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Information and Misinformation during the #EndSARS Protest in Nigeria: An Assessment of the Role of Social Media

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Abstract
Purpose: Year 2020 witnessed dramatic use of social media in spreading information for mobilizing Nigerian youths for a massive protest against police brutality and financial extortion. Accompanying the #EndSARS protest was misinformation which set people against the Nigerian police. This study explored social media information and misinformation and #EndSARS protest in Nigeria.
Design/methodology/approach: Descriptive survey research design was employed for the study. The study employed the use of close-ended questionnaire to elicit data from 609 social media users across Nigeria.
Findings: It was found that social media were used to listen to news about the protest, to find out the causes of the protest, and to know about the extent of police brutality during the protest. Social media were used to a high extent during the protest.
Originality: This study revealed that social media are not immune to being used for spreading misinformation.

Keywords: Social media, Social media information, Social media misinformation, #EndSARS protest, Special Anti-Robbery Squad, Nigeria

Introduction
In all democratized societies, the protest against unruly behaviour in governance has been a recurrent issue. People who intend to demonstrate their annoyance against nefarious activities within the national administrative system accomplish their aims by mobilizing people that support their intentions. Such lofty aims cannot be achieved without getting the support of the generality of the people. However, the target allies require persuasive and compelling information in order to join the train. Useful at this juncture are social media, being a potent tool of social gathering against unwanted systems in an age of ICT. Social media are the buzz of the moment. People make intensive use of social media platforms for news and information these days (Adepetun, 2020). Among these are Twitter, WeChat, Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Telegram, etc. When an event takes place – whether issue of a pandemic outbreak, social disorder, or banditry - people engage the use of social media (Shaw, 2016). Social media have been powerful instruments for disseminating information in Nigeria, either for growth or otherwise. The #EndSARS protest that

gained the attention of the national and international communities in the year 2020 was massively promoted with maximum deployment of the social media by Nigerians. #EndSARS was a decentralized protest against police cruelty in Nigeria. The social movement agitated for an end to the existence of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) which was categorized as a vicious unit of the Nigerian Police over its record of abuses. The protest started with a spotlight on police cruelty, but later got to some other aspects such as bribery, brutality and human rights violations in the country (George, 2020). Information concerning the causes and the ways the protest was staged was made available to the people majorly through the social media (Uwazuruike, 2020).
In the contemporary era, people are informed and misinformed about issues through the social media. For example, information and misinformation about #BringBackOurGirls and COVID-19 is spread all over the world through the social media. #BringBackOurGirls was a movement formed to agitate for the release of the students of Government Secondary School kidnapped in Chibok in Northeast Nigeria in

2014. Misinformation represents fake or erroneous information circulated to deceive people. Parrot Nigeria (2018) noted that unconfirmed, disingenuous and non-professional pieces of information are found in unimaginable quantity on social media. While this affirmation cannot be refuted, it remains to be known if it represented the situation during the 2020 #EndSARS protest or not. Premised on this ground, it becomes necessary to investigate the rationales for using social media, the extent the social media platforms are used, and the nature of misinformation circulated on social media during the #EndSARS protest.

This article is novel as most of the earlier narratives on #EndSARS protest in Nigeria were centered around the spread of information during the period without considering how misinformation (fake news) about the protest affected the society. Meanwhile, the current utilisation of social media testifies to the fact that social media in Nigeria are not immune to being used to spread both verified and fake information during crisis period. This study therefore intends to explore social media information and misinformation that surrounded the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Protest against unruly activities in governance is not new in global history. The 2020 #EndSARS protest in Nigeria was a clear testimony to how people mobilize to fight against nefarious practices within the national administrative system. The use of the social media as instruments of social mobilization was recorded across the length and breadth of Nigeria as people, especially youths, mobilize against police brutality and financial extortion. Much of the information about the #EndSARS was spread on social media platforms. A number of studies have indicated that social media information can also set people against the government (Conor, 2019; Eze, 2020). The happenings during the #EndSARS protest indicated the same thing in Nigeria. This may not be unconnected to the fact that misinformation was also spread through the social media. Discourses on protests against the unruly use of government power in different

quarters have shown that the social media can be used to spread unreliable, unverified and unconfirmed information. While this claim may be true in certain conditions, it is yet to be known if the same condition obtained during the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. It is against this background that this study assesses the role of social media spreading information and misinformation during the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:
 i. investigate the rationales for using social media during #EndSARS protest;
 ii. find out the extent of using social media during the EndSARS protest; and
 iii. ascertain the kind of misinformation circulated on social media platforms during the #EndSARS protest.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:
 i. What are rationales for using social media during #EndSARS protest?
 ii. What is the extent of using social media during the EndSARS protest?
 iii. What is the kind of misinformation circulated on social media platforms during the #EndSARS protest?

