#Hashtags to the Rescue: A Case Study of Nigeria

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ABSTRACT : *This research article investigates the significance of hashtag activism in driving socio-political change, focusing on Nigeria. Despite Nigeria's reputation as having one of the most accessible press systems in Africa, the country's media has faced consistent targeting and censorship by past and present governments. Journalists have been arrested, exiled, and even murdered, highlighting the need for alternative platforms for public expression. Hashtag activism has emerged as a powerful tool for Nigerian youths to voice their concerns, hold the government accountable, and mobilise for collective action. This research examines the impact and effectiveness of hashtag activism in Nigeria, highlighting its potential to elicit much-needed change from the government. Participants critically reflect on hashtag activism's efficacy in enhancing marginalised voices' visibility, fostering awareness about pertinent issues, and galvanising concerted efforts towards social change. These observations underscore the need for a well-rounded strategy integrating online and offline techniques to facilitate enduring transformation. The use of hashtag activism, as elucidated by participants' viewpoints, functions as both a mechanism and a first step towards substantial social change in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: hashtag activism, social change, Nigeria, youth activism, social media, government responsiveness.

INTRODUCTION

From #BlacklivesMatter to #OccupyNigeria, #BringBackourGirls to the #EndSars campaign, social media has played a significant role in creating awareness and sensitising people to bring about a substantial socio-political change across the entire universe (Uzuegbunam & Omenugha, 2018). Cheng et al. (2023) believe that social media and hashtag activism have become an effective tool for advocacy that helps garner the public's support for a cause of action. Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and TikTok are popular social media platforms that have become integral parts of people's everyday lives because they provide opportunities for various contacts and activities.

Society is also aware of the social media platform as a potent tool because it has changed how people participate in campaigns, mobilisation and advocacy (Ugwuoke & Erubami, 2021).

Today, people can participate in a campaign and sign petitions by email, WhatsApp, and other social media platforms. One can engage and attract huge followership through social media without knowing them. Many organisations use social media platforms to create awareness, market their businesses or drive sales, influence policymakers, and mobilise supporters (Kamruzzaman, 2022). (Nenoff, 2020) argue that hashtag activism cannot be replaced; it is now a tool to showcase the various samples of injustice in the country, although there may be other ways. This article will project the strategic importance of Hashtag activism as a germane instrument of social change. It will also look at some theories around this form of activism. This theme is essential to society's future as it shows the dynamics of social change in real time. This article aims to provide a clear understanding of social activism by defining its concepts and theories. It focuses explicitly on hashtag activism in Nigeria and discusses its associated challenges. The article concludes with actionable recommendations, including the need for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hashtag activism, often known as "*digital activism*," is a modern manifestation of political involvement that utilises social media platforms to generate awareness, rally support, and instigate transformative action (Dobrin, 2020). It has been argued by (Klassen et al., 2021) that hashtags on social media sites like Twitter allow for the effective collection and distribution of information, hence creating virtual communities of activists.This kind of activism has been more prominent in the era of digital technology, enabling individuals and collectives to surpass limitations imposed by geography and effectively convey their concerns to a worldwide audience.

The significance of social media in modern-day activism should be considered. According to Castells (2012), digital communication networks have become crucial in social movements, serving as indispensable instruments for rapidly distributing information, facilitating organisation, and promoting mobilisation (Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2013). Hashtags have a crucial role in mobilising activists by allowing the organisation of collective action (Etter & Albu, 2021).

Prominent instances of hashtag activism on a global scale include the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, which arose as a reaction to instances of law enforcement brutality against persons of Black ethnicity inside the United States (Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018), and the #MeToo movement, which shed attention on matters about sexual harassment and assault (Li et al., 2021). These many campaigns have shown the efficacy of hashtag activism in reconfiguring public discourse and compelling institutions to confront fundamental challenges.

The media landscape in Nigeria
The media landscape in Nigeria refers to the overall structure, composition, and dynamics of the media industry inside the country. Nigeria is characterised by a media landscape that is both diversified and active (Onyenankeya & Salawu, 2020). The press system of this region has

been acknowledged for its historical significance and is often described as one of the most easily accessible on the African continent (Aondover et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the use of this liberty has encountered several obstacles. Nigerian journalists have encountered persistent challenges, such as governmental censorship, physical assault, and acts of intimidation (Barrios & Miller, 2021). The above-mentioned problems highlight the need for alternative public discourse and mobilisation channels.

