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Twitter Activism: Understanding the Twittersphere as the foremost community for activism and dragging in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article appraises the use of Twitter as the principal platform for activism in Nigeria to underscore why it is preferred above all others when it comes to the formation and operation of activist communities. Drawing from reflexive thematic analysis of interviews (n=15), I demonstrate that four reasons explain why the Twittersphere has become the central platform for activism in Nigeria. These include the use of Twitter for activism, justice, and dragging; the functional uses made possible by Twitter's architecture; Twitter as a platform for young elite influence; and the perception of Twitter as a leveller. I expand on what these themes mean for Twitter activism and social media regulation, further arguing that research into digital activism and communities should start to recognise Twitter's centrality as a tool of choice in the formation, coordination, and amplification of activist voices.

Keywords: Twitter activism, Nigerian Twittersphere, activist discourse, dragging, hashtag activism

Introduction

What is now known as the October 2020 #EndSARS movement, perhaps the largest demonstration to have occurred in Nigeria's history, was sparked by a series of tweets.[1] The tweets alleged that members of the now-disbanded Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit of the Nigerian police were involved in extortions and extra-judicial killings. This led to renewed calls for the scrapping of SARS, a demand stretching back to 2016. Before long, protests began in several parts of the country and calls grew beyond ending SARS to wider socio-political reforms. In all these, Twitter, with about three million users in Nigeria,[2] was crucial, as activists made it the central platform for organising, coordinating, and amplifying the movement.[3] The platform was also described as having made "its biggest political impact," becoming "the platform of choice for young demonstrators".[4] Hence, what we see with #EndSARS is the appropriation of Twitter as the foremost mediating tool for activist discourse in Nigeria.

It appears that the Nigerian government also took notice of Twitter's central role. In June 2021, the government announced a Twitter ban that lasted seven months, citing the use of the platform for activities "capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence"[5] – what might be interpreted as a vague reference to #EndSARS. The ban came after Twitter deleted one of President Muhammadu Buhari's tweets, which Twitter said violated its policy on abusive behaviour.[6] The deletion prompted Lai Mohammed, the information and culture minister, to say in an interview that "Twitter's mission in Nigeria is very suspect".[7] It can be argued that this is connected to the politics of regulation, suggesting that social media regulation in Nigeria is being drafted to target the kind of overt dissent that happens on Twitter. We see an example of this in proposed regulation codified in the Internet Falsehood Bill 2019[8] (widely known as the Social Media Bill). In turn, Twitter users have opposed the regulation through the #SayNoToSocialMediaBill hashtag, which I consider in this study. The #SayNoToSocialMediaBill opposition, which started in 2019, became most pronounced during the #EndSARS protests when some political leaders called for the regulation of social media as a way to end the demonstrations.

What all these presuppose is the existence of Twitter activism, and the interpretive lens that I deploy for its conceptualisation is one which underscores the active role that users play in determining what platform to use for activism. I use this lens in order to demonstrate that Twitter, although not a causative agent of social movements in Nigeria, has become a tool of choice for mobilising online and offline activism based on specific factors, which I explore in this study. We see examples of this with protest movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), which gained popularity and is sustained primarily by activists on Twitter.[9] Surprisingly, research into online activism hardly points to the central mediating role that Twitter plays, even though they all use Twitter disproportionately as their object of study (Housley et al., 2018; Li et al., 2020; Poell and Rajagopalan, 2015). The implication, I suggest, is that knowledge regarding the recent evolution and practice of activism in online spaces is limited, particularly in terms of the specific usage of digital platforms. Hence, I call on researchers to be more intentional in stating Twitter's central role as a tool of choice for activism as a way to, in part, historicise the shifts and contours of the usage of new media technologies.

Given all these, the question that this article concerns itself with is: Why has Twitter become the foremost platform for activism in Nigeria? To learn why this is the case, I interviewed a range of stakeholders, including Twitter users. Findings indicate that four reasons explain the reality of Twitter activism in Nigeria. I also draw from interview transcripts to describe the concept of "dragging". Before this, I touch on the evolution of mediated activism and the emergence of Twitter as the foremost community for activism in much of the world.

