



*A Retrospective analytical assessment of Nigerian Press Coverage  
of #EndSARS Protests*

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Abstract	Article info
<p><i>Nigerian youths have been put under tremendous pressure by the prevailing uncondusive socio-economic condition in the country. So also, police brutality has immensely contributed to the problems of the Nigerian youths so much that they have to react by organizing nationwide protests in 2020. The protests tagged “#EndSARS protests” are the subject of this study. Content analysis is the research method adopted for the study. Two national dailies were examined to enable the researcher to analyse the press coverage of the activities of the #EndSARS protesters in their entirety. The #EndSARS ended tragically with the army allegedly shooting and killing peaceful protesters, and the whole episode later ended up in arson and extensive looting. The negative outcome of the event notwithstanding, The #EndSARS movements have far-reaching implications on the nation's socio-political environment as well as law and order.</i></p>	<p>Received 15 February 2023 Accepted 16 March 2023</p> <p><b>Keyword:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ activism,</li><li>✓ #EndSARS,</li><li>✓ police brutality,</li><li>✓ protests,</li><li>✓ social media</li></ul>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nigerian political elites have for a long time been so indifferent to complaints of the citizenry against their gross incompetence and misrule. The leaders are, quite often than not, careless about the feelings of those they govern. This belief came to the fore during the famous #EndSARS protests when the Nigerian youths expressed their discontentment as a result of the insensitivity of the government to their plights. The level of discontentment among the Nigerian youths towards Nigerian political elites was so obvious during the famous #EndSARS campaign against police brutality. Igwe, (2020, p. 8) affirms that:

“...the crisis is a consequence of deep citizen (especially youth) anger and lingering frustration against institutional failed expectation and crass institutional decay. It also exposes a government that is not only mistrusted by citizens but which lacks the capacity to calm them through meaningful dialogue and persuasion”.

The protests which began on Twitter in December 2017 (Dambo, et al., 2020) became nationwide protests in October 2020. The protests snowballed into a mass demonstration of angry youths, rocked major cities in the Southern part of the country. The youths, who have been docile for a long while, were mobilized to stage online protests against police brutality.

The protests were initially peaceful and mainly focused on police brutality, but the

demands of the youths were later expanded to include calls for an end to bad governance, corruption, etc.

The Nigerian population is predominately youth. Half of the population of Nigeria is between the ages 0 – 30 (Salami, 2013). Youth unemployment in Nigeria is an age-long problem (Alanana, 2003; Ojedokun et al., 2021). According to Awogbenle & Iwuamadi (2010) cited in (Okafor, 2011, p. 362) Nigeria has a youth population of 80 million constituting 60% of the total population. Out of this number, 64 million are unemployed. The youths are believed to be marginalized in both political and economic spheres.

The general belief of many people is that Nigerian youths are characteristically:

“... notorious for their penchant to foment trouble at the slightest provocation all in the name of seeking redress from perceived injustice, and that their characteristic tendency to evoke the enigmatic and belligerent spirit of provoking aggression may, perhaps, not have been unconnected with the problems typical of, or associated with, their age ...” (Ikotun, R., et al., 2023, p. 52).

That notwithstanding, Nigerian youths who have been so docile for a long time in organizing national actions, have reasons to be aggrieved, they are now trying to wake up to their responsibility by demanding change.

## Literature review

The youths are usually the most formidable driving force in the country. In Nigeria, the youths are just waking up from their slumber.

### **2.1 Activism**

Activism is an essential part of any movement as it is regarded as the very fabric of the movement, it is the soul of the movement and it is essential to its survival (Fiorito et al., 2015). Societal discontentment usually gives birth to social action/activism. Successful activism leads to eventual societal change. Various examples abound around the world. South African story is a typical example. It is believed that millions of people took part in anti-apartheid across the globe (Thörn, 2009). Even though there exist different opinions regarding the role the anti-apartheid movement played in the eventual collapse of the apartheid system (Thörn, 2009, p. 417), the fact that the movement together with other factors was responsible for the collapse of the apartheid regime is incontrovertible.

### **2.2 History of activism in Nigeria**

Activism started in Nigeria during the colonial era. Omobowale (2018, p. 264) asserts that:

Modern activism and civil society started in Nigeria at the end of the First World War. Activism was largely in reaction to colonial rule whereas civil society activities were focused on pressuring the colonial

government to address workers' and natives' welfare and prepare Nigeria for independence

According to Omobowale (2018), the early activist figures are Obafemi Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikwe. The focus of their activism was anti-colonialism and freedom for the natives and the black race in general. Social media activism is a new level of activism in Nigeria (Abimbade et al., 2022).