The conceptual framework

The conceptual framework is the theoretical structure that provides a foundation for understanding and analysing a particular phenomenon or problem (Driver & Erickson, 1983). The theoretical foundation of this research is derived from social movement theory and digital activism theory. Social movement theory offers valuable perspectives on collective action mechanisms (Gahan & Pekarek, 2013), whereas digital activism theory investigates digital technology's influence on modern activism's development (Kaun & Uldam, 2018). Comprehending hashtag activism in Nigeria requires a thorough awareness of crucial topics such as social media mobilisation and the digital divide.

The Hashtag activism in Nigeria.

Scholarly studies of hashtag activism in Nigeria have shed light on the power of social media to shape public opinion and affect electoral results (Apuke & Tunca, 2018; Campaign, 2018). For instance, Apuke & Tunca, (2018) delved into examining the influence exerted by hashtag activism on political involvement and government accountability. Nonetheless, the intricacies of hashtag activism within the Nigerian environment need to be more comprehended, particularly concerning the #EndSars campaign.

The #EndSars campaign, which garnered global recognition in October 2020, arose as a reaction to instances of law enforcement misconduct in Nigeria, specifically about the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) activities (Adegbilero-Iwari et al., 2021). The aforementioned social movement, spearheaded by Nigerian young adults, is an intriguing subject for analysing the efficacy and obstacles of hashtag activism within the Nigerian milieu. The primary focus of this research is the examination of online mobilisation and its effects on Nigerian society and politics, providing significant insights into its dynamics.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative methodology to investigate the impact of hashtag activism on political and social change in Nigeria. Qualitative research allows for exploring the subjective experiences, motivations, and perspectives of individuals involved in hashtag activism (Carr, 1994). This approach was chosen to capture the nuanced and contextual nature of the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection: The data collection process consisted of two main components: primary data collection and secondary data collection.

Primary Data Collection: Activists, social media influencers, journalists, and others actively engaged in hashtag activism campaigns in Nigeria were interviewed in semi-structured primary research interviews.

Purposeful sampling was used to choose the participants to get a wide range of opinions and experiences (Etikan, 2016). The interviews were conducted in person or through online platforms, ensuring geographically dispersed participants were included. The interview questions focused on motivations for participating in hashtag activism, perceived impact, challenges faced, and recommendations for improvement.

In addition to individual interviews, members of activist organisations and online communities using hashtags were invited to participate in focus groups. These discussions provided an opportunity to explore collective experiences, strategies, and the dynamics of online mobilisation.

Secondary Data Collection: Secondary data sources complement the primary data and provide a broader context (Clark, 2013). This included academic articles, reports, news articles, social media posts, and online discussions on hashtag activism in Nigeria. The data collected from these sources helped us understand historical contexts, specific events, and the overall landscape of hashtag activism in the country.

Data Analysis: The data analysis process involved several steps:

i. **Transcription and Data Organisation:** Interviews and focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim, preserving participants' original words and expressions. The transcripts and other collected textual data were organised and stored in a secure digital database, maintaining participant confidentiality.

ii. **Coding and Categorisation:** A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify the data's recurring patterns, themes, and categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The initial coding process involved open coding, where the researchers read and coded the data line by line, assigning descriptive labels to each relevant segment. Together, these topics and themes capture the essential elements of #activism in Nigeria.

iii. **Data Interpretation:** The categorised data was analysed to identify connections, relationships, and overarching narratives. Comparing various case studies, looking at the similarities and differences in participant responses, and using preexisting theoretical frameworks all helped to make interpretations.

iv. **Validation:** Cross-referencing the viewpoints obtained from various data sources enabled triangulation, improving the findings' validity and reliability (Kaman & Othman, 2016). Peer debriefing and member-checking techniques were also utilised, involving participants and experts in the field to review and validate the findings.

Findings were presented in narrative style and reinforced by participant quotations to provide a complete and accurate depiction of their experiences and perspectives.