Context: The Emergence of Twitter-Centred Activism

From its inception, modern mediated forms of communication have been vital for activism and dissent. At the start, there was the printing press used for producing pamphlets and newspapers – publications that were used in the French Revolution of 1789 (Sturm and Amer, 2013). Print publications were also crucial to the Women's Suffrage Movement of the 19th and 20th centuries (Cancian and Ross, 1981), and by nationalists in colonial Africa seeking self-governance (Olayiwola, 1991). At the time of the civil rights movement in the US, electronic broadcasting had been introduced. Those who led the movement sought to attract media (and public) attention through speeches (think of the "I have a dream" speech) and demonstrations. Moments like these served as "telegenic confrontations…brought into American living rooms by the seductive new medium of television" (Hall, 2005: 1236). Electronic broadcasting was equally important in the opposition to the Vietnam War (Mandelbaum, 1982) and in the Tiananmen Square uprising (Calhoun, 1989).

With their introduction, new media technologies such as the internet and social media have also been co-opted by activists and users for activist-oriented conversations. Castells (2015) explores this in their concept of networked social movements, where they draw from the grounded theory of power to show that social media allows social actors, especially activists, to exercise counterpower in new ways. Counterpower, in this sense, is wielded when "citizens of the Information Age" (Castells, 2015: 9) form digital networks and use autonomous communication to shape the construction of meaning and oppose the establishment. We see examples of this exercise of counterpower with movements like Occupy Wall Street and #MeToo (Corsi et al., 2019; DeLuca et al., 2012). The Occupy movement itself became a major instance of the internationalisation of protest. For instance, there were several Occupy campaigns in other places inspired by the US movement. One was the 2012 Occupy Nigeria campaign against the removal of fuel subsidy, becoming perhaps the first time that social media was used for nationwide protests in the country. Uwalaka and Watkins (2018), for example, show that platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Nairaland were avidly used for Occupy Nigeria. Another social media moment was the 2014 #BringBackOurGirls campaign, calling for action to release 276 schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram (Chiluwa and Ifukor, 2015). To cap it off, there was the Arab Spring uprising, of which much has been

said, including the acknowledgement of the role social media played in facilitating, even if it did not engender it (Hussain and Howard, 2012).

My point in all these is to first establish the fact that just like any other media innovation, social media has found its usefulness for activism. Even if social media may not be as emancipatory as techno-optimists think, its role as a tool of power and "means of mobilisation" for social movements is hardly in doubt (Gerbaudo, 2012: 9). Second, and more importantly, within this construct, it has become increasingly evident that out of all social media platforms, Twitter has emerged as the principal social media forum for activism. This has been demonstrated by Haßler et al. (2021), whose research into the Friday For Futures movement shows that although offline protests are still relevant for social movement organisations, the vital role that Twitter plays is evident. This is likely because Twitter is particularly useful in helping people advocate and "feel part of a movement" (Amnesty International, 2018). Theocharis et al. (2015: 203), who analyse Twitter discourse on protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and *Indignados*, also observe that "Twitter has been singled out for its capacity to help activists manage the complexities of mass protest organisation and coordination more effectively". Related here is research into hashtag activism (Ofori-Parku and Moscato, 2018; Haßler et al., 2021), where Bruns and Burgess (2015) refer to the particular use of Twitter, describing the Twitter hashtag as the "killer app" that facilitates the (re)formation of publics around which people congregate. Furthermore, Jenzen et al. (2021: 433) in their study of the 2013 Gezi Park protest in Turkey conclude that for people, Twitter has become *the* "digital public square", given that "Twitter has emerged as a signifier of contemporary protest" and that "Twitter was variably imagined as the extended public space for protest expression".

It is based on this that I argue that activists have appropriated Twitter as the foremost platform for activism and dissent, more so in Nigeria. This speaks to the existence of what I call the Nigerian Twittersphere – a fluid community of users who assemble around Twitter hashtags to freely and uniquely express their opinions in ways that are nationalistic, political, and combative. One way to explain this is the particular way in which Nigerians invoke Twitter NG, a place for Twitter wars where you "don't mess with Nigerians".[10] Broadly speaking, it is in this way that macro and loose publics are constructed on Twitter, with references to identity signifiers like *Nigerian Twitter*, *Ghanaian Twitter*, *American Twitter,* or *Black Twitter*. The significance of Twitter, therefore, lies in the fact that parallels do not exist with other social media platforms – there is no "Facebook NG" or "WhatsApp NG" for instance, at least not in the sense that Twitter NG has been deployed, especially for activism as seen during #EndSARS.[11] It is this that underpins my articulation of Twitter as the most recognised digital space where Nigerians assemble to perform activism, and this article demonstrates why this is so.

