Facebook	65	2nd
WhatsApp	50	3rd
Instagram	35	4th
YouTube	20	5th

Source: field data

As presented in Table 1, Twitter (X) ranked highest with 80% of respondents identifying it as their primary tool for organizing protests, coordinating meeting points, and amplifying live updates. Facebook followed closely (65%), mainly for closed-group coordination and safety communications, while WhatsApp (50%) played a complementary role in disseminating information to broader audiences.

Respondents described Twitter as the “command center”

#### and Framing of Civil Unrest

Findings from the online survey revealed that social media remains the most powerful catalyst for mobilizing and coordinating civil unrest in Nigeria. Among the 60 respondents, 75% reported participating in at least one online protest campaign between 2020 and 2025, indicating that digital platforms have become integral to contemporary civic action. The results further demonstrate that social media use for political mobilization transcends mere information sharing; it functions as a strategic infrastructure for framing collective grievances, shaping narratives, and organizing logistics in real time.

of protests, where hashtags like #EndSARS, #EndBadGovernance, and #JusticeForDeborah emerged as central nodes of mobilization. Hashtags served as framing devices that unified fragmented grievances such as police brutality, insecurity, and corruption under coherent, emotionally resonant messages. To further measure how respondents perceived the overall influence of social media in shaping civic resistance, participants were asked to rate its impact on a five-point Likert scale (from Very Low to Very High).

**Table 2: Respondents’ Perception of Social Media’s Impact on Protest Mobilization**

Level of Impact	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very High	30	50
High	10	17
Moderate	12	20
Low	5	8
Very Low/No Impact	3	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: field data

As shown in Table 2, 67% of respondents rated the impact of social media on protest organization as “high” or “very high.” This overwhelming consensus highlights the central role digital platforms play in accelerating mobilization and enabling citizens to bypass traditional media censorship. Respondents emphasized that the immediacy of updates, live streaming of protests, and viral visual content fostered a sense of unity and urgency across dispersed populations.

Several participants also remarked that social media served as a “digital amplifier,” drawing international attention to local struggles. The global engagement with hashtags such as #EndSARS and #JusticeForDeborah demonstrated how online activism extended beyond Nigeria’s borders through retweets, influencer participation, and diaspora advocacy networks. These

transnational linkages reinforced local legitimacy and pressured authorities to respond, even if symbolically.

**Emotional, Political, and Structural Consequences of Digital Activism**

The second objective of the study focused on the emotional, political, and structural consequences of digital activism in Nigeria between 2020 and 2025. Findings revealed that social media activism evokes powerful emotional engagement and collective identity formation among participants. However, this emotional intensity comes with psychological costs and a mixed record of political effectiveness. The results highlight the dual nature of digital activism as both empowering and exhausting, and as both politically visible yet institutionally fragile.

**Table 3: Emotional Responses to Digital Activism**

Emotional Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)

<b>Felt emotionally connected to protest causes</b>	42	70
<b>Experienced collective empowerment/solidarity</b>	36	60
<b>Experienced psychological stress or digital fatigue</b>	23	38
<b>Felt indifferent or disengaged</b>	6	10
<b>Total</b>	60	100

Source: field data

As shown in Table 3, the majority of respondents (70%) reported a strong emotional connection to protest causes after viewing viral social media content such as videos, personal testimonies, and protest imagery. Sixty percent (60%) of respondents also indicated that social media created a shared sense of empowerment through collective solidarity and emotional resonance.

However, the data also highlight a significant emotional cost to participation. About 38% of respondents

experienced psychological stress or digital fatigue, primarily due to constant exposure to graphic content, online harassment, or the emotional weight of recurring civic crises. Several participants noted that while online activism “keeps the fire alive,” it also induces burnout, anxiety, and disillusionment when tangible change appears elusive. This reflects what scholars have termed the “emotional paradox of digital activism” where high engagement fosters both empowerment and exhaustion.

