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# Social Media, Mass Mobilization, and National Development in Nigeria: Lessons from the #EndSARS Protest

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## Abstract

This study explored the potential of social media for effective mass mobilization and community engagement to attain national development in Nigeria. Premised on the fact that social media have become popular platforms attracting millions of subscribers, the study examined how the opportunities they offer could be harnessed and purposefully deployed to galvanize the citizens to pursue national development causes. This was done against the backdrop of the technological determinism theory that provides the framework for investigating the indispensable role which technology plays in the advancement of a nation's socio-economic development. The secondary research approach was adopted to carry out the study and studied the 2020 #EndSARS protest (SARS refers to Special Anti-Robbery Squad), a youth uprising that aimed to put an end to all forms of police brutality and systemic injustices in the country. This study examined the nature of digital activism that social media facilitated during the protest and how that translated into real-life activism, thereby galvanizing the youth to actively execute the protest. By considering the challenges of the platforms in this regard such as the possibility of being hijacked and negatively deployed in a counterproductive manner, the study concludes that proper mainstreaming of social media into the community engagement and national development struggle would help engage meaningfully with the citizens and mobilize them to attain socio-economic development in the country. Conclusively, the #EndSARS experience demonstrates that social media portends considerable opportunities to engage citizens positively for national development in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** social media; mass mobilization; community engagement; national development; Nigeria; #EndSARS Protest

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## 1. Introduction

Social media have emerged as liberation media in an environment dominated by the elite-oriented media industry where media access and the ability to pay are positively correlated (Uji, 2015). Within this media setting, alternative media platforms have emerged such as social media that give media access to the masses. The enthusiasm that greeted the arrival of social media among the masses, particularly the teeming youth population, confers on them the status

of significant platforms with the ability to stimulate robust socio-economic advancement of citizens. Dauda et al. (2017) refer to the platforms as popular culture, given the popularity that they enjoy particularly among the teeming youth population. According to these authors, in addition to the routine entertainment which the platforms provide, the youth use them as platforms to take a stand on social issues happening around them. The 2020 #EndSARS protest represents one incident where the potential of social media was harnessed to foster a cause among the youth in Nigeria. Previously, Hari (2014) noted the “..use of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter for coordination and mass mobilization” (p. 33) among the youth in the 2012 #OccupyNigeria protests and the impact that the platforms made in this period.

Given their potential, experts are confident that mainstreaming social media for national development could facilitate the process (Ashong, 2021). Research evidence demonstrates their contribution to several spheres of national development such as politics (Okafor & Oko, 2020; Wogu & Egwu, 2020), community development (Abdullahi & Emmanuel, 2020; Nwala et al., 2020; Odoyi et al., 2020), education, economy, health, and social welfare, among other sectors. Odoyi et al. (2020), for instance, established in their study that “a significant majority of respondents in Ahoada East Local Government Area of Rivers State use social media for communicating, mobilizing and organizing grassroots issues like politics, the economy, religious and traditional matters” (p. 203). This finding provides evidence that social media harbors the potential to stimulate national development among citizens in Nigeria.

However, concomitant with their strengths are the numerous threats related to social media carry that may jeopardize the much-desired socio-economic advancement. Research evidence documents their various shortcomings to include their effects on real-life social relationships, safety concerns, and cyber security, as well as the prevalence of fake news, hate, and dangerous speech on their various platforms and their use by ethnic and political zealots to cause rancor and disrupt existing peace. Bearing all this in mind, the research describes social media as a double-edged sword, calling for experts utilizing them for mass mobilization and national development to carefully consider the enormity of these strengths and weaknesses in order to properly mainstream them into the process.

Using the 2020 #EndSARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) protest in Nigeria as a case study, this study examined the opportunities and threats of social media in spearheading the course of mass mobilization in Nigeria toward attaining national development. Discussion in the study centers on how best the opportunities of the platforms could be harnessed and optimized while simultaneously downplaying their threats and weaknesses to facilitate the socio-economic development in Nigeria.