Method

Data Collection

The present study is part of my wider research into social media regulation in Nigeria and its relation to Twitter activism. Semi-structured interviews served as the means of data collection. Altogether, there were 15 interviewees, and they included policy experts, digital rights activists, online media practitioners, and Twitter users who engaged with the #SayNoToSocialMediaBill tag. In the period with which I was concerned (November 2019 to December 2020), the #SayNoToSocialMediaBill tag became the most prominent hashtag used to oppose the move to regulate social media usage in Nigeria. The hashtag also coincided with the October 2020 #EndSARS campaign against police brutality. #EndSARS is relevant here because, in November 2020, it led to the resurgence of the Twitter campaign against social media regulation after some political leaders in the country called for social media usage to be regulated given what they saw as the chaos that was the #EndSARS movement.[12] Hence, the interview responses were substantially influenced by #EndSARS.

My goal was to contact the most frequent people who tweeted using the #SayNoToSocialMediaBill tag to understand why Twitter was their platform of choice. Using Twitter Archive Google Sheets (TAGS), I collected 232,962 tweets posted during the period along with their user data. From this, I narrowed the total number of users to just over 12,000 after removing retweets and duplicates using Python 3. To further narrow this number, I settled on users who had posted 30 tweets or more – this was an arbitrary number. I was left with 48 users and potential interviewees, who had posted tweets ranging in number from 30 to 372. Out of this number, I identified 29 users whose posts centred on the topic: social media regulation. This was apparently because some users took advantage of the trending hashtag to post on other issues such as religion, motivation, and random self-promotion. I contacted the 29 users through Twitter DMs or emails if they were listed in the bios. Overall, seven users who engaged with the #SayNoToSocialMediaBill tag accepted my invitation.

The remaining eight interviewees comprised well-known activists and policy experts in areas ranging from public policy reforms to digital media literacy. Others were contacted using a loose snowballing technique. The interview questions began with a general note on the participants' observation of the way that Twitter is used for activism in Nigeria compared to other social media platforms. Questions then delved into why Twitter has become central to activism and what makes it unique in the Nigerian context. The interviews took place online in two tranches: first between January and March 2021, and second in October 2021. They each lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. It was agreed beforehand that the interviews would be confidential, with the transcripts securely stored while the analysis process lasted.

Data Analysis

I analysed the data using a thematic analysis framework. Essentially, my objective was to highlight common patterns in the interviews and to organise them into codes, initial themes, and fully-developed themes using an open-ended approach. In doing this, I drew from Braun and Clarkes' (2021) reflexive thematic analysis. The reflexive approach to thematic analysis is "open and organic" where theme development follows an interactive process (Braun and Clarke, 2021: 334). My approach, therefore, was to search out and collate themes manually using an inductive, semantic, and iterative framework. There were four rounds that I went through. In the first round, I read the transcripts and coded them, highlighting keywords, phrases, and passages using basic desktop applications. Next, I compiled these codes into seven initial themes. In the third round, I revised the themes, merging some and strengthening others after reverting to the transcripts. And at the fourth round, I held discussions with academic colleagues to refine my ideas and make adjustments where necessary. In the end, I settled on four themes.

This process aligns with the fluid six-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis: data familiarisation, systematic data coding, generating initial themes, developing themes, refining themes, and writing the report (Braun, Clarke and Rance, 2015). Hence, my analysis was based on a process that was more about interpretation born out of data immersion and reflection. The following section details the themes that I found.

Results

The findings overall demonstrate the importance that activists attach to Twitter as a tool of opposition and the factors that account for this. Based on analysis of the data, I organise the findings into four themes. These are (1) Twitter as a platform for activism, justice, and dragging, (2) functional uses, (3) generational gap, and (4) Twitter as a leveller.

Twitter – A Platform for Activism, Justice, and "Dragging"

The most prominent theme from the interviews that explains why Twitter is central to activism in Nigeria is the notion that users have attached ideas of intensified political exchanges to the platform. All the interviewees referred to this, making the point that Nigerians tend to use Twitter for a different reason than they do other social media platforms – one that is geared towards the posting of political, activist, and agitative content. Interviewees noted that they use Twitter to be confrontational and aggressive, describing it as their preferred platform to identify trending political issues, grievances, and campaigns. One interviewee described their approach:

> If I am opening my Twitter app now, I am not opening Twitter with the hope of expecting peace. Once you open Twitter, your mind is already open that you can see anything. With that mindset – anything could be that a little girl was raped and because you have an open mind to see anything, you quickly pick on that matter (Participant 12).

