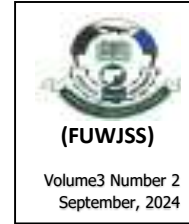


INFLUENTIAL ROLE OF TWITTER (X) IN MOBILISING 2020 #ENDSARS PROTESTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of Twitter (X) in mobilising the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. Enamoured with the capacity for mobilising for social action, X has become a social media platform of choice in planning, coordinating and galvanising protests across the globe. Its affordances and architecture make it easier for organisers of protests to use hashtags to call for action. In Nigeria, the many years of police brutality resulted in the unprecedented massive protests that rocked the country. This study adopts a cross-sectional survey research design involving the administration of questionnaire to 384 respondents in Lagos and Port-Harcourt, Nigeria. The study sample consists of youths who took part in the protests. Lagos was the epicentre of the protests. It was in Lagos, at the Lekki-Toll Gate that the Nigerian Army massacred some of the protesters who were unarmed on October 20, 2020. Major results of the study indicate that X was quite instrumental to the success of the uprising because it helped in the creation of awareness, mobilising for protests, creation of strong bond among protesters, and de-emphasising ethno-religious differences among the youths. The study concludes that using the social media, especially Twitter (X) for massive mobilisation of citizens coalesce in influencing political establishments even without the full support of conventional media. The study recommends that protesting youths and social media influencers should always avoid the use of deepfakes and other forms of fake news (misinformation and disinformation) so as to maintain the credibility of protests.

Keywords: #EndSARS, Lekki-Toll Gate, Nigerian Army, Twitter (X), Hashtags

Introduction

The popular uprising which rocked major cities in Nigeria in October 2020, named #EndSARS took the country by storm. Inspired by the #BlackLivesMatter movement in America, it became an amorphous and decentralised social movement which was committed to ending the incessant extra-judicial killings and brutality by the Nigerian police, especially its highly-dreaded anti-robbery arm- Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). This police unit had over the years, being quite notorious in the dehumanisation, disappearance, and torture of some Nigerians, mostly the youths, many of whom were perceived to be innocent. According to the Amnesty International (2021), the SARS was responsible for gross human rights violations in Nigeria, including unspeakable cruelty, mock executions, shooting of a leg of the suspect, threats of execution, and using pliers to uproot a tooth, among others. The idea behind the formation of SARS out of the regular Nigeria Police Force was a laudable one. The unit was meant to fight armed robbery and other violent crimes, and it was modelled after the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit in the United States of America. However, after over a decade of operations, it degenerated into a killer-machine and a force of terror in the Nigerian society (Uwazurike, 2020). Anybody taken to its notorious cells was like going to the Gulag Archipelago. And so from around the last quarter of 2017, the campaign for the disbandment of SARS started on Twitter until it got to its apogee in October, 2022, with a concurrent massive street protests and the well-coordinated Twitter campaign, using the #EndSARS. The protests reverberated across some major Nigerian cities such as Lagos (its epicentre), Abuja, Port-Harcourt, Calabar, Uyo, Benin, Ilorin, Owerri Ibadan, Oshogbo, and Enugu, among others (Akanbi, 2020).

The uprising had three waves: The First Wave took place in 2017; the Second Wave took place from 2018-2019; while the Third Wave took place in 2020, which was the climax. The First Wave of 2017 was started by a public commentator, activist and Twitter influencer by name Segun Awosanya, with his popular Twitter handle known as “@Segalink”. He was the first person to use the #EndSARS as a rallying point to force the Nigerian government to disband the SARS, because of its predilection for brutality and other human rights violations. According to Ajisebiyawo (2022), when the convener of the #EndSARS movement published his petition on why SARS should be scrapped, it was signed by 10,195 Nigerians, and the petition was subsequently submitted to the