### **2.3 Social media platforms and social action**

Social media platforms have in no small measure facilitated what is referred to as connective action. Connective action according to Bimber et al., (2005) cited in Dambo et al, has to do with linking various like-minded people together for social action. Dambo et al, conceptualize connective action as:

an attempt to expand discourse on the well-known economic theory of collective action taking into account the evolving nature of social action which now uses tools of modern technology. Dambo et al., (2020, p. 11).

Billions of users are connected on social platforms worldwide (Ramnarain & Govender, 2013). There are perhaps no other mass media platforms across the globe that unify people like the new media. Facebook, for instance, celebrated its tenth birthday with over one billion users worldwide (Boulianne, 2015). Eghtesadi & Florea (2020) affirm that Facebook is the biggest social media platform with 2.5 billion active

monthly users. The youths constitute the largest number of social media users anywhere in the world (Pfeiffer et al., 2014). This undoubtedly makes social media platforms a veritable tool for mobilizing youths for social action.

#### **2.4 Nigerian youths and police brutality**

Harassment by the notorious police unit called “Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) provided the impetus for the youths to organize online and offline movements with the hashtag “End SARS”. The online movements started in November 2017. Abati (2020) cited in (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2021) asserts that protests moved to another level on October 4, 2020 after the video of a SARS police that shot and killed a young Nigerian man in front of the Wetland Hotel in Ughelli Delta State went viral. The protests initially started as a virtual protest on social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, etc) until October 8, 2020 when the street protests began in major Nigerian southern cities and Abuja before they assumed a global dimension by spreading to major cities across the globe (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2021; Keshi, 2021).

#### **2.5 Demands of Nigerian protesting youths**

Iwuoha & Aniche (2021) affirm that the youths’ five-point demands include:

disbandment of SARS

compensations for the families of those who died as a result of police brutality

release of the arrested protesters

increase in salaries and allowances of police officers

conduct of an independent investigation of allegations of police misconduct and prosecution of indicted officers and a psychological evaluation of the disbanded SARS before they are redeployed into other units.

The federal government set up the Presidential Panel on Police Reforms and the panel approved the protesters’ five-point demands.

#### **Statement of the problem**

Nigerian youths were considered docile for a long time because of their lack of interest in matters that affect the general well-being of the society. However, things have begun to change since petrol-subsidy removal protests termed “occupy Nigeria protests” that engulfed the nation in 2012. “Occupy Nigeria” was organized by cross spectrum of Nigerian society. Just eight years later, the youths organized another protest tagged “#EndSARS”. This study aims to interrogate press coverage of this youth activism in order to determine the influence of the action on socio-political development of the country.

### **3.1 Research objectives**

RO1. To determine the prominence of the protests against police brutality on the pages of the Nigerian national dailies.

RO2. To examine the tone of newspapers' contents regarding the protests.

RO3. To determine the most important as well as the least important themes

RO4. To find out the most prominent and the least prominent genres of the newspapers' coverage.

### **3.2 Research questions**

RQ1. What is the level of prominence given to the protests against police brutality on the

pages of Nigerian national dailies?

RQ2. What is the tone of newspapers' contents regarding the protests?

RQ3. Which of the themes were considered most important by the newspapers?

RQ4. Which of the genres were considered the most prominent and the least prominent genres?

### **3.3 Study period/universe**

Independent and This Day were the two national daily newspapers selected for this study. 34 copies of the two newspapers were examined starting from Wednesday 7th October 2020 to Friday 23rd October 2020. Copies of the newspapers were accessed online.

### **3.4 Unit of analysis**

Story headlines, articles, cartoons, graphics and all other forms of illustrations are the unit of analysis of this study.

### **4. Theoretical Framework**

Public Sphere Theory is adopted for this study. Public Sphere Theory was propounded by Jurgen Habermas in 1991. According to Habermas cited in (Abimbade et al., 2022, p. 3) "the public sphere is a domain of social life where public opinion can be formed, and all citizens can have conversations that shape the public". Social media technology affords citizens to actively participate in social and political discussions. The new media technology is a tool that mediates between the leaders and the citizens. The citizens are able to organize for social action whenever they perceive that the leaders are failing in carrying out their constitutional responsibility. This is the situation with the #ENDSARS protests.

### **5. Research Method**

The content analysis method is adopted for this study. The method is considered the most appropriate method for this study because the researcher aims to systematically examine the manifest content of the selected newspapers. The researcher randomly selected the online version of the two national daily newspapers which include the following newspapers: This Day and Independent newspapers. The newspapers that were considered in the random list were those with national spread.



### 5.1 Operationalization of terms

#EndSARS protests and government accountability: Refer to newspaper publications relating to #EndSARS protests and government accountability.