The above presupposes that Twitter users come to the platform with a certain psychological resolution; one which alerts them to engage actively with social issues such as a rape case. There is then a sense that "You don't get to decide; the conversations come from anywhere [on Twitter]. And that information is always so shocking, you will have to react" (Participant 10), leading to the description of Twitter as "an activist platform" (Participant 13) and a "war zone" (Participant 3). Tied to the impulse to engage in this manner is the belief that "a lot of Nigerians have gotten justice from Twitter" (Participant 12). Here, "justice" is used loosely to refer to a sense of reprieve that users get when they report wrongdoings, for example, an incidence of crime or extortion on Twitter. The underlying suggestion is that this loose sense of justice – the willingness to right a wrong – conditions the expectations that users have when they visit Twitter. The platform is then a site where social media users expect to find conversations on happenings that are meant to shock people's senses and subsequently lead to demands for redress and change, or justice. #EndSARS provides a typical example since it was ignited after the video of an extrajudicial killing was posted on Twitter.[13] From this perspective, the #EndSARS movement can be seen originally as a demand for (retributive) justice for all those who had fallen victim to police brutality – a call for justice on Twitter that snowballed into a major activist campaign.

What is even more noteworthy is the notion that social media users usually expect to find calls for justice or activism specifically on Twitter. This suggests that agitative and activist content is far more likely to be posted on Twitter; thus, creating a cyclical pattern where Twitter's central role in activism is further entrenched. Take #EndSARS for instance. One can assume that those who posted the video would have wanted rapid agitative responses to the post, aiming for it to go viral. Thus, having a sense of the expectations that social media users in Nigeria bring to Twitter would likely have settled the question of *where* to post the video. Twitter users, in turn, would not have found the video to be peculiar given their expectations about Twitter contents, prompting them to *engage*[14] with the tweet. Twitter is then described as a gathering for "conversations that wake you up" and "information meant to trigger" (Participant 10), as a way to perform activism aimed at achieving perceived justice.

Dragging

Activism and justice, in their excessive form, also manifest in what is known as "dragging" – an intense Twitter conversation aimed at denigrating, attacking, or criticising specific persons for their actions or comments deemed by users to be deplorable, and for which accountability is needed. The interviewees referred to it in different ways including "dragging" (Participant 12), "mob" (Participant 6), "war zone" (Participant 3), a way to "harass one another" (Participant 1), a "brutal place" (Participant 5), and a site where Nigerians "abuse" (Participant 8) or "insult" specific persons (Participant 9). I settled on the description given by Participant 12 because it most clearly captures the characterisations that other interviewees provided and because of its wide usage in the Nigerian

Twittersphere. It is unclear how the term came about, but parallels can be drawn to the way a defendant is "dragged" to court by the plaintiff or the manner that someone is "dragged" through the mud. This reinforces the view of Twitter as a site for dispensing justice, where Twitter users simultaneously wear the garb of judge, jury, and executioner. Objects of dragging can be anyone, but they tend to be high-profile figures such as public office holders and celebrities. What counts is their involvement in perceived wrongdoing that Twitter users feel they should be held accountable for. In this regard, Participant 15 described a situation where a sitting Senator was effectively dragged on Twitter, saying:

> Since my coming on Twitter, I have seen drastic action taken simply because a group of people, in thousands, usually complain about a particular thing. Take, for instance, the case of the Senator who…slapped a lady. The whole fuss that was around that incident – that guy almost lost his job to an extent he went back to apologise. In normal circumstances in Nigeria here, that is very impossible for that Senator to go back and say he is apologising. It was because of the pressure around that situation – he had no choice because he knew he was going to lose his job.

More often than not, dragging is spontaneous and starts with a tweet, not necessarily amplified by a highly followed account, accusing someone of transgressing values commonly held by Twitter users; the objective being to get the perceived transgressor to acknowledge their wrong and repair the damage or suffer some punishment. Dragging can last for a few hours or days and it can be one-off or intermittent, depending on how long the issue remains of interest. Regardless, it is almost always the case that the name of the person being dragged will feature on the Twitter trend table. I found nothing in the literature on dragging, but connections can be made to studies on online shaming and networked harassment (Laidlaw, 2017; Marwick, 2021; Shenton, 2020; Thompson and Cover, 2021).