National Assembly for necessary action. The #EndSARS Twitter campaign started on the 2nd of December 2017, when a videotape of police officers attached to the unit shot and killed a man surfaced online. The campaign became a trending subject on Twitter with over 400,000 Tweets in twelve hours. By 2018 and 2019, the Second Wave started because the harassment and intimidation of many defenceless Nigerians continued unabated even when the Nigerian government had promised repeatedly that the SARS would be reformed. International television stations like Aljazeera and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documented through their reportage the harrowing tales of those who managed to come out of the SARS gulag alive. The stories were blood-curdling. The Third Wave, which was the apogee, started a few days to Nigeria's Independence Day Anniversary in 2020. The uprising was so massive that, apart from the fact that some Nigerians in the Diaspora joined in their respective countries of abode, the Nigerian government was at a loss as to how to respond to the protests. By October 11, 2020, the Nigerian Police Force announced that it was disbanding the SARS in line with the demands of the protesting youths (Abimbade, Olayoku, and Herro, 2021). Unfortunately, the protests became so violent that in some cities in Southern Nigeria, banks and some public properties were burnt. The destruction wrought on Lagos, the epicentre of the protest was so massive that properties worth billions of dollars were destroyed. And so on the night of October 20, 2020, the Nigerian Army, around 6:50 PM Nigerian time, opened fire on unarmed #EndSARS protesters, leaving over 100 persons dead, while some simply disappeared.

However, the social media, right from the Arab Spring has become veritable tools and sites of protests globally. By virtue of their affordances and architecture, which lend themselves to easy access and use, organisers of protests find in the social media a useful platform for mass mobilisation. For example, the massive protests in Iran against the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, the Red Shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010, the Arab Spring in early 2011, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014, and the Black Lives Matter protests in America in 2020, were all pointers to the power of the social media in socio-political mobilisation (Kasenally and Awatar, 2017). In addition, Social media networks are seen as important in contemporary social protest movements. These digital platforms are not only utilized for organizing mass protests, they are also themselves sites for activism (Matsilele, Mpofo, Msimanga, and Tshuma, 2021)

It follows therefore that a campaign that started on X in 2017 gradually gained traction to the extent that by 2020, there was a massive mobilisation of Nigerian youths through the potency, potential and power of the social media. It is instructive to note that before #EndSARS in 2020, there were #OccupyNigeria in 2012, and #BringBackOurGirls in 2013. While the leaders of these two were political opponents of the government in power then in Nigeria, the #EndSARS movement was amorphous and non-hierarchical; everybody was an equal founder and member. In times past, before the emergence and popularity of the social media, protests were usually coordinated through human channels, pamphlets, posters, and hand bills, among others. In addition to this, was the use of organised unions and associations. The conventional media merely reported the planned protests as news items. In autocratically-democratic countries like Nigeria, state-owned media do not give coverage to such planned protests; only some independent media houses do. However, today, with the ubiquity of the social media, most anti-government protests are now coordinated on these digital platforms. According to Breur (2012), the role of the social media as seen in the success of the Arab Spring in 2011 has reinvigorated the position that the social media actually have some influence in the mobilisation for protests as well as individual engagements. So what motivated the adoption of Twitter out of all the other social media platforms in Nigeria in the #EndSARS protests; what inspired the protesters' perception and use of Twitter, and what was the influence of this micro-blogging platform on the relative success of the protests. The major objectives of this study therefore is to evaluate the factors that led to the adoption of Twitter (X), its perception as well as its influential role in the #EndSARS protests that rocked Nigeria in October, 2020.

History of Police Brutality in Nigeria

Protest movements all over in the last decade and half have been planned, coordinated, and galvanised by the social media. These digital tools have not only become contested spaces, but also battlegrounds for social action. One of the positive attributes of the social media in coordinating protests lies in their capacity to translate online momentum to offline results. According to Williams (2015), Twitter for instance, makes it possible for activists to create the right hashtags that are capable of organising information (tweets) to coalesce around a cause of action thereby boosting the visibility for transnational engagements during protests. She argues on that Twitter hashtags are quite effective in sharing

information that will spur social action about a demographic group that seems to get little support from the powers-that-be, and that Twitter hashtags elevate issues that would have been ignored by the mainstream media to the front burner.