Calls for police reform: Newspaper articles that outrightly call for police reform.

Calls for the prosecution of the killer corps: Newspaper reports that call for the prosecution of killer police officers.

Politicians' support for the #EndSARS protesters: Newspaper materials that talk about Nigerian politicians that openly identified with the protesters.

Violence/fatality: Newspaper reports on violence/fatality

Calls for outright disbandment of SARS: Newspaper articles that talk about outright disbandment of SARS.

#EndSARS protests and economy: Newspaper articles on #EndSARS as it relates to the economy.

Arrests: Newspaper reports on arrests of the protesters.

A judicial panel of inquiry: Newspaper reports on a judicial panel of inquiry set up by the Lagos State government.

#EndSARS and bad governance: Newspaper materials on the connection between #EndSARS and bad governance.

### 6 Data presentation

Data derived for this study are hereby presented in tables 1 to 5 below.

Table 1. Distribution showing the three newspapers selected for the study

Newspaper	Frequency	Valid Percent
This Day	190	55.6
Independent	152	44.4
Total	342	N=100 or 100%

Table 1 shows that the Independent newspaper's share of #EndSARS contents is 44.4 %, while This Day's share of the contents is 55.6%.

Table 2. Distribution showing the prominence of the #EndSARS-related newspapers' contents.

Newspaper	Front Page		Inside Page		Back Page		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
This Day	26	7.6	155	45.3	9	2.6	190	55.6
Independent	20	5.8	131	38.3	1	0.3	152	44.4
Total	46	13.4	286	83.6	10	2.9	342	100

Source: This Day & The Independent newspapers - October 7 to October 23, 2020

According to table 2, 13.4% of the newspapers' contents on #EndSARS were placed on the front pages of the selected newspapers, while 83.6 % appeared on the middle pages and only 2.9% showed on the back pages of the newspapers

Table 3. Distribution showing story type

Newspaper	News story		Editorial		Feature		News analysis		Foreign news		Interview		Total	
	Fr eq.	%	Fr eq.	%	Fr eq.	%	Freq .	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq	%
This Day	131	38.3	3	0.9	34	9.9	8	2.3	11	3.2	3	0.9	190	55.6
Independent	119	34.8	1	0.3	20	5.8	4	1.2	5	1.5	3	0.9	152	44.4
Total	250	73.1	4	1.2	54	15.8	12	3.5	16	4.7	6	1.8	N= or 100%	

Source: This Day & The Independent newspapers - October 7 to October 23, 2020

Most of the materials published in the two newspapers selected for this study, that is 73.1% were in news story format, 15.8% were feature stories, 4.7% were #EndSARS-related foreign news, 3.5% were news analysis, 1.8 of the newspapers' contents were interview and meager 1.2% were editorial.

Table 4. Distribution showing the tone of the newspapers' contents

Newspaper	Positive		Negative		Neutral		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
This Day	63	18.4	101	29.5	26	7.6	190	55.6
Independent	50	14.6	83	24.3	19	5.5	152	44.4
Total	113	33	184	53.8	45	13.2	N = or 100	

Source: This Day & The Independent newspapers - October 7 to October 23, 2020

Table 4 reveals that 53.8 % of the contents were adjudged negative, 33% were considered to be positive, and 13.2% were found to be neutral.

Table 5. Distribution showing newspaper themes

	Newspaper				Total	
	This Day		Independent		Freq	%
	Freq	%	Freq	%		
Calls for police reform	64	18.7	31	9.0	95	27.8
Prosecution of the killer corps	19	5.6	7	2.0	26	7.6
Politicians' support for #EndSARS protesters	31	9.0	25	7.3	56	16.3
Violence/fatality	23	6.7	27	7.9	50	14.6
Calls for outright disbandment of SARS	10	2.9	23	6.7	33	9.6
Appeal for a peaceful conduct of protests	30	8.8	16	4.7	46	13.5
#EndSARS protests and government accountability	3	0.9	3	0.9	6	1.8
#EndSARS protests and economy	4	1.2	8	2.3	12	3.5
Arrests	-	-	2	0.6	2	0.6
Judicial panel of inquiry	4	1.2	6	1.8	10	2.9
#EndSARS and bad governance	2	0.6	4	1.2	6	1.8
	190	55.6	152	44.4	342	100

Source: This Day & The Independent newspapers - October 7 to October 23, 2020

According to table 5, 27.8% of the selected newspapers' contents were on "calls for police reform", followed by materials that showed support of some notable politicians for the #EndSARS protests, 14.6% of the contents were on violence and fatality, 13.5% were on "calls

for a peaceful conduct of protests", 9.6 of the materials calls for outright disbandment of SARS and 7.6% of the contents calls for prosecution of killer corps.