When targets of dragging are public figures, it becomes a case of demanding accountability and expressing overt dissent, with the belief that "dragging…has helped to change things" (Participant 12) as seen in the Senator example above. Participant 12 went on to add that "policymakers are also very conscious of what goes on on Twitter…. They also are human beings and they've got families", the suggestion being that these policymakers would not want their family names to be dragged. Some prominent names that have been implicated include Desmond Elliot, former Nollywood actor and lawmaker in the Lagos State House of Assembly, who has been repeatedly dragged on Twitter for, among other things, his pejorative referral to social media users as children.[15] Other politicians such as Lai Mohammed and even President Buhari have been the objects of dragging. In this sense, dragging is seen as criticism and becomes a form of online shaming that is humbling, perceived by users as a justified act aimed at knocking someone down a peg because of their social transgression (Laidlaw, 2017). Those involved are then able to rationalise their act of dragging, deploying what Marwick (2021) calls morally motivated networked harassment. For instance, Participant 4 said: "The good thing is that you can't just say something silly and stupid and think you can get away with it" – the impression being that other users will drag you on Twitter in an attempt to police social behaviour.

Despite this moral justification, at intervals, one will find those whose intention is to engage in acrimonious exchanges. Hence, the interviewees described Twitter as a "brutal place [where] people will come after you. There is a negative side of it where people attack you" (Participant 5). This is related to the trolling that happens on social media broadly. People on Twitter were also seen as "a mob", making the platform "a bit like a reality show where people are just looking for the next scandal, the next person to abuse" (Participant 6). These users typically hurl insults at or wish ill to the person being dragged, and they can also dox their victim, asking Twitter users to *bless* (i.e., bombard) them with *greetings*. Instances include the release of phone numbers of public officials during the #EndSARS campaign on Twitter.[16] Thompson and Cover (2021) describe this as digital hostility. Laidlaw (2017) also presents this as the other side of online shaming – humiliation representing an affront to dignity.

The concept of dragging can then be seen in the broader sense of Twitter's role in facilitating confrontational exchanges, for good or evil. It is under this overarching conceptualisation that dragging is understood as a social practice that makes Twitter unique in the way people use it to criticise and police social and political transgressors. Hence, we see that there is almost no record of dragging being performed on other social media platforms in Nigeria, such that reference to dragging is usually interpreted by default to mean dragging *on Twitter*.

Functional Uses

When referring to the centrality of Twitter in its own right, the interviewees pointed to the role it plays in facilitating activism, dissent, and dragging. When referring to Twitter's centrality in comparison with other social media platforms, the interviewees (13 of them) drew attention to the techno-social functions it provides. The central role that Twitter plays in Nigerian activism is then tied to its architecture and the realisation of this by activists and users who see Twitter as useful for the activist discourses they engage in. Facebook, for instance, is seen as a platform of nostalgia and informal interactions where people "catch up with family and friends", a platform more suited to the older generation for whom nostalgia is more of present reality (Participant 9). This interviewee also saw LinkedIn as a professional/employment platform, making it an unlikely site for activist discourses. Instagram, on the other hand, is described as a "show-off platform" for the "glitz and glamour" where conversations do not become heated (Participant 11).

> If I go on Facebook, what I will see is, 'Thank God for five years of marriage'. But if I come on Twitter and I just scroll a little, I see something about one teacher in one school telling the girls they can't wear short skirts (Participant 10).

Usually, it is the same set of people who use Facebook to mark anniversaries that also use LinkedIn for promotion and Twitter for activism. What this presupposes is that social media users choose different platforms depending on the kind of information they want to send out, as Bossetta (2018) illustrates. This aligns with Boczkowski et al.'s (2018) study on social media repertories, where they observe that people indeed use each platform differently. The understanding from the interviews, therefore, is that it is the same person who uses Twitter for activist discourse who also uses Facebook for familial interactions. According to the interviewees, the major reason why users view Twitter as an activist tool is because of its platform design.

