

# Social Media, Keyboard Disruptors, and Fake Protesters during protest movements in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Social media platforms continue to flourish as practices encompassing them become deeply embedded in many cultures. As more people embrace social media platforms, their affordances and opportunities are leading to improved communication, and helping hold authorities to account. While social media do help to hold authorities to account, those in leadership roles are beginning to use these platforms to bolster their perverse objectives. To understand the latter better, this study aims to examine methods that the Nigerian authorities adopted to discredit, disrupt, and conceal the killing of protesters during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. This study adopts a mixed methods approach comprising of qualitative content analysis of tweets and replies (N=10,622) regarding critical and counter tweets about the protests, and responses from a semi-structured interview (N=20) of 'fake protesters' during the 2020 #EndSARS protests. Findings show that the Nigerian authorities adopted a two-pronged approach of using hoodlums to perpetrate violence with the hope of destabilizing the protests, and used influencers and celebrities online to disrupt, destabilize and conceal the killing of protesters during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. The paper contributes to knowledge in three ways. First, it empirically conceptualizes Keyboard Disruptors. Second, the paper uncovers that while social media platforms have decentralized communicability, that they, however, have improved the capabilities of the authorities in the dissemination of propagandistic materials as well as having the capabilities to repress a protest movement. Third, the study delineates a typology of protest disruption tactics during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** digital activism, social media, soro soke, #EndSARS, Keyboard Disruptors, Fake Protesters

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## 1. Introduction

On October 7, 2020, youths in Nigeria commenced series of socio-political protests tagged the “#EndSARS protests” in Nigeria. Nigerian youths asked for the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS is a special unit of the Nigerian Police Force. It has been alleged prior to 2020 that the police unit abuse their power and are notoriously unkind to Nigerian youths (BBC 2020b; Orjinmo 2020). Nigerians, particularly, the youths, have grumbled incessantly about the crudity that SARS uses to approach cases that they take on. For example, Officers from SARS have always been accused of civil right abuses and arrest of innocent Nigerians for mere appearance (Uwalaka, 2021)). Prior to 2020, these complaints did not translate to calls to disband SARS. This all changed on October 3, 2020, when a video appeared online showing some of SARS officers absconding from a scene in a white vehicle that apparently belonged to an unidentified man. It appeared that the SARS Officers had shot the unnamed man at the front of the Wetland hotel in Ughelli, Delta State, Nigeria (Dambo et al. 2021). Nigerians became irate and shared the video in social media platforms. The reaction to the viral video was instantaneous and extensive as many youths in Nigeria started lamenting about the highhandedness of SARS Officers. The video fuelled anger among Nigerians to march against SARS. This led to protests in the streets of Nigeria and many other cities around the world. The protesters marched and asked for the disbandment of SARS, the elite police unit in Nigeria (Uwalaka, 2022).

It was in that twitchy period of utmost scepticism of law enforcement around the world that the SARS film appeared on the internet. The film revealed the highhandedness of SARS Officer as it displayed an unresponsive man on the floor and a paucity of compassion meted to the dying man by the absconding SARS officers (Uwalaka, 2023; Uwalaka et al., 2023; Uwalaka & Nwala, 2023). Youths in Nigeria were enraged, protested in the streets of Nigeria and other countries such as the United States of America, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom, Hungary, Ireland, South Africa and Australia (Lawal & Olanrewaju 2020). The protests were ferocious

in many States in Nigeria. The attendance was enormous with enthusiasm unnoticed in previous protests in Nigeria.

After four days of continued protest, the Nigerian Police Force declared that it has disband the SARS unit in the Nigerian Police Force (Aljazeera 2020). The sound of celebration enveloped the protests venues as the news of the announcement got to the protesters (Aljazeera 2020). Protesters were joyous that the Nigerian Government heeded to their cries and were hopeful that change was imminent. It was then reported that instead of ending SARS, that President Muhammadu Buhari is rebranding the police unit to SWAT – Special Weapons and Tactics. The protesters' delight turned to disenchantment and the protests returned with more vigour and anger. The protest vociferously continued unabated as protesters swore not to backdown until SARS is scrapped and those unjustly detained in Nigerian prisons by SARS Officers were summarily discharged (BBC 2020a).