## **2. Conceptual Issues: Social Media, Mass Mobilization, and National Development**

This section gives an overview of the basic concepts upon which discussions in this study are based. These concepts are social media, mass mobilization, and national development.

### **2.1. Social media**

Social media are interactive platforms hosted on the internet that facilitate easy exchange of information and socialization among users. They encompass several platforms that help actualize the essence of this interaction such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, and Telegram, among an endless array of other platforms,

both universal and geo-specific. Nwabueze (2014) defines social media as interactive web-based media that engage key players in a communication channel in defining and determining the message content. Shaw (2016) defines social media as “the means of interactions through web-based technology among people in which they create and exchange information, ideas and opinions in virtual communities and networks” (p. 2). Social media are internet-based media channels that facilitate dialogue or two-way active contributions by both senders and receivers in message development.

According to Obono (2016), social media represent new trends of communication among people who depend on the media for news and information. They are liberal channels of communication that facilitate the process of creating, sharing, and exchanging ideas among a network of people in the digital space. Social media are internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content. They enable individuals, groups, and organizations to create and share content, including videos, photos, images, texts, news, ideas, insight, humor, opinions, and gossip. Likewise, social media facilitate social interactions and enable the development and diffusion of information. Social media are characterized by five key features, namely participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness (Obono, 2016). They are interactive forums that are not bound by one’s location; more precisely, individuals can access information communicated via the various platforms and create and share content as long as they are connected to the internet.

Nwabueze (2014) identified various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Dauda et al. (2017) added MySpace, Pinterest, Tumblr, Foursquare, and WeChat as some of the popular social media platforms with a large user base in Nigeria. Obono (2016) grouped social media into the following categories: collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs and microblogs (e.g., Twitter), content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g., SoundLife). Numerous other geo-specific social media platforms exist and are used in different societies. To illustrate, in Nigeria, social networks such as Palmchat, Imo, 2go, and Meetme are used although they are not as popular as the ones mentioned above (Targema, 2020).

Social media thrives in Nigeria primarily owing to the massive importation of digital technologies that facilitate their usage and high internet penetration (Dauda et al., 2017). Nsude et al. (2021) noted that recent internet penetration statistics rank Nigeria at the top of the list of African countries based on the share of internet traffic. More specifically, internet penetration amounted to 46.6% of the population in 2020 and is projected to reach 62% by 2025, which has boosted the ubiquity of social media in Nigeria, driving their impacts across several dimensions of human endeavor.

## **2.2. Mass mobilization and community engagement**

Mass mobilization refers to the process of galvanizing the people to achieve a given course and fostering their collective consciousness. Sambe (2008) considers mobilization as one of the core functions of the media related to stimulating people’s consciousness in pursuit of a given course. National development is one of the typical issues that require robust and effective mass mobilization to attain. Akindele (2004) noted that political mobilization

“deals with mass emotional motivation, psycho-socio and political spurring of people toward the attainment of corporate and communal goals” (p. 99). Akindele reviewed scholarly definitions which point to the fact that mobilization denotes the process of stimulating people’s consciousness toward attaining certain ends. The Directorate of Social Mobilization (cited in Akindele, 2004) underlines that “to mobilize people is to increase their level of awareness of certain set objectives with a view to achieving those objectives” (p. 100).

A central contention in conceptualizations of mobilization is that the concept must be approached in terms of engaging the people to participate actively and freely in discussions and decisions affecting their general welfare. Experts contend that mobilization describes endeavors that aim at increasing people’s level of awareness or understanding of political and other issues in order to apply their energies positively and participate actively in the social and political life of the country. Akindele (2004) summarizes scholarly thoughts on the concept of mobilization as the process of sensitizing the citizenry and increasing their cognition, political consciousness, and efficacy. He underlined that political mobilization could mean the determined process of emotionally bringing people together and making them internalize the communality of societal values, attitudes, and orientation in order to achieve specified holistic objectives.

As we shall demonstrate later, the process of mobilization in contemporary society benefits tremendously from social media. Hence, social media, mass mobilization, and national development represent an enduring nexus, as developments in contemporary Nigeria have shown. This will be discussed in detail in subsequent sections.