Literature Review
Social Media Information

Social media have over the years been deployed as tools of information dissemination and social transformation. Fasuwon (2019) described social media as the novel information network and information technology for effective communication and interaction among people. According to Obar and Wildman (2015), social media refer to digitally-mediated interactive technologies which aid the formation and circulation of information, views, and various kinds of expressions through online networks.

Social media have radically transformed the manner people communicate and disseminate information in the 21st century (Uwazuruike, 2020). The various interfaces in the social media platforms necessitate easy access to varieties of information, being it pictorial, tabular, written, etc. Social media afford people prospect and opportunity to make their views, experiences, and opinions known, and also get expertise and proficiency (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013). Social media are also used to get through to one's relatives and friends notwithstanding the locations, and have knowledge of the recent events all over the globe (Oghenetaga & Ejedafiru, 2014). Some employ social for entertainment and for satisfying information needs (Heiberger & Harper, 2008).

Social media cover more space than the old media. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, and various others, are quicker and open to faster reply than the traditional media forums such as the print media, television, radio, and telephony, and consequently have become veritable device of information gathering, dissemination, and evaluation (Fasunwon, 2019). The most prominent social media platforms used for digital communication in Nigeria are: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,WhatsApp, Telegram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Youtube, etc (Eke, Obiora & Odoh, 2014; Ezeah, Asogwa & Obiorah, 2013).

Social Media Misinformation
Social media are a double-edged weapon and their power for progress and backwardness dwells in the users (Eke, Obiora & Odoh, 2014). There is no doubt that social media are an instrument of social change in the contemporary era. However, social media are equally used for spreading misinformation (Adepetun, 2020). Misinformation comes in form of fake or erroneous information circulated deliberately to swindle or misdirect people. Most times, people take decisions quite impulsively without appropriate checks and balances which they afterward regret. Misinformation on social media has resulted to widespread apprehension in recent years (Allcott Gentzkow & Yu, 2018). The

explosion of social media and the vast use of smartphones make fake news spread rapidly and easily (Fox, 2018). Social media are now vehicle for transmitting news and thoughts through which people are assembled into violent social activities (Fasunwon, 2019). The menace of social media propaganda and fake news has come to the fore across the globe, causing people to be misled.

The ubiquitous social media scenery has created information network occupied by a dissonance of opinions, true and false information. Most of the information obtained from the social media with no sufficient authentication has led to substantial devastation of lives, properties, and investments belonging to individuals, corporate bodies and government (Chou, Oh & Klein, 2018). Within the context of Nigeria, social media misinformation and fake news is not novel. The BBC emphasised that social media are the instruments for swift spread of rumors in the country (Parrot Nigeria, 2018). Fasunwon (2019) noted that the social media have been employed to disseminate falsehoods for mobilizing citizens against the government. This remark is not far from the submission of CPA (2012) that unrestrained social media postings could be disingenuous, manipulative and premeditated false, particularly when such remain uncontrolled.

Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)
The special anti-robbery squad (SARS) was established in Lagos State in 1992 as a response to the activities of the notorious armed robbers in the state (Malumfashi, 2020). It was a unit in the Nigerian Police which comprised a group of policemen specifically trained and equipped to combat violent crimes. It was established as a faceless police unit to carry out undercover operations against armed robbers (Oloyede & Elega, 2019). Within two decades of its establishment, the unit spread all over the states of the country. The spread of the unit with no appropriate structure led to some of it unruly characteristics.

To an average Nigerian, the word police is synonymous with corruption. SARS had been endlessly speculated to be riddled with corruption, instead of combating corruption

(Adepetun, 2020)**.** The rationale behind the establishment of SARS was found to be defeated as the policemen exploited all the powers within their reach to exploit people and brutalize those that were not complying with their financial extortion (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020). Even though there were numerous outcries by hundreds of Nigerians who had fallen victim of the nefarious activities of the police, the leadership of the Nigerian police did virtually nothing about it. SARS officers acted with impunity; they engage in armed rape, extrajudicial killings and various acts of torture such as the one that occurred in Delta State (George, 2020).