It has been noted that the protests attained its goal of disbanding SARS, the police unit due to digital media platforms, and that social media platforms were used to mobilize, communicate, and provide instantaneous updates to protesters (Dambo et al. 2021). This is not unique as foundational enquiries into the impact of digital media and mobile social networking applications in the organization of social movements in Nigeria revealed that social media and mobile social networking applications boosted the coordination and planning of the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests (Uwalaka et al., 2018; Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). Despite that, there are little to no research that empirically test the allegation around fake protesters contracted to repress the 2020 #EndSARS protests. This study attempts to bridge that gap in the literature. This study examines the allegations of fake protesters during the 2020 #EndSARS protests and techniques allegedly adopted by the Nigeria Government to repress and pollute the protests movement. Thus, the aim of this study is to interrogate methods that the Nigerian authorities adopted to repress, disintegrate, and conceal the killing of protesters during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria.

## **2. Appraising digital media and the muzzling of protest movements**

Digital media platforms continue to flourish as practices encompassing them become deeply embedded in many cultures. As many people embrace digital media platforms, their affordances and opportunities are leading to improved communication among the citizenry and between the led and the leaders (Akpojivi, 2023). This improved communicability is helping hold those in authority accountable to their actions. Even with digital media becoming normative, its effects on political participation and engagement, particularly during contentious politics, is still under debate. The increasing number of protests movements around the world as innovations in digital media technologies increase is raising questions about the influence of digital media platforms as catalyst for dissent, protests, and other forms of contentious politics.

The prevailing empirical findings on protest movements hinges on either those that are sceptical or dismissive of digital media platforms as a vehicle for political change (Fenton & Barassi 2011; Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2009, 2012, 2013) or those that are optimistic as they see digital media platforms as essential for modern political activism (Bennett & Segerberg 2011; Bosch 2019; Castells 2012; Segerberg & Bennett 2011; Tufekci & Wilson 2012; Walgrave et al. 2011). The former argue that digital media platforms breed lazy and ineffective activism. The studies contend that the absence of ideological frame in activism mobilized through digital networks are usually weak and unable to achieve their goal. The latter believe that the diffusion of digital media corresponded with protests around the world. Some of these protests include: the indignados, the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street, and pockets of other protests such as the Occupy Nigeria protests.

Results from some recent studies have maintained the status quo in that they illustrate that digital media platforms used for political purposes relates with protest participation (Lee 2020; Lee et al. 2020). Findings from other parts of Asia have affirmed that digital networks contribute to the mobilisation of socio-political movements. It has been argued that the #FreeYouth protests in Thailand were loosely connected groups of weak ties on social media and that social media platforms helped enliven and revitalized the protest (Sinpeng 2021). Intriguingly, Chang and Park (2021) have established that joining in protests increase citizen's political use of digital media platforms. This indicates that as a greater number of people join and partake in protests, the more they utilise digital media platforms for socio-political objectives. This is magnified during conflicting protests such as the 2016-2017 presidential fraud outrage in South Korea. Similarly, data from studies in Nigeria have shown that using joining and participating in socio-political contestations online, increase political efficacy of the participants and intention to participate in political affairs (Uwalaka, 2017).

Digital activism research in Nigeria have discovered that the socio-political and economic matters debated by digital activists motivated street protesters during the Occupy Nigeria protests in 2012; that digital media

platforms were utilised during protests due to distrust in the traditional media; that digital networks were drivers for the protests, and that the diffusion of digital media platforms boosted Nigerian youths' capacity to contest main influence assemblies while stopping those in power from suppressing the protests (Hari 2014; Ibrahim 2013; Kombol 2014). Likewise, data from other studies have determined that digital media platforms played part in the success of political campaigns such as the #thechurchmustvote campaign during the 2019 national elections and the #NotTooYoungToRun campaign (Uwalaka, 2020a; Uwalaka et al., 2020). Findings further demonstrate that digital communities' real-world change steered the agenda and pushed the Nigerian government to engage with the Chibok girls' crisis in Northern Nigeria (Carter-Olson 2016). These digital communities were led by international celebrities who championed the release of the Chibok girls by making people around them to participate and join the protest movement (Akpojivi 2019; Endong 2019).