On X as tool for social mobilisation, Ott (2017), argues that the microblogging platform is now increasingly performing the agenda-setting function, once dominated by television, and that TV now follows the lead of Twitter. He argues further that Twitter, by its narrative and interactive structure, facilitates communication among its users, especially because it is characterised by simplicity in the creation of content. Matsilele, Mpofo, Msimanga, and Tshuma (2021), explore three sub-Saharan Africa's hashtag movements: the Zimbabwe's #ZimbabweanLivesMatter; Eswatini's #EswatiniLivesMatter; and Nigeria's #EndSARS movement. They relied on the transnational alternative digital public sphere and hashtag activism to understand how social media acted as a meeting point or public sphere for mobilisation and building synergistic movements. Their study also relied on a combination of virtual ethnography and purposive sampling as methodological approaches. Thematic analysis was the analytical tool employed with four themes guiding the study: democratisation and human rights, transnational solidarity, states' response to hashtag movements and use of parody accounts as a counter hegemonic strategy. The study found that these hashtags and movements achieved some level of 'success' by forcing the governments of the countries studied to make piecemeal concessions of varying degrees. Wang and Caskey (2016) studied the use of Twitter in protest movements, with a focus on the Occupy Wall Street movement in America. They discovered that Twitter was used as a major platform to share objective, logistical information, in addition to personal opinions, in order to bring about a united community and mobilise people to take part in the offline protests.

Further, Adedokun (2022), studied how the social media have become strategic in social movements, using the #EndSARS protests as a case study. He discovered that the social media were not only influential in the protests, but that the employment of emotional dynamics, collective identities, symbolic artefacts, and mutual values sustained the protests even beyond the imagination of the organisers. Bello, Alhassan, and Inuwa-Dutse (2023), studied the discourse and mobilisation of the #EndSARS protests on Twitter from 2017-2020. They discovered that 3550 of the posts on #EndSARS were "raw tweets"; 3422 were "retweeted tweets"; 1317 were "replied tweets"; while 1107 were "quoted

tweets”. They also discovered that 88% of the protesters used mobile devices in tweeting the protests. However, the gap this research intends to fill is that it will use survey to get the views of the principal actors; that is, those who were actual participants in the field during the protests. This will mean the use of primary data; since other writers used secondary data.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)/Theory and the Social Movement Theory. TAM was developed by Fred Davis and Richard Bagozzi in 1989 as an extension of Ajzen and Fishbein’s Theory of Reasoned Action. The theory believes that when users are presented with a new technology, there are some factors that determine the decision on how and when to use such technology. These factors are: Perceived Usefulness (PU), which means the extent to which a person believes that using a particular technology would enhance his or her job performance; and Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU), which means the degree to which a person using a new technology believes that using it will be without stress. So, the affordances of Twitter and its architecture informed its adoption as the social media platform of choice because it is quite flexible in terms of mobilisation for social action.

The Social Movement Theory on the other hand, evolved from an interdisciplinary study within the social sciences that generally seeks to explain why social mobilization occurs, the variety of its manifestations, as well as the potential social, cultural, political, and economic consequences, such as the creation and functioning of social movements. The theory argues that bad governance and lack of opportunities in a society put the people under pressure to the extent that when it gets to a crescendo, the people will have no choice but to take an unconventional means of ventilating their views, such as protests (Smelser, 2013). It follows therefore that the level of police brutality in Nigeria over the years, by the disbanded SARS in particular, pushed the Nigerian youths to the wall; so they had no choice but to organise for a massive resistance of the status quo.

Research Methodology

The study used survey, which according to Ha, Fang, Henize, Park, Stana, and Zhang (2015) is one of the most commonly used research designs in mass communication. The purpose of survey, according to Wimmer and Dominick (2015), therefore, is to collect a large quantity of

data from a sample of respondents that are generalisable to the population. The population of the study consisted of 1,347,653 people from Etiosa Local Government Area (LGA), and 136,394, from Ibeju-Lekki LGA, all of Lagos State. This gave a total of population of 1,484,047 (Lagos Bureau of Statistics, 2016). The choice of these two LGAs was informed by the fact that they constituted the epicentres of the uprising in Lagos. The population of the study from Rivers State, on the other hand, comprised 756,000 people Port-Harcourt LGA, while Obio-Akpor LGA had 649,600 (Rivers State Ministry of Youth Development, 2020). These gave a total population of 1,405,600. These two LGAs in Rivers State which form the metropolitan centres of River State were the epicentres of the protests. So the grand total of the study population of Lagos and Rivers States is: 2,889,647.

Following the above, the sample size was 384, based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, which states that when the population is 1000,000 and above, the sample size should be 384. This is expressed as follows:

$$s = \frac{X^2 NP}{d^2} + X^2 P (1-P)$$

Where:

s= required sample.

X^2 = the table value of chi-square for degree 1 of freedom at the desired confidence

level- (3.84), derived thus: (1.96 x 1.96 = 3.8416)

N= the population size

P= the population proportion (assumed to be .50 since this would provide the Maximum sample size)

d= the degree of freedom of accuracy expressed as a proportion.