#EndSARS Protest

The #EndSARS campaign began with the publication of a petition by convener, Segun Awosanya (Oloyede & Elega, 2019). #EndSARS started as a demand for the disbandment of SARS, a division of the Nigerian Police Force which had garnered notoriety for its cruelty and human rights abuse. The #EndSARS was a protest against the unfathomable discontentment of Nigerian citizens with the service rendering system in the police service. The movement reverberated with a lot of Nigerians because SARS depicted everything they were dissatisfied with about the state of governance in the country (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020). Investigations reflected that Nigerians report considerably low levels of confidence in the police as a vast proportion of them have been forced to pay a bribe to police (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020).

A post on the social media in October 2020 about the killing of a boy in Delta State by SARS officers triggered general unrestricted indignation (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2020). Nearly instantly, several young Nigerians started sharing their annoyance and their own experiences with SARS on social media. In few days, the #EndSARS hashtag grew to become a group that gave voice to Nigerians who were fed up with the extortion, impunity and brutality of the notorious police unit. Because of the media hype the protests had garnered, the Federal Government of Nigeria quickly made public

announcement of the scrapping of SARS (Omonobi, Agbakwuru, Brisibe & Olawale, 2020). However, the scrapping was inadequate to mollify the protest because similar announcement was made in December 2017 by the Inspector General of Police (IGP) to 'stop and search' operations by SARS as numerous reports of harrying had reached the Nigerian Police. The ban was openly reversed by the IGP in 2018, showing the ineptness of earlier orders (Fasunwon, 2019). This made the public to lose confidence in the Nigerian Police.

The #EndSARS protests attracted worldwide empathy as world leaders like United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres and United States Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo tweeted in favour of the protest (Uwazuruike, 2020). Equally, popular personalities and celebrities such as ex-USA Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, current USA president Joe Biden, Arsenal footballer Mesut Ozil, boxing heavyweight champion Anthony Joshua, and American rapper Kanye West used the hashtag either as a sign of support for the protests or ask for a stop to the government attack on protestors (Larnyoh, 2020; Uwazuruike, 2020). The hashtag #EndSARS happened to be the major trending topic on Twitter in October as a unique emoji was launched for the movement by Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey (Uwazuruike, 2020).

Social Media and #EndSARS Protest

Due to the growth of globalization as well as the use of social media, there has been a new dimension in the mode of conveying grievances. Social Media are now part of the most famous platforms of digital protest and have been pivotal in the success of the #EndSARS protest (Onaleye, 2020). Essentially using Twitter and WhatsApp, young Nigerians rallied and mobilized waves of campaigns to locations in Nigeria with appealing effortless formulas. The protesters shared their locations on Twitter, Telegram and WhatsApp asking for "reinforcements"—an attempt that saw crowds going from tens to hundreds within hours in some places (Kazeem, 2010).

Social media - majorly Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook - were used by celebrities and activists

to rally for support for the '#EndSARS'. Within few days, demonstrators occupied strategic places in Lagos, Abuja, Akure and Ibadan agitating for the scrapping of SARS. Pictures, videos, and audio recordings of some of the brutalities of the SARS officers were posted online (Fasuwon, 2019). Social media were utilised to promote the #EndSARS protest by attracting public attention to police viciousness in Nigeria. The movement was able to generate a digitally networked solidarity for estranged persons which gave them some form of validation (Oloyede & Elega, 2019). The Nigerians who had, at one point or the other, fallen victim of the activities of the SARS operatives were persuaded to relate their experience of cruelty under the hashtag '#EndSARS' on social media platforms majorly Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

Several comments of the angry Nigerians on social media were to end police brutality and total eradication of SARS (Olowolagba, 2019). The videos of the nefarious SARS brutalities were revealed to the vast majority of Nigerians home and abroad via WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram and the Facebook. In a bid to ascertain the extent of vandalization of both government and private facilities in the course of the #EndSARS protest which the Nigeria police believed was used by hooligans to plunder and bring about public disorder in the country, the Inspector General of Police, Mohammed Adamu, claimed that social media were the major weapons used to escalate the protest (The Whistler, 2020). The Federal Government of Nigeria claimed that one factor that made the information on #EndSARS protest difficult to rely on was that the sources of some of the information were not confirmed (CKN News, 2020). Associated with the #EndSARS protest was wanton misinformation which made it difficult to ascertain the authenticity and credibility of information about the protest. That propelled the Federal Government of Nigeria to accuse international media of spreading misinformation about the protests (News Agency of Nigeria, 2020).