It has been argued that such organised repression against protests most times, leads to the protests becoming violent. A study contends that the organised repression against the Shiites movement in Nigeria may push them into violent extremism (Uche 2019). The crackdown of dissent in Nigeria is one of the reasons the #EndSARS protests was violent at the end (Oxford Analytica 2020). These are not novel, neither are they preposterous. Findings have illustrated that governments in Egypt, and Tunisia tried to muzzle the Arab Spring protesters but were unsuccessful as the protesters refused to be moved by the force from the military (Alexander & Aouragh 2014; Aouragh & Alexander 2011; Tufekci & Wilson 2012). The verve to intimidate and punish protesters by political leaders has only increased as digital media platforms became popular around the world.

Studies have examined other aspects and tactics used to delegitimise social movements. One of such tactics is the use of fake news to disrupt the protest movements. Digital activism results have shown that fake news and rumours are used by those in power to delegitimise protest movements (Lee 2020). It has been argued however, that protesters could use fake news to pressurise those in power to give into their demand, thus, making fake news, a potential double edge sword for both the political leaders and the protesters. In a more insidious way, data has shown that fake news disseminated via social media platforms influenced South Africa's xenophobia (Chenzi 2021). Although it has been found that social media was used immensely to listen to news about the protests, but there was high level misinformation about the protests and what happened in Lekki Tollgate as well as the disruptions that were caused by fake news and brute force (Adekoya 2021; McCargo 2021). Furthermore, Megiddo (2019) labelled government sabotaging influence and tactics as measures of digital domination. He argues that governments' reliance on digital militias allows them to side the limit of their legitimate authority. These findings suggest that fake news has been co-opted into the arsenal of political leaders that detest protest movements and those that fear change. There are other strategies that have been adopted by Governments to muzzle protests. Some of these include: the internet disruptions were used to quell rising protests and controlling strikes in Ethiopia (Ayalew 2019), lawmakers and industry heavyweights are making laws in an attempt to criminalise and muzzle acts of civil protests (Colchete & Sen 2020), the use of ignoring as a way to dismiss protest movements (Bishara 2015), and the use of repression and co-optation tactics to fragment protest movements (Sika 2019).

While scholars (Sarihan 2021; Sinpeng 2021) have extensively studied military interventions during protests movements as a way of destabilising such movements, there is relatively low interest in studying other ways through which protest movements could be hampered by the authorities. Crucially, the 2020 #EndSARS protests have not been studied adequately with media reports stating that the protests were marshalled and organised online (BBC 2020b). Only a handful of studies have evaluated the hypothesis about the salience of online media during the 2020 #EndSARS protests (Dambo et al., 2022; Dambo et al., 2021; Uwalaka & Nwala, 2023). While these studies are vital to understanding some aspects of the hypothesis, it however, looked only at the dissemination of messages on twitter but failed to interface with the protesters on the streets or robustly discuss attempts at repressing, and disintegrating the protests as a means of thwarting the protests by those in authority as well as concealing the involvement of Nigeria authorities in the shooting of protesters during the protests.

This study is designed to bridge the gap by analysing the disruptive methods that the Nigerian authorities deployed to distract, disrupt, and destabilise the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria as well as further methods that the authorities adopted to conceal the shooting and killing of protesters in Lekki Tollgate on October 20, 2020, during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. Consequently, the aim of this study is to interrogate methods that the Nigerian authorities adopted to repress, disintegrate, and conceal the killing of protesters during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria.

To that end, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What were digital activists' reactions on Twitter about the activities of those that minimised the

- significance of the protests and attempted to conceal the killing of protesters in Lagos during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria?
2. What strategies did the fake protesters (online and offline) adopt to fragment and disintegrate the 2020 #EndSARS protests?

### 3. Methods

This paper adopted a mixed data collection method. First the researchers monitored online footage related to activities of the alleged thugs during the 2020 #EndSARS protests. Second, a qualitative content analysis of tweets and replies of digital activists in Nigeria against online influencers (Keyboard Disruptors) who were allegedly employed by the Nigerian authorities to push government narrative during and after the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. Third, a semi-structured face-to-face and online video interviews with protesters (online and offline) against the 2020 #EndSARS protests movement in Nigeria. The semi-structured interviews used snowball sampling approach in which anti-#EndSARS protest protesters were recruited through referrals (Bryman 2016; Tufekci & Wilson 2012). This is because, it was difficult to ascertain who the fake protesters were, and the researchers needed to recruit either via their acquaintances or by writing to them online based on the trolling and critical tweets of the protests. After weeks of online correspondence, twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted in Port Harcourt, Owerri, Lagos and Abuja between the November 20, 2020, and December 22, 2020. Among the twenty interviews were also interviews conducted via Zoom for seven anti-#EndSARS protesters in Kaduna, Kano, Calabar and Uyo, and Damaturu.