Overview of Hashtag Activism in Nigeria

This section comprehensively examines Nigeria's hashtag activism, emphasising respondents' qualitative insights. This research used a combination of in-depth interviews, surveys, and content analysis to explore the lived experiences, viewpoints, and narratives of those actively involved in hashtag activism within the Nigerian setting. Examining the motives, obstacles, and perceived effects reveals a comprehensive understanding of hashtag activism in Nigeria and its contribution to socio-political transformation. This qualitative analysis provides unique insights into the complex dynamics of this phenomenon.

The Nigerian government acquired 60% of the Daily Times in 1975 and ensured that the paper did whatever it wanted; a once influential paper started taking the government's dictates. This influence also got to the federal and state ministries of information. The people eventually lost faith in these media organisations, claiming they had become tools of deceit and propaganda. Ukonu (2005) argues that the government's interest in the Nigerian media goes beyond complete ownership of the management of airwaves; it extends to capital investment. Emphasis has always been placed on the transmitting end and hardly ever on the receiving end of the system". Thus, making broadcasting a government monopoly.

> *"Broadcasting became a major project and a monopoly because it is a viable means of social-cultural and political influence and power"* (Ciboh, 2004)

There was a call for privatisation, and Bakre & Lauwo, (2016) argued that it would empower the rich and further broaden the class margin between the rich and the poor. This effect would make the media a danger in unscrupulous hands. Ciboh (2004) also says that many of the rich with private media are religious fanatics and would use their stations to promote their activities; meanwhile, Nigeria is sitting on a landmine where ethnic and religious uprisings are concerned. It was a relief when the early 2000s birthed social media, and this platform was made famous by Barack Obama's Campaign in 2008. Baumgartner et al. (2010) state that five million people across fifteen social media platforms were reached during Barrack's presidential campaign and eventual election. By November of that year, he had 115,000 followers on Twitter, 50 million views on YouTube, and 25 million followers on Facebook. Nigeria's case was similar. Goodluck Jonathan was the first to use social media for political activities during his 2010 campaign, and today, he is still known as "I had no shoes" or the Facebook President (Adunbi, 2017).

Skilful utilisation of social media indicated that Nigerians are interested in good leadership and ready to take action (Dunu & Uzochukwu, 2015).

> *"Social media has given us a powerful tool to challenge the government-controlled media and voice our concerns,".Thanks to hashtags, we could organise and demand openness and responsibility, says Participant A.*

Ocelík et al. (2021) argue that social media drives social protests geared towards innovation in the country. Nigerian youths have used hashtags to drive change in policies like the #OccupyNigeria, which led to the eventual return of subsidy that year, and #BringBackOurGirls, which led to rescue of the 200 abducted girls. According to Dayil & Vickers (2020), the fundamental goal of the #BringBackourGirls initiative was to lobby for the freedom of the Chibok Girls. Nigerians have used the campaign to challenge norms about women and their perception in Northern Nigeria and have advocated against violence against women and children. This was supported by Participants B and C:

"The popularity of social media and hashtags has given us faith that we can effect genuine change. It has brought our country closer together and shown the world our commitment to standing up for what is right.
Participant B

"In Nigeria, the usage of hashtags has helped bring attention to important topics. Because of this, Participant C has compelled the government to confront corruption, human rights abuses, and inequality.

The campaign led to conversations around gender equality and proper and safe education for the girl child. #EndSars led to the total collapse of that arm of the police, temporarily taking police officers off the roads. Oyesomi et al. (2014) state that these successes are possible because social media is a tool for participatory communication and mobilisation when effectively utilised, a skill the Nigerian Youths have mastered. However, Akpojivi, (2023) argued that every social movement is shaped by different advantages, privileges and disadvantages, which affect inclusion, participation, the perception and presentation of issues. As the investigation of hashtag activism in Nigeria progresses, it becomes evident that this digital phenomenon transcends its role as a platform for online expression. Instead, it emerges as a potent catalyst for societal transformation, fundamentally altering the dynamics of civic participation. The narratives shared by those actively engaged in this movement provide a compelling account of empowerment, mobilisation, and optimism.

While thinking about the possibilities for transformation via hashtag activism, Participant D expressed the sentiment that this type of activism has provided a platform for those who have traditionally been marginalised and silenced to have their voices heard. This attitude encapsulates the fundamental nature of hashtag activism as a medium that empowers those previously marginalised inside the conventional media environment. The ability to challenge the current order and advocate for a more promising future for the country has been facilitated by this development.