Methodology

The study involved the use of descriptive survey research design. All the 609 users of social media of 18 years and above across Nigeria within the phone contact of the researcher formed the population of the study. Total enumeration sampling technique was used for the study. A close-ended self-constructed online questionnaire was prepared and administered to the users of social media across Nigeria via the social media platforms (WhatsApp and Telegram) between November 2020 and January, 2021. The items of the questionnaire were built based on the existing literature reviewed. The Dillman total approach to mailed surveys was employed to ensure that the response rate was high (Dillman, 2000). After two weeks that the initial survey was sent, another survey was sent to those that never responded. As a follow up, reminder messages were sent a week after the second time of sending the survey. Those that never responded to the survey within 2 weeks after receiving the questionnaire were contacted through telephone and social media. The questionnaire, designed using online survey service - www.surveycrest.com, had three parts. Part A was designed to elicit data on rationales for using social media during the #EndSARS protest. Part B was on the extent of using social media platforms during the #EndSARS protest. Part C sought data on the nature of misinformation spread on social media during the #EndSARS protest. The data generated were analysed using statistical mean and were presented in Tables.

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Questionnaire Response Rate
Out of the 609 social media users that got the online questionnaire, 417(68.5%) responded. The respondents, based on their professions, were: health workers 37(8.9%), students 149(35.7%), academia 24(5.8%), artisans 51(12.2%), market women and women 49(11.8%), journalists 9(2.2%), farmers 22(5.3%), and others 76(18.2%).

Results

Research Question One: What are the rationales for using social media during the #EndSARS protest?

Table 1: Rationales for Using Social Media during the #EndSARS Protest

Reason	Mean
To listen to news about the protest	3.57
To find out the causes of the protest	3.44
To know about the extent of police brutality	3.40
To hear people's view about the protest	3.32
To spread up-to-date information about the events that took place during the protest	3.29
To get information about the number of casualties recorded during the protest	3.28
To secure information about the extent of vandalization that happened during the protest	3.27
To know the steps government was taking to stop the protest	3.25
To ascertain the number of arrests made during the protest	3.24
For listening to general announcement from government about the protest	3.21
To confirm the position of political figures about the protest	3.16
To know the view of international community about the protest	3.12
To know the views of people on social networks	2.97
To guide against boredom	2.32
For sharing feeling concerning personal issues	2.12

Source: Field Study, 2021   N=417

Table 1 indicates the rationales for using social media at the period of the #EndSARS protest. The means for reasons such as: to listen to news about the protest (3.57), to find out the causes of the protest (3.44), to know about the extent of police brutality (3.40), to hear people's view about the protest (3.32), and to circulate up-to-date information on the events that took place during the protest (3.29) were high. However, reasons such as: guide against boredom (2.32) and to sharing feeling concerning personal issues (2.12) were low.

Research Question Two: What is the extent of using social media platforms during the #EndSARS protest?

Table 2: Extent of Using Social Media Platforms

Extent of Use of Social Media Platforms	Mean
WhatsApp	3.79
Twitter	3.72
Facebook	3.66
Instagram	3.57
Youtube	3.34
Facebook Messenger	3.19
Blogs	2.95
LinkedIn	2.82
Webinar	2.25
Google+	2.18
Zoom	1.99
Webex	1.82
Others	1.63
Average Mean	2.83
Criterion Mean	2.50

Source: Field Study, 2021   N=417

As shown in Table 2, the average mean (2.83) is higher than the criterion mean (2.50). This means that extent of using social media platforms at the period of the #EndSARS protest was high. The mean reported for WhatsApp (3.79) ranked highest. This was followed by the means of Twitter (3.72), Facebook (3.66) and Instagram (3.57). The means of Webinar (2.25), Google+ (2.18), and Zoom (1.99) were also significant even though they were below the criterion mean (2.50) adopted for the scale.

Research Question Three: What is the nature of misinformation circulated on social media during the #EndSARS protest?

Nature of Misinformation	Mean
False information circulated erroneously with no intention to deceive others	3.41
Inadequate information which never capture the real cause of the protest	3.36
Misrepresented pictures and video	3.30
Reconfigured misinformation (when information is manipulated to suit a purpose)	3.25
Disinformation (when a person choose to feign the truth to mislead people)	3.11
Malinformation (when a person to misinform others by telling the truth in illusory ways)	2.92
Deceptive content (illusive use of information to frame an occurrence)	2.81
Manipulated content (genuine information contrived to deceive people)	2.79
False context (authentic content shared with fake background information)	2.76

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that social media were used for some reasons during the #EndSARS protest. The findings of this study are clear testimony on how people utilise social media during crises as well as pandemonium in the society. Onaleye (2020) claimed that at the commencement of the #EndSARS protest, some Nigerians were left in the dark regarding the remote and immediate causes of the protest. As such, people took conscious effort to investigate the reasons behind the protest (Oloyede and Elega, 2019). The findings that the social media was used to hear people's view and spread up-to-date information about the events that took place during the protest were not far from the earlier occurrences in which social media were engaged (Okoro and Nwafor, 2013). Social media provide avenues for sharing views, knowledge as well as spreading information about issues of concern (Uwazuruike, 2020).