**Table 4: Political and Structural Impact of Digital Activism**

<b>Perceived Political Outcome</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Prompted temporary government responses</b>	40	67
<b>Led to sustained policy or institutional reforms</b>	18	30
<b>Increased public awareness without government response</b>	45	75

<b>Resulted in enhanced surveillance or state repression</b>	25	42
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Source: field data

Table 4 reveals a striking divergence between symbolic political responsiveness and substantive policy outcomes. While 67% of respondents believed that online protests prompted temporary government responses such as press releases, official inquiries, or public apologies, only 30% perceived any lasting policy reform arising from digital activism. This gap indicates a recurring challenge in Nigeria’s civic resistance, high online visibility but low institutional transformation.

Interestingly, 75% acknowledged that digital activism significantly raised public awareness about social and governance issues, suggesting that its strength lies more in agenda-setting than in direct policy influence. However, 42% reported increased state surveillance or repression following online mobilization efforts, reflecting the rise of what scholars have called digital authoritarianism (Ekeh & Molomo, 2025; Njoku et al., 2025). Respondents cited the government’s 2021

suspension of Twitter and monitoring of activist accounts as evidence of this retaliatory pattern.

**Misinformation, Surveillance, and the Sustainability of Online-Driven Protests**

The final phase of the analysis explored the structural vulnerabilities of social media–driven activism in Nigeria, focusing on misinformation, government surveillance, and the decentralization of leadership. Findings reveal that while digital platforms have democratized participation and broadened civic engagement, they also foster conditions that undermine the sustainability and coherence of protest movements. Respondents consistently emphasized that misinformation and digital monitoring have eroded trust, heightened fear, and constrained open dialogue, thereby weakening the long-term viability of online mobilization.

**Table 5: Perceptions of Misinformation and Digital Surveillance**

Challenge Identified	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Prevalence of misinformation during protests</b>	44	73
<b>Concern over government surveillance and monitoring</b>	37	62
<b>Fear of online harassment or doxing</b>	29	48
<b>Distrust in information shared via social media</b>	35	58
<b>Total Respondents</b>	60	100

Source: field data

As shown in Table 5, 73% of respondents confirmed that misinformation was widespread during online protest periods, citing fabricated images, manipulated videos, and false reports as key contributors to confusion and reduced credibility of activist messaging. Equally concerning is the perception of government surveillance, reported by 62% of participants. Respondents described a climate of “digital fear” in which activists self-censored political opinions, deleted old posts, or migrated to

encrypted platforms such as Telegram to avoid detection. This perception of surveillance not only restricts freedom of expression but also weakens participatory democracy by fostering digital silence, a phenomenon mirrored in global scholarship on digital authoritarianism (Njoku et al., 2025). Additionally, nearly half (48%) of participants reported experiences or fears of online harassment, including coordinated trolling or threats, further discouraging sustained online engagement.

**Table 6: Decentralization and Sustainability of Online Movements**

Structural Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Absence of centralized leadership weakened negotiations</b>	31	52
<b>Fragmentation among online activist networks</b>	27	45
<b>Difficulty sustaining protest momentum post-viral phase</b>	38	63
<b>Lack of strategic coordination for policy engagement</b>	33	55
<b>Total Respondents</b>	60	100

Source: field data

As illustrated in Table 6, 52% of respondents believed that the absence of centralized leadership undermined effective negotiation and weakened the strategic coherence of online protests. Similarly, 63% observed that movements often lost momentum once viral attention declined; suggesting that digital mobilization alone is insufficient for sustaining collective action without institutional structure or continuity mechanisms.

In the Nigerian context, the leaderless nature of movements such as #EndSARS and #EndBadGovernance fostered wide participation but lacked formal representation capable of transforming digital demands into actionable policy reforms.

Consequently, while social media platforms provide spaces for public deliberation and mass mobilization, they rarely facilitate structured policy dialogue or institutional negotiation. In Nigeria, this has translated into movements that are emotionally powerful and globally visible but structurally fragile and easily fragmented.