Undoubtedly, hashtag activism's influence transcends the digital domain's confines, as Participant E aptly emphasised: "Through the utilisation of hashtags, we have effectively drawn attention to pressing social issues that were previously disregarded." This highlights the

movement's capacity to stimulate discourse, educate the broader population, and instigate policy alterations. This denotes a transition from a state of quiet to one of active advocacy.

Participant F concurs with this viewpoint, emphasising the significance of hashtags in providing a voice for marginalised people and fighting for fair and just treatment. The individual's statement suggests that hashtag activism is an effective means of attaining societal equity and impartiality.

Moreover, Participant G underscores the cohesive influence of hashtags and social media, stating, "The utilisation of hashtags and social media platforms has fostered a heightened sense of interconnectedness among individuals". As mentioned above, the oneness surpasses conventional limitations, enhancing the connections of camaraderie and communal ties. It facilitates the conversion of individual voices into a unified and influential entity that drives transformative outcomes.

The significance of hashtags in facilitating substantial societal transformation is emphasised by Participant H, who asserts that the influence of hashtags in driving social change should not be underestimated. The efficacy of their influence is in their capacity to mobilise individuals and advocate for transformative measures, therefore compelling governments to acknowledge their concerns and inciting profound introspection within society.

Participant A said: "I think about the optimism that hashtag activism has ignited in the presence of societal inequities: "The utilisation of hashtag activism has instilled a sense of hope within us when confronted with instances of injustice." The evidence suggests that Nigeria has the potential to undergo significant improvements via collective efforts and the active pursuit of reform. Remaining silent is no longer a viable course of action.

Participant Z highlights the significant mobilisation potential of hashtags, asserting that the efficacy of hashtags lies in their capability to engage and rally substantial numbers of individuals. They function as a means of expressing discontent, a demand for solutions, and a notification to those in positions of authority - a possible instigator of substantial societal changes.

In summary, the perspectives shared by these participants provide light on the complex and diverse aspects of hashtag activism in Nigeria. The evidence demonstrates that hashtag activism serves as a platform for amplifying the voices of marginalised individuals, inciting transformative action, promoting solidarity, and inspiring optimism. The personal accounts presented below serve as evidence of the profound impact of internet activism on reconfiguring Nigeria's socio-political milieu.

The "*End SARS*" campaign witnessed the most significant intersections of all time in the country; whether structural or political, class, age, colour, and disability were perceived as significant advantages. The disabled and kids were protected by the strong while the rich fed

and catered for the poor. It was a matter of life and death; both the children of the poor and the rich were affected equally. Torous et al. (2021) opined that social media, i.e. the internet, is the new space in the modern world. Hashtags have produced a faster and cheaper means of reaching a large audience with immediate response and instant feedback.

Challenges and Criticisms of Hashtag Activism

The major challenge of Hashtag activism is that it can spiral out of control as quickly as it started. The truth is that not all involved are of the same social class and finesse, as this was witnessed during the #EndSars campaign. Some thugs thought activism was about destroying public property, but the educated soon prevailed over them. At some point, thugs joined in and started shooting to give the government an excuse to forcefully disperse them, claiming the protest was no longer peaceful. This invasion led to the loss of lives. Sebeelo, (2021) states that Hashtag activism only allows those agreeing on specific actions. Those who disagree might be blocked or unfollowed, making it an echo chamber. Some of the respondents had these to say:

> *Participant A: "The danger of being infiltrated by somebody with ulterior motives is one of the difficulties of hashtag activism. It is a shame that some individuals resorted to violence and looting in the name of the #EndSars movement. It tainted the whole thing, and people died needlessly because of it.*

The issue expressed by Participant A about the susceptibility of hashtag activism to manipulation by those with hidden agendas is a reasonable one. The acts of violence and looting within the #EndSars campaign are emphasised since they have had regrettable effects that have eclipsed the movement's initial intentions. This highlights the need to maintain awareness and use strategic messaging inside online movements to preserve focus and mitigate the risk of hijacking.