The narration of Nigeria's police abuses through the social media assists in seeing the persistence abuse of government authority against the subjects (George, 2020).

The extent of police brutality was revealed in videos, pictures, and audio recordings that were made available to the whole world (Fasuwon, 2019). By this, Nigerians stood firm against the repudiation of their fundamental humanity.

The study also showed that the extent of using social media platforms during the #EndSARS protest was high. The respondents reported that Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter were adequately used to get and spread current information during the protest. These are not far from Eze (2020) submission that current issues of national and international concerns are easily and speedily disseminated through the social media. Shaw (2016) and Onaleye (2020) also have already reported the extent people use social media for mobilizing and sensitizing people against the policies and actions that are repugnant to the society and social justice.

The social media users in the study claimed that the nature of misinformation circulated on social media platforms during the #EndSARS protest, among others, include: false information circulated erroneously with no intention to deceive others, inadequate information which

never capture the real cause of the protest, misrepresented pictures and video, reconfigured misinformation, and disinformation (when a person choose to feign the truth to mislead people). Meanwhile, in the course of this study, there were no available literature for reference on the nature of misinformation circulated through the social media pertaining to the #EndSARS protest. However, findings regarding social media misinformation during the #EndSARS protest can be likened to earlier findings in similar situations of protest and chaos. The current study found that false information circulated erroneously with no intention to deceive others, and inadequate information which never captured the real cause of the protest were the major types of misinformation about the #EndSARS protest. This justifies the position of Eze (2020), and Jamieson and Albarracin (2020) that several people made use of the social media to promote unconfirmed rumours and peddle fake news. Parrot Nigeria (2018) equally reported the typical flooding of social media with unconfirmed, disingenuous and non-professional information. Allcott, Gentzkow and Yu (2018) warned that misinformation on social media can result to widespread apprehension.

Limitations

Results of this study should be applied with caution as responses from only 417(68.5%) users out of the study population of 609 were used for the study. The 68.5% response may not proportionally express the mind of the remaining 31.5% that never responded to the questionnaire. This limits the extent to which the respondents' views represent the population of interest. As such, the views of the respondents in this study cannot be generalized as representative of the entire social media users in Nigeria. Further and more comprehensive studies that will yield high response rate from the population of interest are still needed. However, these limitations never abate the implications of the findings.

Conclusion

The study is a descriptive research that sought to know the role social media information and misinformation played in #EndSARS protest. The study showed that social media were used during the #EndSARS protest to listen to news about the protest, to find out the causes of the protest, and to know about the extent of police brutality. The extent of using social media in the period of the protest was high. The nature of misinformation reported during the protest were: false information circulated erroneously with no intention to deceive others, inadequate information which never capture the real cause of the protest, misrepresented pictures and video, reconfigured misinformation, disinformation (when a person choose to feign the truth to mislead people), and malinformation (when a person to misinform others by telling the truth in illusory ways). Through the use of the social media, Nigerians are able to protect their civil right against police cruelty and monetary exaction which has become a recurrent issue in the country. More importantly, massive awareness has been created that social media can be progressively employed to change the perpetual abhorrent old order and champion revolution towards better society.

Recommendations

The following are recommended in line with the findings of this study:
1. Social media should be constructively utilised as an instrument of social transformation to protest against obnoxious activities observed to be inimical to human dignity and social justice in the society.
2. Information disseminated through the social media should be fair and have positive impact on the society.
3. Social media should not be engaged for spreading misinformation, disinformation and fake news which can cause societal and global uproar.
4. There must be appropriate checks and balances in the process of disseminating information on social media. Social

media industry should intensify effort to curb fake news, disinformation, and hate speech peddled through the various social media platforms.

5. There must be concerted effort at national and international levels to look into the immediate and remote cause of the #EndSARS protest with a view to putting a permanent stop to it and also ensure that issues that can degenerate to similar occurrence are addressed headlong.

Suggestion for Further Studies

Based on the findings and the recommendation of the study, the following are suggested for further study:

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