Employing proportional distribution of questionnaire, which is usually on the logic of the larger the population, the larger the sample size, 200 copies of questionnaire were distributed to the respondents in Lagos, while 184 copies were distributed to the respondents in Port-Harcourt. Further, the sampling technique used in both Lagos and Port-Harcourt was convenience sampling technique. This was because the researcher needed to get to those who either took part or supported the #EndSARS protests. Also, the instrument for data collection was the questionnaire, while the techniques of data analysis were frequency tables, percentages, and charts.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Out of the 384 copies (200 for the respondents in Lagos State, and 184 for the respondents in Rivers State), a total of 268 copies from the respondents, representing 94.4% were returned. However, the sex, age-range, and level of education of the respondents are presented in the table below:

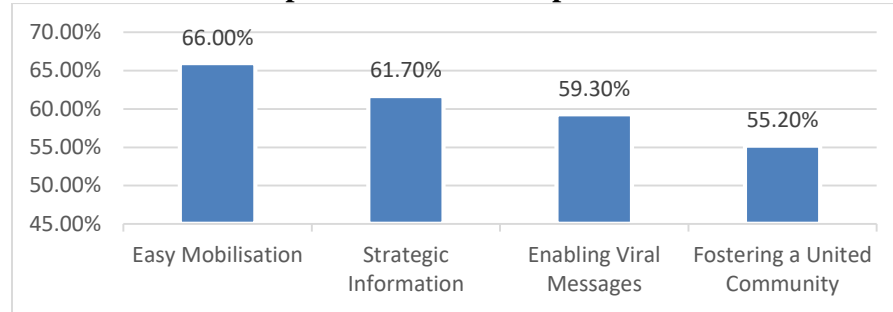
Table 1: Socio-Demographic Data of Respondents

Items	Respondents	Percentage
Sex		
Male	146	54.5%
Female	122	45.5%
Total	100	100%
Age-range		
18-22	76	28.4%
23-27	109	40.7%
28 & above	83	30.9%
Total	100	100%
Education		
Undergraduate	121	32.9%
Graduate	158	42.9%
Others	89	24.2%
Total	100	100%

From Table 1, although the men were slightly more than the women during the protests, some women were the leading light of the uprising. For example, the Feminist Coalition of Nigeria played tremendous role through their organisation, sponsorship and sustenance of the protests by contributing money using Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies. These women took charge of refreshments like food and drinks. Three of these women were quite astounding: Miss Rinu Oduola, a social media influencer who later became a Fellow at the World Movement for Democracy (WMD) and also a youth representative on the Lagos State Judicial Panel on Police Brutality; Mrs. Aisha Yesufu and Miss Catherine Udeh, popularly known as DJ Switch later became Reagan-Fascell Fellows at the National Endowment for Democracy in Washington DC, the United States of America. All these because of the visible role they played in the #EndSARS protests. Concerning the age-range of the respondents, absolute majority of them were youths and also well-

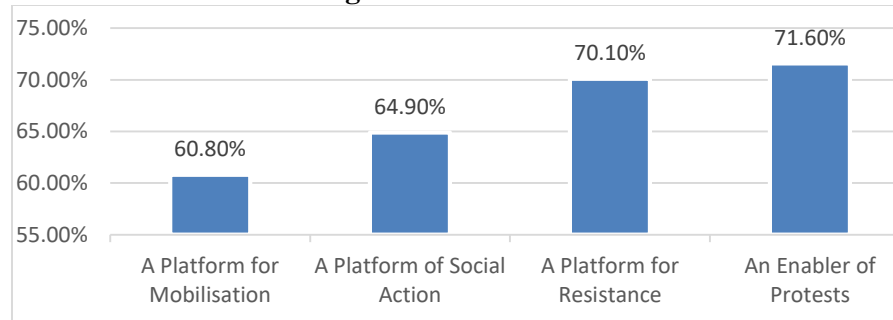
educated. Among them were medical doctors, lawyers, and technology geeks, among others. Only a few of them were secondary school leavers.