## **6.1 Data analysis and interpretation**

The analysis is based on the research questions that were derived for the study.

RQ1. What is the level of prominence given to the protests against police brutality on the pages of Nigerian national dailies?

Answer

According to table 2, 13.4% of all the articles published on #EndSARS protests made the front page, 2.9% were published on the back page, while as much as 83.6% made the inside page.

The protests were so prominent as the events dominated the front page of the Nigerian press.

All through the period, newspapers articles on the protests adored the front pages of the press.

RQ2. What is the tone of newspapers' contents regarding the protests?

Answer

Table 4, provided answer to this question. The tone of the newspaper articles on the #EndSARS protests was generally negative as 53.8% of all the materials published in the two selected newspapers were stories that were regarded negative, 33% were considered positive, while 13.% were regarded neutral.

RQ3. Which of the themes were considered most important by the newspapers?

Answer

According to data provided in table 5, the most important themes were “calls for police reform” with 27.8% of the newspapers' contents, followed by “politicians' support for #Endsars protesters” with 16.3%. Newspapers' articles on “violence/fatality” were 14.6%, the share of “calls for outright disbandment of SARS” was 9.6%, “appeal for peaceful conduct of protests” was 13.5%, while “calls for the prosecution of the killer corps” was 7.6%.

RQ4. Which of the genres were considered the most prominent and the least prominent genres?

Answer

Huge percentage of the newspapers' contents on #EndSARS, that is, 73.1% was “news stories”, followed by feature stories with 15.8%. The least prominent genre was “editorial” with 1.2%, followed by “interview’ with 1.8%.

## **6.2 Discussion of findings**

#EndSARS protests shook Nigeria to its foundation. Hardly had there been any protests in the recent time that had ever put the government on its toes like the #EndSARS protests. That was why the government of President Muhammed Buhari acceded to the protesters' five-point demands. The press paid

serious attention to the protests. Going by the attention given to the protests by the press, 13.4% of all the contents published on #EndSARS made the front pages, 2.9% were published on the back pages. This was considered high as there was almost no day that news materials on “#EndSARS protests” did not hit the front pages of the two newspapers selected for this study.

Equally important is the fact that 14.6% of all the articles were on violence/fatality. The unfortunate action of the army that was brought in by the government on October 20, 2020 which led to the infamous “Lekki toll gate shooting” of unarmed, peaceful, national flag-waving protesters further escalated the problem. Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> October 2020 is today referred to as “Black Tuesday” (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2021, p. 14). That is the day the Nigerian army massacred peaceful protesters at “Lekki toll gate” in Lagos, Nigeria

The most important theme of the publications was “the need for police reform”, 27.8% of all the publications were on police reform. A huge percentage of the materials published in the newspapers, that is 73.1%, was in news story

format. This fact implies that Nigerian journalists do not pay the required attention to the rigorous genres such as interpretative reporting/news analysis.

## 7. Conclusion

The right to protest is supposed to be unalienated right of citizens in any democratic society. The case seems to be different in Nigeria where the government sees such right as an attempt by political enemies to bring down the government. Nigerian youths’ protests against police brutality came up on the heels of incessant attacks on the youths by the police. The protests were well-organized and very impactful. They were generally peaceful, (Chisom, 2021; Ajisafe et al., 2021), until the government confronted the unarmed protesters with assailants who happened to be military men in military fatigue. They opened fire on the unarmed protesters. So many lives of young people were lost. The whole nation was alarmed by the level of violence that was visited on the hitherto peaceful protesters.

However, the whole scenario revealed the ability of the youths to impact on government’s policy formulation as well as implementation

(Ajisafe et al., 2021). The youths, as captured in the press, among other five well-articulated demands, made a case for the disbandment of the notorious Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), they also demanded police reform. While the protests were still on going, the government responded to almost all the demands made by the protesters. Analysis of the press coverage of the protests also revealed that the protesting youths received the backing of so many prominent citizens, including politicians. The coverage also indicated that there were quite a number of fatalities. The denial by the government that there was no fatality was therefore an attempt to coverup the truth. Quite a number of people believe that the youths. Even though #EndSARS protests ended tragically, the lesson learned from the event cannot be forgotten in a hurry. The protests show the ability of the youths to organize themselves into forceful power across the country. The youths were able to successfully mobilize themselves for action through social media technology. The successful action has shown that Nigerian youths can no longer be taken for granted.

## 7.1 Recommendations

1. Nigerian government is hereby advised to pay attention to dissent voices in society.
2. Government should put in place a strong feedback mechanism to enable it to feel the pulse of the nation and then respond to it appropriately.

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