### **2.3. National development**

National development is an omnibus concept that embodies the realization of other germane concepts which serve as indices for measuring it. Ashong (2021) suggests that a holistic way of looking at national development is to approach its discourse from two perspectives. The first is the perspective of nationhood that emphasizes the basic traits that define the Nigerian state such as culture, shared values, and interests. The second perspective emphasizes a focus on improving the well-being of the citizens. When the two perspectives are harmonized, national development could be understood as the process of developing national consciousness among citizens toward attaining development-oriented goals, while simultaneously improving the socio-economic well-being and living conditions of citizens.

A discourse on national development is, however, incomplete without looking at the concept of development and what it entails. Ashong (2021) presents two views that characterize the conceptualization of development. The first point of view approaches development in purely quantitative terms: a boost in gross product (GNP), per capita income, high technology, mass production, urbanization, and massive investment in mass media infrastructure (to increase the volume of information). The latter approach, however, deviates from this quantitative orientation and emphasizes quality of life. This thinking is considered a form of resistance from the Third World that critiques the Western orientation toward the concept of development and how it should be understood. Thus, “the current thinking... is that development must take into consideration human factors. Prominent among the human factors...is integration” (Ashong, 2021, p. 28).

This later thinking, therefore, highlights the improvement of the material well-being of individuals and in individual security and personal dignity and closing up inequality gaps, among other qualitative indices. Stieglitz (as cited in Omede & Ngwube, 2018) follows this renewed thinking of development, stating that “words like openness, partnership, and participation, women empowerment, and environmental health carry in their innards, a theory of development, as well as evidence that can lead to more successful development efforts” (p. 189). A national development plan, anchored on these principles, therefore, drives the much-desired socio-economic development.

Lawal & Oluwatoyin (2011) define national development as “the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political advancement of a country or nation” (p. 238). According to them, this is best achieved through meticulous development planning and implementation of workable strategies, which can be described as the country’s collection of strategies mapped out by the government. The quest for a national development plan has been a recurrent one across dispensations in Nigeria. Ironically, while all dispensations prioritize national development, a synergy in attaining it is lacking, thus making the quest for national development disjointed and prone to failure. For instance, from independence to date, Nigeria has boasted of at least ten different development plans, out of which none was implemented to the later. Joseph (2014) reviewed various national development plans in Nigeria since independence and concluded that:

The series of development plans after political independence, namely the 1962–1968 National Development Plan, 1970–1974 Second National Development Plan, and the 1975–1980 Third National Development Plan, merely translated to further underdevelopment, unemployment, and waste, primitive accumulation of public wealth due to lack of commitment, lethargic and lackluster approach to developmental projects by successive government. (p. 57)

Despite seemingly serious duplications of previous initiatives as evident in their core mandates, almost all of them were characterized by systemic corruption, which is, at the moment, endemic, a lack of sustainability plans and non-inclusive in orientation. Joseph (2014) argues that:

The various strategies adopted had been just a change in the nomenclature, the formulations and the process of implementation is the same, it is believed that we cannot continue doing the same thing repeatedly and expect a different result. Therefore, for development to thrive in Nigeria, the attitude and orientation of the implementers of the various strategies must change. Commitment and honesty on the part of the policy makers and implementers remain the only antidote to developmental challenges and the ineffectiveness of the strategies for development. (p. 57)

National development has thus become a recurrent narrative in Nigeria that hardly translates into reality. Accordingly, the quest for attaining it remains rife among concerned development stakeholders. This study aimed to demonstrate how the opportunities of social media platforms could be harnessed and mainstreamed into the process of attaining the much-desired national development in Nigeria.

### 3. Technological Determinism Theory: A Framework for Analysis

Technological determinism theory presents a framework for understanding the relationship between information and communication technology and the key features of society at any given period (Burnett & Marshall, as cited in Paragas & Lin, 2014). The theory explains the linkage between breakthroughs in communication technology and the factors that propel them to effectively drive social change in society (Maikomo et al., 2021). Sharma (2018) states that “at the heart of the discussion on the theory of technological determinism lies the premise that technology is the basis for shaping society and any important event in society is based on the result of some innovation” (p. 149). Pundits contend that technology is a major propeller of social change, which is an argument that originates from the earliest conceptualizations of the theory by Marshall McLuhan, one of its major proponents (Baran & Davis, 2010).