In essence, the interviewees described Twitter as a platform that facilitates the viral spread of information. They saw it as "the most engaging social media network" (Participant 13), particularly for "real-time intellectual engagements and feedback" (Participant 14). Indeed, one of Twitter's appeals is that it encourages public conversations with strangers in real-time (Amnesty International, 2018). Interviewees also noted that Twitter promotes activist discourses in Nigeria because its platform design enables users to see not just what their followers post, but also what appears on a hashtag. O'Reilly (2009) describes this as the "asymmetric follow" system which makes it possible for tweets to potentially reach millions of people including those that are not on the sender's follower list. Twitter is then seen as being "more connected" than other social media platforms in a non-personal way since "you don't have to know the person [you are interacting with]; it will appear on your timeline" (Participant 10).

Interviewees also observed that Twitter only allows 280 characters per tweet, noting that this enables fast-paced interactions. Since it is short, "people have to make their answers concise and to the point, unlike on Facebook where there is a long conversation" (Participant 5). Participant 13 further said: "Twitter helps to make your conversation very sharp, crispy, and straight to the point". The use of short texts then means posts can be "pushed out" (Participant 5) quickly to facilitate discourses of activism and resistance, accounting for Twitter's usefulness in this sense.

Generational Gap

In addition to Twitter's design and functional usage, five participants noted that the choice of Twitter for activist discourses in Nigeria can be explained in demographic terms. They described Twitter as a platform that has been adopted overwhelmingly by young people who are said to still have the idealism and passion required to challenge the political establishment. One interviewee saw youths as the "impatient generation" for whom "there is a wellspring for sufficient anger" (Participant 7). The interviewees further shared the understanding that different platforms serve different generations, with Twitter being the platform for young Nigerians today. As one interviewee noted, Blackberry Messenger was the platform used to organise, coordinate, and sustain the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests. "This generation", they said, "is using Twitter [instead] and they are much angrier. This generation's anger is being vented on Twitter" (Participant 9). One crucial thing to acknowledge here is the fact that social movements do not necessarily reside in digital platforms, but in the creative practices of activists who shape the usage of new media technologies in achieving their cause (see Srinivasan & Fish, 2017). Hence, the suggestion is that the usefulness of Blackberry Messenger for activism now finds expression on Twitter, pointing to the importance of historicising activist practices in relation to the use of digital platforms.

Young people are also said to have "less baggage" in terms of caring responsibilities, and they are described as people who are "not jaded by life" and feel they can get things done right away (Participant 5). Consequently, Twitter's centrality to activism was seen as:

> more of the age group of the people who are on this social media, rather than the social media itself. Most of the youths have nothing to lose in a way, and that is why they were able to carry out the #EndSARS protest…. For them, Twitter is more accessible. It is what they use (Participant 5).

This view was corroborated by another interviewee, a #SayNoToSocialMediaBill hashtag user. They viewed social media platforms in segmented terms where Twitter is used by the youth, while Facebook and WhatsApp are preferred by those in the older generation:

> Twitter is still mostly a platform for young Nigerians. My mother has a Twitter account, but she doesn't use it. She uses WhatsApp all day. So, I think different platforms are more catered to different audiences. WhatsApp is for our parents; Facebook is also for them (Participant 2).

The interviewees held on this view, even though demographic information on age is difficult to infer from Twitter profiles. Regardless, their view is consistent with the literature (Blank, 2017, Poell and Rajagopalan, 2015). For instance, Blank's (2017) submission is that Twitter users constitute the young elites in the US and the UK. They are younger than users of other social media platforms, who are in turn younger than other internet users, who are then younger than the offline population. Viewed from this perspective, Twitter can be seen as the "transmission of [young] elite influence" (Blank, 2017: 13). Participant 13 also described the platform in similar terms, saying, "Twitter is still being seen as elitist".

This is the suggestion that Twitter is preferred by the urban and educated youth. We see this in the #EndSARS example, which indicates the demography of those who tend to use Twitter for activist discourses in Nigeria. Since the protests were youth-led (Lorenz, 2022) and Twitter was the major platform used,[17] it is plausible to suggest that the relationship between Twitter and its usage by young people is relatively strong. This is not to imply that those in the older generation do not engage in activist discourses on Twitter, but that young people tend to form the majority.