> *Participant B: "Echo chambers are indeed a concern in hashtag activism."*
> *It is great when people with similar views can get together, but it is even better when they can hear others out and have productive conversations.*
> *We need to work on being more accepting of other perspectives.*

Participant B highlights the issue of echo chambers in the context of hashtag activism when people who share similar perspectives tend to reinforce and amplify one another's opinions. These individuals underscore the significance of fostering varied ideas and facilitating practical discourse. This insight highlights the need for hashtag activists to proactively seek and engage with other perspectives to cultivate a more inclusive language conducive to open dialogue.

> *Participant C: "The unpredictability of hashtag campaigns is a difficulty.*
> *However, not every effort succeeds in its aims. This serves as a sobering reminder that, despite the power of social media to magnify our voices, it*

cannot ensure rapid or permanent change. Strategic and consistent action is required.

Participant C understands the inherent unpredictability of hashtag campaigns and advises against harbouring expectations of rapid or specific success. This underscores the need to implement planned and persistent offline initiatives with hashtag activism to attain enduring transformations. This emphasises that including internet mobilisation in a comprehensive, sustained campaign is essential.

The internet gap is a big issue for hashtag activism, according to Participant D. Not everyone has the means to acquire or master digital literacy abilities, and this fact must be considered. We need to figure out how to reach more people and include them in our efforts.

The analysis highlights the noteworthy contribution made by Participant D, who expresses a substantial worry about the digital divide. This phenomenon could hinder some persons from engaging in hashtag activism due to restricted access to technology or insufficient digital literacy skills. This underscores the need for fostering inclusion and devising innovative approaches to amplify the voices of marginalised people within the realm of online movements.

Participant E: "It is crucial to recognise hashtag activism's limits. It is a helpful tool but hardly a magic bullet for society's ills. We also need offline activism, such as lobbying, direct interaction with decision-makers, and community organising.

The analysis highlights the significance placed by Participant E on acknowledging the constraints associated with hashtag activism. The proponents endorse a comprehensive methodology integrating digital activism with traditional offline tactics, including lobbying and direct interaction with key stakeholders. This approach emphasises the mutually supportive nature of online and offline action in generating substantial societal change.

Participant F: "While hashtag activism has drawbacks, it has also opened up previously unavailable avenues for dialogue and mobilisation." It has helped us find kindred spirits and bring attention to pressing concerns. The difficulties we face are teaching us opportunities to refine our tactics.

The participant quotations shed light on significant elements of hashtag activism, including its function as an initial step towards tangible societal transformation (Participant G), the imperative of safeguarding against manipulation (Participant H), the significance of promoting inclusivity and accessibility (Participant I), and its capacity to enhance awareness and facilitate collective mobilisation (Participant J). The authors emphasise the need to use hashtags strategically and judiciously while acknowledging the difficulties and constraints associated with digital activism. These observations above underscore the ever-changing characteristics

of hashtag activism, necessitating deliberate adjustments and innovative approaches to optimise its efficacy in promoting societal welfare.

However, not all hashtag campaigns are successful; as a matter of fact, there is no way of knowing what will trend or what will not. Irrespective of the point, the fact that one likes, shares or retweets does not mean the campaign will succeed (Guha, 2015). This activism has tactfully left out the older generation or those who do not know how to use the new generation phones and gadgets.

CONCLUSION

The efficient and effective use of Hashtags has made the Nigerian Youths more aware of the power that they wield. According to the United Nations Population Division (2022), Nigeria has over 200 million individuals. A significant segment of this population consists of young individuals who exhibit a heightened awareness of the significance of their voices within the contemporary era, characterised by the prevalence of hashtags.

Youths who can now tweet directly *@nigerianpolice* and get justice almost immediately when wronged, those who can now hold the government accountable, and those who can now influence policies within the country. This article's position was to review the importance of hashtag activism in Nigeria and how it has been utilised to effect social-political change. Social media has revolutionised how people think, interact and even communicate globally. This article thinks that hashtag activism is cogent to social transformation, which is essential to impacts, and it commands and decides what the traditional media presents as crucial to the public. This article conducted a narrative review on hashtag activism and the failures of traditional media that led to its birth in Nigeria. Although the findings are inconclusive, further research could validate or refute the conclusions of this paper.

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