Adler (2006) emphasizes the need to interrogate other variables as well into studying how technology impacts generations, such as economics, culture, geography, biology, and language. Adler notes that any exemption of these variables in the conceptualization of the theory makes it deficient, as they have critical roles to play in the overall impact of technology in a given society. Although this theory explains the role of technology within society, critics have argued that it tends to exaggerate the potential of technology beyond proportion. Sharma (2018) uses the egg-chicken analogy to explain this controversy. According to him, while appraising the role of technology in society, it is pertinent to ask: did society feel the need for new technology or was new technology first presented to society and thereafter utilized?

Adler (2006) underlines that technology itself is socially determined: “technology and social structures co-evolve in a non-deterministic, emergent process...the effects of any given technology depend mainly on how it is implemented which is in turn socially determined” (p. 926). The role of technology in the overall development of society is best appreciated within the context of use, implying that societies have varying capacities to use technologies, which in turn, leads to variations in the overall impact of such technology in different socio-economic or cultural contexts. Paragas and Lin (2014) explained this further by introducing two dimensions, the hard and soft determinisms, to the conceptualization of technological determinism theory. Specifically, hard determinism ascribes technology with omnipotence in shaping society, whereas soft determinism locates the power of technology in regard to other social and cultural factors present in society.

McLuhan conceived the concept of the media as extensions of man; more precisely, it is the idea that media literally extend sight, hearing, and touch through time and space (as cited in Baran & Davis, 2010). The advent of the electronic media and their influence on the process of communication supported McLuhan’s powerful predictions that formed the basis of technological determinism theory, such as the popular global village concept (Baran & Davis, 2010). While discourse on technological determinism is ongoing and shaped by realities in the media industry, the emergence of the internet has introduced a new perspective to the discourse, as some argue that it is, indeed, the fulfillment of the predicted global village. The emergence of the social media virtual communities that anchor global interactions of individuals has deferred all spatial and temporal barriers and stimulated robust engagements of individuals on several fronts, which are all critical

issues in contemporary discourse on technological determinism. How does this translate into robust national development and what are the emerging concerns that require urgent interventions? These questions are addressed in the following sections.

#### **4. Method of the Study**

This study relied primarily on qualitative research approaches. Data related to the thematic focus of the study were sourced from purely secondary sources, i.e., the internet and library resources. Prominent academic sites such as Scopus and Web of Science were used for data sourcing, using keywords such as ‘social media,’ ‘national development,’ ‘#EndSARS protest,’ ‘digital media,’ ‘digital activism,’ ‘digital media opportunities,’ and ‘digital media challenges.’ This search yielded a rich volume of data used to carefully select articles relevant to this study and build up arguments. The timeframe for the inclusion of works into the current study spans from 2010 to 2022 because this period has witnessed an exponential rise in the use of social media in Nigeria owing to the proliferation of digital technologies and increased internet access among citizens (see Nsude et al., 2021). Notwithstanding this timeframe, other relevant materials outside this period but useful for the discussion in the study were also included in the list of literature selected for discussion. The following sections present data arising from this method.

#### **5. Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the study are presented and discussed in this section under the following subheadings. The discussion aims to determine the strengths and weaknesses of social media and explain how they could be properly mainstreamed into the national development process in Nigeria and the prospects and challenges and the major lessons that could be learned from the 2020 #EndSARS protest in this regard.