Chart 1: Factors Responsible for the Adoption of X for the Protests

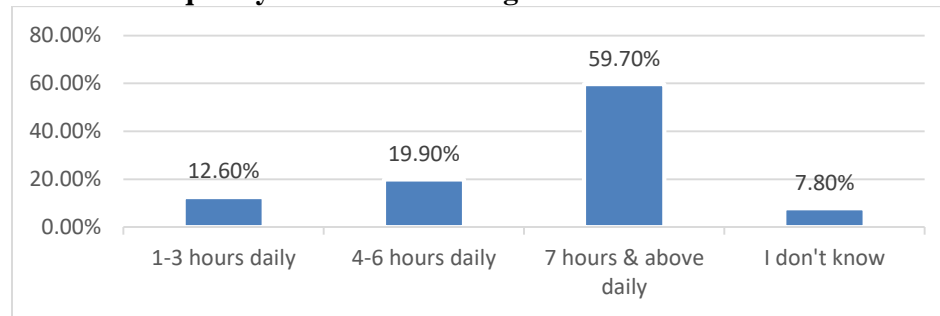


In Chart 1, there is no doubt that the affordances and architecture of Twitter actually lend the social media platform to be deployed easily for mobilisation towards social action and protests. Messages on Twitter can go viral within minutes with the use of hashtags, and at the same time, it is also the social media of choice for passing strategic information.

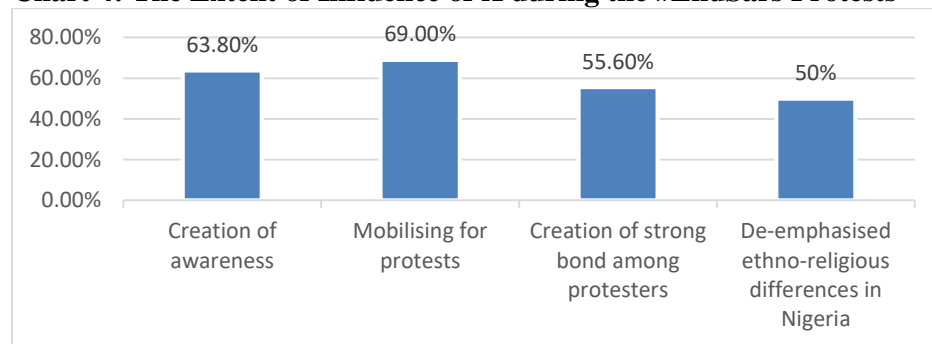
Chart 2: Perception of the Youth towards the use of X in the #EndSARS Protests in Nigeria



In Chart 2, it is quite glaring that Twitter has become not only a contested space, but also a site and battleground for social action. It is the veritable social media platform of choice by social movements for protests. In addition to that, is its capacity for breaking news and making information to go viral. Further, the researcher also sought to know the frequency of use of the social media during the #EndSARS protests. Below are the views of the respondents:

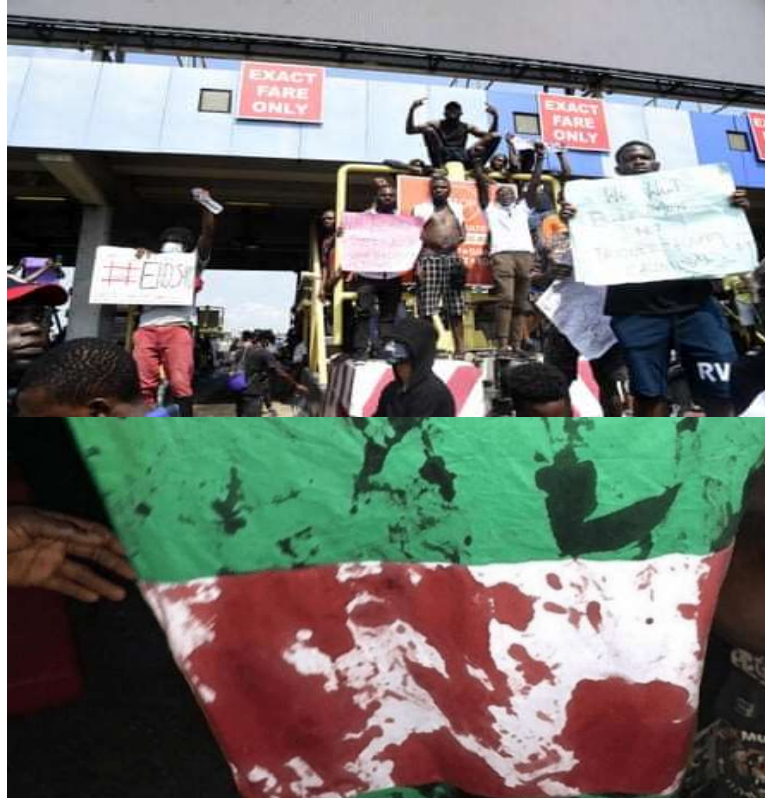
Chart 3: Frequency of Use of X during the #EndSARS Protests