Tweets and replies from the hashtags “#EndSARS” were analysed in this study. The analysis was to appraise the reactions of Nigerians on Twitter about the activities of those that downplayed the significance of the protests and attempted to conceal the killing of protesters in Lekki Tollgate during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. In this context, social media platforms provide numerous openings to conduct studies on extensive topics. An evaluation of its content during protests movements can provide important understandings irrespective of the researcher’s geographical position. Thus, social networking analysis enables scholars to retrieve data from diverse locations where field research could prove improbable (Gabel et al. 2020).

The objective of this study is to systematically appraise how the Nigerian authorities attempted to discredit and disrupt the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. The study studied 10,622 tweets, retweets, and replies from the hashtags #EndSARS. The data was collected between October 18, 2020, to January 30, 2021. These Facebook posts and tweets from Twitter were scrubbed online using NCapture. The posts and tweets were then transported into an NVivo 12 Pro for analysis. This software was selected because it suits the objective of this study and is the most appropriate software needed for this analysis. The purpose of the analysis was to create general themes from the tweets and replies. This technique has been used by other studies to evaluate data scraped from social media platforms for as Facebook and Twitter (Bosch & Mutsvairo 2017). The goal is to appraise the themes that arose from these tweets and replies about the debates around those that attempt to project the narrative of the Nigerian Government, and the reactions of Nigerians on Twitter about those that are pushing the progovernment storylines. This method has been used by other studies to analyse their data (Gabel et al. 2020).

All tweets and replies in the sample were coded according to the coding rules specified in the codebook. Process and patterns of category generation for the tweets and replies follow the codebook as well. Coding rules were defined only for the categories, not for sub-categories. From this process, six broad categories or themes have been identified, each containing some sub-categories. According to Table 1 below, these categories are: (1) calling out and shaming the Keyboard Disruptors; (2) theme supporting Government narrative; (3) counter narratives; (4) undermining the protests; (5) Supporting curfews; and (6) Others

### 4. Results

Contents from Twitter regarding the protests were analyzed to understand the reactions of digital activists on Twitter about online activities of those that allegedly tried to undermine the importance of the 2020 #EndSARS protests and those that attempted to conceal the killing of protesters by the Nigerian Military. In this study, 10,622 tweets and replies were analyzed. Of the 10,622 tweets, replies, and retweets, 6,022 were collected in 2020 while 4,600 were collected during the release of the report of the Lagos State Judicial Panel on the 2020 #EndSARS protests. Table 1 below, shows majority, 38% (3,824) of the tweets and replies called out and shamed those that allegedly tried to disrupt (Keyboard Disruptors) the protests online in 2020. These Keyboard Disruptors can be further divided into party loyalists of the All-Progressive Congress (APC), celebrities that

support the government and influencers who were recruited by those in government.

Example of tweets that called out and shamed those that tried to disrupt the protest read: ‘and if there were no deaths enough with the sensationalisation that statement showed that she believed more that nobody actually died, and even if people died or not why should she call the cries for accountability from Nigerians sensationalisation?’. This Twitter users was displeased with a tweet from a renowned celebrity in Nigeria whose tweet was problematic and appeared to reinforce the government narrative. When she was called out, she tried to revise her tweets. Another Twitter users replied to a thread, ‘you don't talk like that as an influencer and that's the same thing that happened to D\*\*\*\*. Your words should be clear even though the government gave you an honorary award’. Yet another Twitter user called out another influencer, ‘how are you doing and your kids? Hope they see this, that their mom lied?’. A Twitter user explained, ‘she was asking for relatives just few days after the massacre. How many of the hustlers and street traders in Lagos have relatives in Lagos. The many unaccounted bodies in the mortuary, stated in the report don't they have relatives, why are their relatives not coming out?’. The tweets and replies above show that Nigerians were really enraged at some Twitter users who were posting and supporting the government narrative during the protests. They hurled insults to those who appeared to encourage the government including Nollywood celebrities.