Twitter as a Leveller

Four of the interviewees further shared their understanding of Twitter as a leveller – a site where "nobody cares who you are" (Participant 5). This is the realisation that people are willing to address others as equals without regard for age, status, or standing:

> Twitter is like a leveller. No matter who you are, whether president or senator. It provides a level playing field. As long as you bring yourself to the Twitter table, just be ready to play the ball (Participant 4).
>
> They (Twitter users) are very hostile…. And irrespective of your class; they do not care whether it is Trump, Buhari, Wole Soyinka (Participant 3).

Twitter as a leveller is facilitated by the @mention function, where any user can be addressed in a conversation. Twitter mentions can also create visibility and recognition for a particular viewpoint – seen as a demonstration of social capital (Maares et al., 2021; Recuero et al., 2019). A sense of someone's social capital on Twitter can be made using metrics such as follower count, account verification status (the blue tick), and a user's ability to influence conversations. Seen from this perspective, Twitter rarely functions as a leveller; instead, the platform tends to reproduce unequal social relations. For instance, Maares et al. (2021) show that high-profile journalists on Twitter tend to mention, reply, and retweet only those in their professional networks, rarely interacting with regular users. It might also be said that high-profile users, who usually have large followings, tend to follow far fewer people in return. These are the supposed opinion leaders, whose tweets are far more likely to be of consequence than the "average" tweet – presupposing that Twitter does not reflect equality among users.

We see this in the Nigerian context, where there is little to suggest that a level-playing field exists. For example, in my analysis of the #SayNoToSocialMediaBill corpus, I found that although Twitter users regularly mentioned the names of top politicians, including President Buhari, there was no corresponding response in the form of replies. What is relevant, however, is the sole @mention that happens, reinforcing the view that users can address anyone, including high-profile users, demanding attention and responses from them. It is this access that underpins Twitter as a leveller for people from different social cadres.

Participant 13, for instance, pointed to the fact that they mentioned Ahmad Lawan, Nigeria's Senate President, using the @mention function for weeks until he responded to their campaign on electoral reforms, stating, "he (the Senate President) couldn't resist the pressure". He added that Twitter makes it easy to "connect with anybody" including "most global leaders". From this standpoint, Twitter activism makes it possible for users to address political leaders directly and demand action without fear of social sanctions related to deference. This is significant in a relatively high-power distance society like Nigeria, where deference to elders and leaders is entrenched. It also means that platforms like Twitter have largely bridged the relational gap between leaders and citizens, making it possible for regular users to "hail" political leaders as a form of interpellation (see Althusser, 2014). It is in this way that Twitter can be seen loosely as a leveller.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has demonstrated why Twitter is the platform of choice for online activism generally and for Twitter activists in particular. Using analysis of interviews, I pointed to the manner that Twitter is favoured as a tool of activism, explaining its use as a medium for activism, justice, and dragging, especially by the youths who tend to see it as a leveller, and the understanding that Twitter's platform design facilitates online activism. The study's limitations arise from the fact that it does not refer to social media analysis to quantitatively compare platform outputs as a way of determining Twitter's dominance. Despite this, I drew from secondary material and case studies such as #EndSARS to establish the notion of Twitter's central usefulness for activism in Nigeria. The

interviewees further buttressed this notion; on this basis, I qualitatively analysed their responses regarding why this is so.

To conclude, I point to some reflections. First is that my use of the Nigerian Twittersphere should be seen in light of the agency that users deploy in their online engagement and not a suggestion that Twitter accounts for online activism in a techno-deterministic sense. Consequently, what is important is the value that activists attach to the platform as a tool for the expression of counterpower (Castells, 2015), such that the circulation of activist discourses is strongest within Twitter, even though conversations on social movements also take place across other digital platforms. There are, in essence, "multiple assemblages" (Srinivasan & Fish, 2017: 102) of which Twitter occupies a prominent position as far as heightened political exchanges and activism are concerned. Equally relevant is the fact that social media networks function according to rules set by platform executives, who are mostly interested in profit-making (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). We see this currently at Twitter, given the chaotic policy shifts of Elon Musk, its new owner.[18] What remains to be seen is whether and how Musk's idiosyncrasies will affect the way that the platform is used for activism and dissent.