Due to the passion and commitment to the cause of the protests, it is not surprising that a majority of the respondents spent seven hours and above daily tweeting about the protests. Some, could not even place a figure on it. Some of the people who tweeted frequently were social media influencers who combined their online activities with offline protests.

Chart 4: The Extent of Influence of X during the #EndSars Protests

In Chart 4, it is quite clear that X had tremendous influence on the #EndSARS uprising, especially with the use of hashtag. From the aggregation of the views of the respondents, who were asked to rank-order their responses, it is irrefutable that without Twitter especially, it would have been difficult to mobilise the kind of huge crowds that were seen across Nigeria, especially in the South. Some of the pictures of the protests are as follows:





Sources: www.guardian.ng; www.aljazeera.com; and www.businessday.ng

This research was anchored on the role played by X in planning, coordinating, and galvanizing the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. It has become a well-documented fact that this micro-blogging social media platform has become with popular uprisings all over the world. From the foregoing, findings from this study indicated that X was adopted as the ultimate social media platform for the protests because of its capacity for easy mobilisation, strategic information, enabling viral messages, and fostering a united community among the protesters. This justifies the study of Wang and Caskey (2016), and Ott (2017). As a corollary to the reasons adduced for the adoption of X, another finding of the study showed that the respondents perceived X vis-à-vis its potential as a platform of resistance, social action, mobilisation, and an enabler of social movement and protests, justifying the work of (Kasenally and

Awatar, 2017), as well as Matsilele, Mpofu, Msimanga, and Tshuma (2021).

Furthermore, the study equally revealed that a majority of the respondents spent an average of seven hours and above on X daily during the protests. This simply underscored the commitment with which they attached to the struggle. This tends to justify the finding of Bello, Alhassan, and Inuwa-Dutse (2023), who noted the cumulative volumes of tweets that were churned out on the #EndSARS issue. A key finding of the research pointed to the influence of TX in the uprising. Just like many other popular uprisings around the globe in which X played an immense role, this research showed that X was quite influential in the protests because it helped in the creation of awareness, mobilising for protests, creation of strong bond among protesters, and de-emphasising ethno-religious differences among the youth'. In addition is that many young Nigerian women played a key role in the uprising; the protesters were mostly youth'; and many of them were well-educated. They were also versatile in the use of new technological platforms like X. This is inconsonance with the tenets of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)/Theory, which this study was anchored on. Similarly, the Social movement theory, another theory that this study was premised on, justifies the movement of people in form of protests as in the case of #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. Apparently, these theories undergirding this study were established to be relevant.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is no doubting the fact that international protests in which the social media played an active part in mobilising the people for social action also inspired the Nigerian youths, especially in the #EndSARS uprising. For example, the massive protests in Iran against the re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2009, the Red Shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010, the Arab Spring in early 2011, the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong in 2014, and the Black Lives Matter protests in America in 2020, were all pointers to the power of the social media in socio-political mobilisation. These protests, using the social media, especially Twitter showed that a massive mobilisation of citizens coalescing around an idea can rattle the political establishment even without the full support of the conventional media.

Some remarkable fallouts of the #EndSARS uprising in Nigeria is that with determination and focus, Nigerian youths can cause a change in the

country without recourse to primordial sentiments like ethnic and religious differences. In addition, the organisation of the movement was amorphous and non-hierarchical, even though there were key figures. This decentralised mode of operation was meant to keep the Nigerian government in the dark. Arising from the foregoing, protesting youth and social media influencers should avoid the use of deepfakes and other forms of fake news (misinformation and disinformation) so as to maintain the credibility of protests. X, formally known as Twitter, remains a formidable tool that should be explored by everyone for positive gains and wider reach. The continuous use of the X platform is strongly advocated especially among the youths. However, the purpose of use should be well defined in line with the rule of law. It can also be used to achieve peaceful protests aimed at holding the government accountable which can culminate into a change or review of government policies.

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