## 6. Discussion

This study found that 67% of respondents rated the impact of social media on protest organisation as “high” or “very high,” providing substantial empirical support for the first hypothesis that digital platforms are central

to political mobilisation and coordination in Nigeria. Twitter (X) has established itself as the primary platform for real-time coordination, with Facebook and WhatsApp as secondary options, supporting the assertion that social media serves as the central mechanism of activism in the country. This pattern supports previous research (Ajisebiyawo, 2022; Lawal et al., 2025), which designates Twitter as the focal point of Nigeria's digital activism, attributed to its immediacy, viral dynamics, and networked influence. The employment of hashtags like #EndSARS, #EndBadGovernance, and #JusticeForDeborah consolidated disparate grievances, converting personal dissatisfaction into a collective national narrative. This aligns with the findings of Lawal et al. (2025), who characterise hashtags as framing tools that foster collective identity and improve visibility.

This result is consistent with international studies regarding the mobilisation potential of social media. Castells (2012) posits that "networked movements" highlight the capacity of digital networks to facilitate horizontal organisation, enabling individuals to mobilise independently of formal institutions. In Nigeria, social media effectively circumvented state-controlled media, enabling activists to livestream police violence, disseminate real-time updates, and independently coordinate logistics. While these findings align with the research of Njoku et al. (2025) and Ekeh and Molomo (2025), which highlight digital tools as democratising mechanisms, they differ in demonstrating a total reliance on digital platforms for protest organisation. Previous research identified a complementary relationship between online and offline activism. In contrast, the current study indicates a paradigm shift towards "platformized resistance," wherein digital tools function as the primary infrastructure for collective action rather than mere supplements.

The findings align with the Networked Public Sphere Theory, which views social media as an alternative space for civic deliberation and participation (Benkler, 2006). In this context, social media in Nigeria goes beyond mere communication, altering the structure of collective action by converting individuals into active contributors of information, mobilisation, and narrative construction. In a political context where institutional media frequently face limitations imposed by state interests, the digital sphere has emerged as an alternative public arena for political discourse and dissent. While the theory advocates for decentralisation and participatory engagement, the Nigerian experience highlights its

inherent fragility, demonstrating that networked participation is susceptible to manipulation, repression, and infrastructural dependencies.

The second major finding indicates that digital activism in Nigeria has considerable emotional and political impact, yet it results in limited structural change. Seventy percent (70%) of respondents indicated an emotional connection to protest causes following exposure to viral content, underscoring the importance of emotional resonance in digital mobilisation. This is consistent with previous research (Njoku et al., 2025; Moses et al., 2024), which emphasises emotional contagion the swift spread of affect within digital networks as a fundamental mechanism that maintains protest momentum. Moses et al. (2024) and Ekeh and Molomo (2025) emphasise the significance of emotional storytelling via imagery and personal testimonies in fostering solidarity and urgency. Thus, social media serves both as an informational platform and as an emotional space that influences political engagement.

Emotional engagement is dual in nature; it fosters momentum but also leads to psychological fatigue and volatility. About 38% of respondents indicated that they experienced digital stress or burnout due to ongoing exposure to distressing visuals and contentious online discussions. This aligns with the findings of Njoku et al. (2025), who noted that sustained digital engagement frequently leads to emotional exhaustion and disengagement, especially when activism does not result in concrete policy changes. Emotional mobilisation serves as an empowering yet exhausting force; it drives participation while simultaneously contributing to fatigue when results are postponed.

Sixty-seven percent (67%) of respondents indicated that online activism led to temporary governmental responses, including press releases and promises of reform; however, only thirty percent felt these resulted in lasting policy change. This finding is consistent with the argument presented by Uwalaka and Watkins (2023), which states that online movements in Africa often attain symbolic visibility yet struggle to institutionalise their demands. The divergence from Ajisebiyawo (2022), who regarded digital activism as a transformative force for governance reform, can be attributed to contextual changes, notably the increase in state repression and censorship in recent years, which have limited the transformative potential of digital activism. Analysed through the framework of Networked Public Sphere Theory, this pattern suggests that although digital

communication increases visibility and participatory engagement, it does not automatically ensure institutional responsiveness. The Nigerian case exemplifies the adaptation of state power to digital dissent via co-option, symbolic concessions, and regulatory control, thereby converting activism into a mechanism that alleviates civic discontent without altering governance structures.