Second is the concept of dragging and how it is deployed by Nigerian Twitter users. During the #EndSARS movement, for instance, some celebrities were dragged on Twitter for promoting their work while the protests were on.[19] Hence, dragging is similar to the way that pressure or shaming is used generally on social media against individuals or organisations. What is significant about dragging in the Nigerian sense, however, is that it tends to be carried out only on Twitter. This is because of the way that dragging is understood and performed as a cultural exercise, where, as noted above, Twitter users tend to associate certain (aggressive) behaviours with the platform and expect to find provocative contents there. Dragging also goes beyond online shaming and harassment, serving sometimes as a tool of activism. Also related is the functional usage of Twitter as opposed to other social media platforms. This was a major theme that the interviewees highlighted as they drew connections between Twitter's affordances and the view of the platform as a leveller. All these underscore why activists, particularly young activists, perceive Twitter as pivotal.

Third is that Twitter's usage in the manner described by the interviewees can be tied to the growing move to regulate all social media platforms and users in Nigeria. For instance, there is the Internet Falsehood Bill which targets all forms of online communication. Therefore, the likelihood is that regulation can become an instrument to tame the activism that finds expression on Twitter. The Twitter ban gives credence to this suggestion. It came because Twitter deleted President Buhari's tweet, further suspending his account for 12 hours. Nonetheless, the same post was also shared on Facebook by the President's account and was subsequently deleted by Facebook. Yet, nothing was said about Facebook's deletion. The government simply pressed ahead with a ban targeted solely at Twitter, because of what can be interpreted as the outsized and principal role that Twitter plays in activist discourses. In other words, the Nigerian government recognised the salience of Twitter activism and saw the ban as a way to quell it, even if temporarily. In reality, this was counter-productive, as Twitter users circumvented the ban and continued using the platform for activism. As an example, the #EndSARS tag appeared on the Nigerian Twitter trend table on many occasions during the ban. This only goes to reinforce the use of Twitter as the foremost platform for activism, since users stayed with the platform and did not move elsewhere as was seen in the migration from Blackberry Messenger.

Finally, this article points to the need for researchers to recognise the importance of Twitter activism, something which is rarely done. There is an acknowledgement, for instance, that the BLM movement began on Twitter, but this is usually credited to the role played by social media generally (Housley et al., 2018). We find a similar trend in research into online feminist campaigns, where Horeck (2014: 1106) refers to the "radical potential of digital media" and social media more broadly when the campaign used in the study was based solely on activism on Twitter. Likewise, Li et al. (2020) use social media activism as a general frame of reference, even though the social movements

they consider are overwhelmingly Twitter-based. What we see therefore is a cautiousness among researchers in recognising the principal usage of Twitter as a tool for activism. However, I argue for the need to refer to specific platforms and the particular socio-technical features they possess, rather than generalising to social media. I find support for my argument in Bossetta (2018) who criticises scholars for their "penchant for treating social media as a single genre" (p. 472), noting instead that platform architecture shapes how political messages are posted on different social media platforms. Consequently, I call on researchers and others to use Twitter activism (or hashtag activism), as opposed to the more general "cyber activism" or "digital activism" when dealing with the (overwhelming) use of Twitter for activism.

A potential argument against my position could be that researchers disproportionately use Twitter, in comparison with other social media platforms, because Twitter data is far easier to access and analyse (Blank, 2017). It could then follow that this ease, and not the usage of Twitter, is what accounts for the overwhelming focus on Twitter campaigns and hashtags in the literature. This is a plausible explanation, but one that needs some revision, particularly in the Nigerian case. Take the #EndSARS movement for instance. Twitter's central role in the movement has been established previously in its description as the platform of choice for young protestors. Also, we see a near 100% increase in Twitter traffic in October 2020 – the month of the movement. Social media usage figures show that Twitter traffic for Nigeria at the start of October put at 22.01%, rose to 39.88% by the end of the month.[20] This was just as traffic for Facebook, which has far more users in Nigeria, fell from 55.13% to 42.89%. Although the data on traffic flow does not specify that increased Twitter usage during the period is tied to #EndSARS, this can be implied when we consider that the #EndSARS tag generated no less than 302 billion Twitter impressions between 1 October and 18 November 2020.[21] I argue that this indicates the important role played by Twitter in the #EndSARS movement. The suggestion, therefore, is that researchers dealing with online activist discourses (as in my case) turn to Twitter, not just because of its ease of use, but also because it is preferred by online activists, who generate the kind of discourse we are interested in. In other words, researchers typically go where the data can be found. In this case, the data can be found on Twitter, which has become the foremost platform for activism in Nigeria.

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