##### **5.1. Social media, mass mobilization, and national development in Nigeria: The nexus**

The potential of social media to galvanize civic mobilization for robust national development have been documented in academic literature (Odoji et al., 2020; Uji, 2015). Although certain shortcomings of social media make skeptics reserved over their overall contribution to national development, experts contend that the current generation can no longer afford to overlook the potential of social media toward galvanizing the citizens for national development. Ashong (2021) for instance, notes that although “scholars are divided over whether the phenomenon of citizen journalism should be taken seriously, but the fact that the social media have almost become an essential and inseparable part of life today should make us take them seriously” (p. 90). Social media, as noted earlier, have become a part of popular culture in Nigeria. They are truly in vogue, thanks to internet penetration and the exponential influx of digital technologies that enable citizens to access them. Social media have provided a converging point between thought leaders and the online audience (typically referred to as netizens), and ensured robust engagements on their various platforms. Adeyanju (2015) highlights their significance to the process of public opinion formation as follows:

The expanded information in public sphere and the quantum of information at the disposal of the citizens are making it imperative for those interested in public opinion to change their strategies at influencing it. Many politicians and governments are



now moving fast to imbibe the new media and even the social media to get their messages across to the people. The traditional media are no longer enough to do this. It is becoming very common to see politicians have their own blogs and chat constantly with their audience on Facebook while at the same time monitoring their activities on Twitter. (p. 203)

This convergence is highly related to the process of mass mobilization and the bigger question of national development. Oke (2019) describes the potential of social media to stimulate social change, especially at the grassroots where residents have wide-scale access to mobile phones and broadband networks. Such potential of social media thus makes them connected and informed like their urban counterparts. According to him:

The new media are a catalyst for the correction of the hegemony of the national media in developing nations. Mobile phone applications, social networking sites and blogs have become potential means of empowerment for literate citizens and in the case of mobile phone use combined with local radio, a ubiquitous and trusted medium in rural Nigeria, for semi-illiterate citizens. More widespread use of the social media and their adoption into the mundane practices of lived experiences, their potentials to shape social relations becomes all the greater... (p. 212)

This position is vivid and describes the enormous impact of social media penetration on challenging the manipulative ideology-hegemonic tendencies of the elite on the elite-controlled media. Thus, Oke (2017) summarizes his thoughts that: “the widespread use of new media applications has brought about a number of social changes. Their use has been viewed as an instigator for social change and potential means of social transformations” (p. 213) At the core of social media’s strengths in championing mass mobilization for national development, especially in a pluralistic society such as Nigeria, are their openness, liberal and participatory nature, interactive and dialogic features, and wider access, which made them popular among citizens.

Kediehor and Uchendu (2020) extended this discussion further. Their study aimed to determine the implications of digital media platforms and the participation of the Udi community in politics. It revealed that social media have promoted a culture of active participation of the community members in democratic and national developments. Their study provides empirical evidence that social media platforms facilitate community members’ participation in the political process. Findings indicate that 41.45% of the study population confirmed that social media have a very high influence in promoting political participation among members of the Udi community, 28.72% reported a high influence, whereas 15% were undecided, 7.81% reported a low influence, and 6% reported a very low influence. These findings empirically indicate the potential of social media to galvanize community members’ participation in the political life of their community.

A similar research endeavor was undertaken by Ude-Akpeh et al. (2020) who investigated social media use for political mobilization of youths in Anambra State, Nigeria. Their findings confirm the resourcefulness of social media in the process of political mobilization of the youth. According to their findings, 25% of the sample confirmed that social media are effective to a large extent in political mobilization, 61.1% said they are effective to an extent, whereas 13.9% reported that they are only effective to a little extent.

Findings further indicate various areas in which social media have been proven vital for political mobilization such as posting political campaign messages, mobilizing the youth for support, and sensitizing them on the need to come out en-masse and vote, and disseminating messages on topical political issues.

Furthermore, several other studies have established the effectiveness of social media for political mobilization and participation (Nwala et al., 2020; Okafor & Oko, 2020; Wogu & Egwu, 2020). A central thesis that runs across these studies is a spotlight on the potential of social media, including accessibility, liberal/populist orientation, availability, openness, and interactivity that endear them to the users, particularly the youths, as research evidence documents that they spend a substantial chunk of their time on the platforms.