**Table 1. Themes from Tweets, replies and sample tweets**

Themes	Frequency (%)	Sample tweets
Calling out and shaming Keyboard Disruptors	3,824 (36)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ‘You said nobody was killed right? Maybe this will help your bison properly.’</li> <li>2. ‘That I'm disappointed in *** is an understatement. She messed up big time’</li> </ol>
Supported Government narratives	2,656 (25)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ‘If people died during the Lekki Toll Assault, let their people speak out please and if there were no deaths then enough with the sensationalisation’</li> </ol>
Counter narratives	2,123 (20)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ‘So that the bad government can go after their families too’</li> <li>2. ‘I think she was playing safe; she didn't really stick her neck out to agree or disagree with the killings, and people expected more from her’</li> </ol>
Undermining the protests	1,062 (10)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ‘Has unscrupulous Elements been around play? Definitely...’</li> </ol>
Supported curfew	532 (5)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ‘Make dem keep this curfew abeg’</li> <li>2. ‘Bad boys everywhere. Govt need to take control of this out-of-control protests...’</li> </ol>
Others	425 (4)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ‘What did she say? Wetin Om***** talk self?’</li> </ol>
Total	10,622 (100)	

About 25% (2656) of tweets and replies support government narratives while 20% (2,123) of tweets and replies countered the government-based narrative. Here, digital activists countered claims made by government sympathizers and showed evidence to buttress their points and fact check the tweets of online influencers and celebrities. A Twitter user who sympathizes with the government argued, ‘not a single body has been produced and not a single family or relative has come out to say that that their child or ward was killed at Lekki Tollgate’. Also, another Twitter users tweeted, ‘did anyone really die at #Lekkitollgate or we are just following a rhetorical bandwagon? I spent 6 mos investigating and no family had come forward with names.’ The same Twitter user than alleged that CNN lied in their news report when she said, ‘@CNNAfrica backed out of the judicial panel, and everyone is mute. A year later nothing has changed’. Another Twitter user argued that ‘the protesters at #Lekkitollgate were the hoodlums, and the hoodlums were the protesters ... Many of the protesters were criminals. They succeeded in looting’. These government narratives peddled by some of the most influential Nigerians were strenuously countered by digital activists in Nigeria. However, these narratives persist and pervade the media echo-system and both the public sphere and digital activism space. This is after digital activists’ fact checked and contradicted most of their claims.

Few others expressly posted tweets and replies that supported the curfew and undermined the protests. Here, digital activists challenged those who were supporting the government and tried to drown their voice in the digital media space, but the voices kept undermining the protests.

To answer RQ 2, that is, examining the strategies that Fake Protesters (online and offline) adopted to fragment and disintegrate the 2020 #EndSARS protests, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 of the anti-#EndSARS protests protesters. The participants interviewed coalescence into three groups: party loyalists, contracted online influencers and offline thugs (Agbero), and friends of the governments.

The party loyalists were mainly online, carrying out the talking points that they believed will help disrupt and disintegrate the protests. For them, the protesters were PDP – the main opposition supporters who want to tarnish the works of President Buhari and his APC government. One of such participants is a 42-year-old woman in Lagos who noted, ‘PDP was not happy that they lost to US (APC) in 2019. They started mobilizing their party members to protest. So, we used our Facebook accounts and WhatsApp group to call them out and explain to Nigerians about PDP’s ploy’. This anti #EndSARS protest protester and many others criticized the protest and parroted the government stance to support their political party. They did this by casting the protesters as PDP partisans and underplayed the civility of the protesters and infractions of SARS officers in Nigeria. Another participant narrated how they received tips from their WhatsApp group on how to respond to tweets from digital activists and the alleged killing of protesters in Nigeria; He said, ‘we received tips on what to say, and how to attack those protesters online especially Mr Reno Omokiri. We used his PDP membership top attack his posts about SARS and the government’ (Interview Participant, 28, Lagos).

Some of the participants confessed to have been contracted to disrupt the protests in Lagos, Kaduna, and Uyo. For example, a 30-year-old man explained, ‘I was paid with my boys to cause small wahala for Alahuasa so that the protest go stop’. The researchers inquired how much they received and the person that paid them and he replied, ‘we were given one thousand dollars by a Chairman of APC in one of the Local Government Areas of Lagos State. He said that the protesters are stopping government from working and wanted us to scatter the protests so that government can continue to deliver to Lagosians’ (Interview participant, 30, Lagos). Another anti #EndSARS protests protester explained how a Chieftain of the APC gave his cult group 2 million Naira around Oshodi to pick small quarrel to stop the protests. He said, ‘one Chief gave us 2 mil to do gragra small so that they fit scatter the protests’ (Interview participant, 29, Male, Lagos). Other fake protesters that were interviewed disclosed how they were incentivized monetarily to disrupt and disintegrate the protests.