The third major finding reveals the structural constraints that hinder the sustainability of digital activism in Nigeria. Seventy-three percent of respondents identified misinformation as a persistent challenge, while 62 percent expressed concern regarding government surveillance. The findings support the assertions made by Adekoya (2021) and Onigbinde and Oloyede (2024), indicating that misinformation and state monitoring undermine trust and diminish participation. FactCheck Africa (2024) reported that during the #EndSARS movement, both supporters and opponents circulated false images and altered posts, leading to confusion and internal division. This study confirms these observations and demonstrates that misinformation distorts collective objectives and offers governments justification for digital crackdowns under the guise of combating “fake news.”

Furthermore, 52% of respondents identified the lack of centralised leadership as a factor contributing to poor negotiation outcomes, aligning with the findings of Okoye and Adesina (2025). Decentralisation fosters inclusivity and participatory agency; however, it concurrently impedes coordination, strategic planning, and sustainability. This observation partially contradicts Lawal et al. (2025), who regarded networked mobilisation as strength. Current evidence indicates that a lack of leadership leads to organisational fragility, as the absence of identifiable representatives hinders effective engagement with government institutions and undermines the continuity of advocacy once digital attention wanes.

This research contributes to the Networked Public Sphere Theory by identifying its limitations within semi-authoritarian contexts. The theory highlights the importance of openness and participatory communication; however, it fails to adequately address contexts in which digital environments are subject to surveillance, censorship, and manipulation by state actors. The situation in Nigeria illustrates the tension between digital empowerment and state repression, resulting in a hybrid public sphere that is both open and

constrained. This duality elucidates the capacity of social media to catalyse extensive mobilisation and emotional solidarity, while simultaneously lacking the ability to effectuate lasting structural or institutional change.

## 7. Recommendations

Building upon the findings, several actionable strategies are essential to enhance the impact and sustainability of digital activism in Nigeria. First, activists and civil society organizations should transition from spontaneous online mobilization to structured digital advocacy, integrating online activism with offline organizing, stakeholder dialogue, and policy engagement. Establishing leadership frameworks, negotiation teams, and inter-coalition networks would strengthen the continuity and legitimacy of civic movements.

Secondly, addressing misinformation and disinformation requires institutional collaboration between civil society, media organizations, and technology companies. Initiatives such as digital literacy programs, community-based fact-checking hubs, and youth-centered media education will enhance information integrity and public trust.

Thirdly, to counter surveillance and digital repression, there is an urgent need for legal and technical safeguards. Policymakers should enact transparent digital rights laws that protect free expression while activists adopt stronger cybersecurity measures such as encryption, VPNs, and secure communication channels, to reduce vulnerability.

Lastly, sustaining civic transformation demands hybrid activism that fuses digital platforms with community engagement, policy research, and institutional collaboration. By embedding online advocacy within broader democratic reform, Nigeria can harness social media not merely as a protest tool but as a catalyst for accountable governance and participatory democracy.

## 8. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that social media has become an indispensable instrument for mobilizing, coordinating, and framing collective action. Platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, and WhatsApp have democratized participation by bypassing traditional media constraints and enabling decentralized activism. However, the research also identifies the inherent fragility of these digital movements. While emotional engagement and online solidarity generate significant visibility, they often fail to translate into sustained policy

outcomes due to misinformation, surveillance, and the absence of structured leadership. Consequently, Nigeria's digital activism operates within a hybrid environment, open enough to enable dissent, yet constrained by state power and information disorder. In essence, social media has amplified civic voice but not necessarily civic transformation, highlighting the need for deliberate strategies that bridge digital mobilization with institutional engagement and long-term policy reform. In perspective, the findings contribute to global debates on digital governance and civic resistance by highlighting the paradox of social media as both an emancipatory and disciplinary tool. The implications are twofold: for policymakers, there is a need to develop frameworks that balance digital freedom with security concerns; for activists, there is a pressing requirement to evolve from spontaneous online mobilization toward strategic, hybrid models that combine digital advocacy with institutional engagement.

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