## **5.2. The #EndSARS protest: A case study of social media use for mass mobilization in Nigeria**

Apart from election seasons and the political scene, the #EndSARS represents one of the most contemporary case studies where the potential of social media has been harnessed and deployed to champion a cause. Although previous protests in Nigeria had also leveraged substantially on the social media platforms such as the #BBOG (Bring Back Our Girls) movement in 2014 (Jibril, 2017) and the #OccupyNigeria protest of 2012 (Hari, 2014), the 2020 #EndSARS protest will go down in history as a movement that exemplified the unification force of social media among the young population and how they could be deployed in the crusade for structural changes and reforms. According to Moses et al. (2022), the #EndSARS protest sought an end to all forms of police brutality, demonstrating citizens' resistance to incessant police brutality and abuses which have become the order of the day in Nigeria.

BBC (2020) reported that what began as a protest against the brutal police Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) later became a conduit for the youth to vent their anger and express their disenchantment with the people who have sat on their destinies for decades and denied them the basics of life and human dignity. Nwabuikwu (2020) traces the origin of the protests to a Tweet on October 3, 2020 by a Twitter user named Chinyelugo with the handle @AfriciaOfficial2, who tweeted about a young man allegedly tortured to death by SARS operatives in Ughelli, Delta State. By October 7, 2020, after the incident had generated considerable interest on social media globally, major #EndSARS protests began in Lagos. Importantly, this was not the first ever anti-SARS protests. Nwabuikwu (2020) recounts the campaign to EndSARS from 2015. However, the 2020 #EndSARS protests, unlike the previous attempts, refused to fizzle out and developed into full-fledged protests that attracted international attention and compelled the government to give serious concessions to the youth.

While the protests, which started initially in Lagos, spread across major towns in the southern part of the country, the climax occurred on October 20, 2020 when officers of the Nigerian Armed Forces opened fire on protesters at the Lekki tollgate, turning the peaceful protest into a violent one. Conflicting reports and controversies surround what exactly transpired at Lekki; however, a Premium Times report states that three corpses of the Lekki victims were deposited at a morgue in Lagos State (Adediran, 2021). The report quoting the Chief Pathologist of the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital (LASUTH), John Obafunwa, states that "at least 99 people were killed in Lagos during the #EndSARS

protest and had their bodies deposited at a morgue in the state... The victims include three that were killed in Lekki during the shooting by soldiers at unarmed protesters” (as cited in Adediran, 2021, paras. 1–2). The shootings which sparked wide-scale condemnation radically transformed the hitherto peaceful protest into a violent one, and the destruction that followed was monumental. Alade et al. (2020) reports that:

Arsonists went on a rampage and burned the headquarters of the Nation Newspapers and TV Continental that are linked to the National Leader of the ruling APC, Senator Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Federal and state government structures including the headquarters of the Nigerian Ports Authority (NPA) were set ablaze by the rampaging youths who also burned the family residence of Governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu and that of his mother. (paras. 2–4)

The destruction further spread across the country and the protesting youth targeted government and private warehouses where COVID-19 palliatives were stored and looted them. Moreover, they looted other government properties and those of prominent politicians and launched attacks on government establishments. Beyond the wide-scale destruction, however, the #EndSARS protest attempted to introduce strategic reforms specifically in the art of policing in the country and other broader areas of routine administration and governance. For instance, from the onset, the protesters outlined five key demands that they continued to push for until the protests turned violent. These key demands were (1) the immediate release of all arrested protesters; (2) justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families; (3) setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct; (4) psychological evaluation and retaining of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed; and (5) the needs to increase police salaries so that they can be adequately compensated and motivated to protect the lives and property of citizens (Vanguard, 2020).

These demands were widely circulated on the social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, driving the protests. Although they were initially considered baseless, the Federal Government gave in to the demands as the protests gained momentum (Adetayo, 2020). How well these demands have been implemented to the later one year after the protest calls for a different assessment altogether; however, in the meantime, SARS was disbanded by the Inspector General of Police and a new police tactical unit—the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT)—squad was formed in its place (Omilana, 2020). Also, judicial panels of inquiry were set up in Lagos and other states to investigate the demands of the protesters, attain issues and claims, and propose resolutions. While some of the panels completed their tasks and submitted their reports, some are still sitting, as the issues brought before them are complicated and require deeper levels of inquiry and evidence extraction to establish. Importantly, the protests garnered a type of popularity and international attention not witnessed before in the country by the youth population.

The role social media played is of particular importance in mobilizing the youth in the course of the protest. Thought leaders, primarily celebrities and human rights activists, mobilized the protesters through social media channels, attracting a large pool of both online and offline protesters. BBC (2020) reported, “a potent mix of street protests and social media has given young Nigerians a voice that has shattered the country’s culture of

deference” (para. 1). Moses et al. (2022) noted that social media played a formidable role in organizing the youths, which were fundamentally leaderless in an almost spontaneous protest. According to them, the impact of social media manifested in terms of linking and uniting the protesters on the online space, crowd-sourcing funds to execute the protests, and winning international sympathy and solidarity. Hence, social media were the primary platforms for organizing the protesters and provided regular updates on developments, reactions, and strategies.

Like in the case of the popular Arab Spring (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013), the international community was kept updated on developments during the protest via social media. Through the #EndSARS protest, the potential of social media, including interactivity, openness, accessibility, popular appeal, and connectivity, manifested practically. At the end of the protest, it was evident that social media commands a kind of popularity among the teeming youth population in the country that, if well harnessed, can serve as strong mobilizing forces to galvanize them in pursuit of set goals. A worthy point that must be emphasized to round up the discussion in this section is that social media serve primarily to reinforce citizens’ disenchantment with state forces (Chon & Park, 2020; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Maikomo and Targema (2021) noted that beyond police brutality which served as the trigger of the protest, “citizens’ frustration and disapproval of status quo, endemic corruption that bred untold hardships on citizens, endemic poverty rates and widening inequality gaps, and gross unemployment of the youth were also critical factors that motivated and sustained the protest” (p. 12). A critical appraisal of the role of social media for mass mobilization and national development must take cognizance of these underlying factors and streamline them accordingly for a greater impact.

### **5.3. Beyond opportunities: The #EndSARS protest, social media threats, and the challenge of mass mobilization**

Beyond opportunities, the #EndSARS protests present an avenue to determine the threats or weaknesses of social media in the course of mass mobilization for national development initiatives. The #EndSARS protest has come and gone but left behind a rich volume of experience to refer to. First, it must be noted that social media is prone to abuse by mischief makers and can be easily hijacked. The #EndSARS protest lost its focus because as soon as it gained the required popularity and international recognition to effect the required structural reforms, it was hijacked by interest groups. Consequently, some key thought leaders began to withdraw their support from the protest. Shuaib (2020) reported that one of the founders of the protest, Segun Awosanya, popularly known as Segalink, had distanced himself from the protest “after alleging that politicians and commercial criminals, hoodlums, had hijacked it for their selfish ends” (para.1). The wide-scale destruction, vandalization of public property, and looting that followed the Lekki shootings were extended beyond the initial vision of the brains behind the protest, which is a development that ultimately resulted at the end of the protest with lesser impact than earlier envisaged.

Another limitation of social media in this regard stems from their major strengths, namely their unregulated nature that allows everything to thrive on various platforms. Pundits observe that social media provide an avenue for Nigerians to express their hatred for one another unguarded. Dauda et al. (2017) who examined social media as discursive devices for conflicts in Nigeria concluded that “the magnitude and impact of

the ubiquitously vituperative vitriolic comments in some of the discourses... can further escalate conflicts and create more monsters” (p. 267). The study also found that Nigeria is already overwhelmed with several challenges and does not need the spread of venomous ideologies to aggravate its situation. Jibril and Targema (2017) identified a predominance of hatred and vituperation expressed openly in online readers’ comments sections of news stories shared on social media. Against the backdrop of the divisive features that define the Nigerian state, the study concludes that the emergence of digital media that defy gatekeeping portends grave danger to the country’s fragile unity.

Apart from hate speech that has become a prominently disturbing feature of social media in Nigeria, the rising tide of fake news on the platforms is another worrisome feature that experts are becoming weary of (Nsude et al., 2021). These two critical forces, hate news and fake news, diminish substantially the mobilizing potential of social media and breed skepticism toward the platforms among many individuals critical of what they are exposed to on various platforms.

Another disturbing trend of social media and their mobilization prowess is the possibility of harvesting it for subversive ends. Separatist agitators use it to garner popularity and deploy it negatively to subvert progress and unity in the country. The Independent People of Biafra (IPOB) and their use of social media is a case study in this regard. Although this position calls for a more critical assessment, the point is that social media can be as well negatively deployed to attain subversive goals against the quest for national development. The irony of social media is that the very attributes that constitute their strengths and opportunities also largely account for their weaknesses and threats to national development. This dual nature, therefore, implies that the application of the platforms for national development must carefully consider its two sides to properly mainstream them in the process of attaining national development.

#### **5.4. Mainstreaming social media for national development in Nigeria**

The preceding discussion presents social media as a double-edged sword in terms of mass mobilization for national development because of its dual nature. Experts have referred to the platforms as conundrums (Sanda & Targema, 2020), suggesting that any purposeful effort toward applying them for national development must take cognizance of their opportunities and threats to properly mainstream them into the process. Mainstreaming social media for national development is surely a tedious but compelling task. As the foregoing discussion showed, the platforms have become popular culture; hence, it is pertinent to incorporate them in all endeavors that require wide-scale public outreach and engagement with the masses. Adopting the social media option and effectively incorporating it into the communication strategy of any purposeful campaign portends considerably to the success of such campaigns. Therefore, the organizers of such a campaign are assured of wider outreach and popularity at a very low cost; it is the kind of popularity that the conventional media alone cannot offer.

Chon and Park (2020) argue that social media activism functions as a mediator that leads individuals to actively participate in offline activism. This transition from digital to real-life offline activism is a feature that can be strengthened to boost the impact of digital media on community engagement struggles. Experience over the years has shown that Nigeria parades far more digital than real-life activists. The need to bridge this gap and strengthen community engagement via the platforms is critical for increasing their overall impact. The

#EndSARS protest demonstrates a translation from digital to offline activism and how social media could be best used as a tool for stimulating community engagement. This lesson can be taken from the protest to incorporate it in further attempts at utilizing social media for mass mobilization and effective community engagement. Experts must strategize beyond digital activism to map out strategies to translate digital activism into positive actions by citizens toward attaining the desired goal.

A way of mitigating the weaknesses of social media and properly mainstreaming them in the course of national development is to foster a synergy between the platforms and the conventional media. Such synergy can leverage the strengths of both media credibility and trust in the conventional media on one hand and the popularity/wider appeal of social media on the other hand. Similarly, stakeholders must explore other possible strategies to boost the credibility of social media and check their weaknesses- such as engaging experts to create and share credible content on the course at hand and carefully detect and debunk fake news in the process. Accordingly, some of the most glaring weaknesses of social media can be mitigated to position them more strategically toward galvanizing the citizens for national development.

## **6. Concluding Thoughts**

Social media have become a trend in contemporary Nigeria and mainstreaming them to achieve national development is not just an option but a necessity. This is more compelling when one considers the strengths that the various platforms exude, such as popularity, mass appeal, liberty and pluralism, interactivity, and accessibility among numerous other traits that endear them to the users. Against the backdrop of these strengths, they have become frontline drivers of mass mobilization initiatives in Nigeria on the political, social, and economic fronts.

The #EndSARS protest represents a case study to carefully assess the opportunities and threats that the platforms offer to properly mainstream them for national development purposes. Evidently, although the platforms represent opportunities for popular mobilization, their very nature harbors inherent weaknesses that hinder deploying them effectively for mass mobilization. These weaknesses, which turn the platforms into the major carriers of hate speech and fake news, breed skepticism toward them, cause people to question the information they access through the platforms, and heighten the need for caution while mainstreaming them into the development process if their impact is to be felt at all.

To overcome these limitations and optimize the potential of social media for national development, this study recommends a synergy between social and conventional media as the best strategy to mobilize citizens for national development. This hybrid approach will serve to neutralize the limitations of social media and consolidate their potential to attain the much-desired national development in Nigeria.

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