The last type of the persons that participated in the interviews are friends of the government. They are like the APC loyalists. Only that they target sitting opposition governors to humiliate. Two examples will suffice here. The first is related to responses from three interview participants from Port Harcourt. They recounted how they were sent by an APC chieftain to pretend to be #EndSARS protesters to enable them embarrass Governor Onyesom Wike of Rivers State. They said:

During the protests, our boss asked us to visit the front of the Government House, PH and to pretend to be #EndSARS protesters. ... We did as we were instructed. So, when Wike came to address the protesters, we turned our backs at him, and he angrily left. He stopped supporting the protests from that day (Interview Participants 13, Port Harcourt).

Two other interview participants disclosed how they were mobilized by their party to embarrass the governors of Akwa Ibom and Kaduna. According to the participant in Kaduna, an APC Chieftain who was a political enemy of Governor El Rufai asked them to cause small problems at the protests venue to embarrass the governor. From the foregoing, it is evident that some opposition Governors who were support the #EndSARS protests were targeted by their political enemies (intra-party and inter-party) as a way of embarrassing them and their States. These results show that there was strategic use of anti #EndSARS protests protesters (Fake Protesters and Keyboard Disruptors) to fragment, thwart, and disintegrate the protests and to conceal the killing of protesters and the crudity of SARS officers.

#### ***4.1. Repressing Protest Movement: An example of Keyboard Disruptors***

In this paper, the researchers conceptualize Keyboard Disruptors as fake protesters online. They are either contracted by those in authorities or are party loyalists or friends of the government to covertly poison the online public sphere and digital activism space. They are the reverse of ‘Techno-Enthusiasts’, ‘liquid organizing’, ‘soft leadership’, ‘Digital Vanguards’ and Cyberchiefs (Gerbaudo, 2017; Uwalaka, 2020b). This is because while these online influencers and leaders use their fame and technological brilliance to further protest movements,

Keyboard Disruptors use their fame and superior technological skills to fight protest movements.

While the Nigerian government did not turn off the internet as was done in Ethiopia (Ayalew 2019), they did use proxy armies to muzzle the protesters. Their attempts were not the ignoring tactics (Bishara 2015) but have similar traits to co-optation (Sika 2019). What the street fake protesters and Keyboard Disruptors attempted was nothing short of co-optation of the 2020 #EndSARS protesters. Keyboard Disruption was an instrumental strategy for the government in that it created internal struggles with the protest movement which then fragments the movement. When fragmentation is achieved, it facilitates government repression against the protest movement. This not only creates further fragmentation of the protest movements but also serve as a deterrent to the development of new protest movements.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study interrogated how the Nigerian authorities tried to discredit and disrupt the 2020 #EndSARS protests and to conceal the killing of protesters during the protests. Results reveal that the video footages were categorised as fury, coordination, and evidential footages. These footages showed how hired hoodlums by those in authority caused mayhem in the protest grounds. Footages further revealed the coordination between the hired thugs and the authorities. While the hoodlums used violence to destabilize the protests, they were however rescued when protesters overpowered them in the protest grounds.

Furthermore, data revealed a bitter and serious battle between online participants who were biased and served as a destabilizing force for the government and digital activists who worked assiduously online to coordinate the protests. There were some who peddled government narrative and digital activists who countered such narratives. The debates were fierce and troubling at times. Digital activists fought back against peddlers of negative narratives about the protests. These negative narrative peddlers were either APC officials or celebrities and influencers who indicated that they sympathized with the government or were hired by the authorities.

This finding relates and confirms the argument that fake news is used by those in authority to delegitimize a protest movement (Lee 2020). The use of social media influencers to spread fake news about the protests to nullify and invalidate the protests was a way to scuttle the protest movement. When the covert and stealth operation failed, political leaders in Nigeria rolled out the military tanks to quell the protests. Although the Nigerian military was able to suppress the protests on the night of October 20, 2020, the protests took a fatal turn the next day as youths in Nigeria chased, beat, and even kill some military and police officers that they encounter. The escalations mirrored the warning about organized repression during protests movements (Uche 2019).

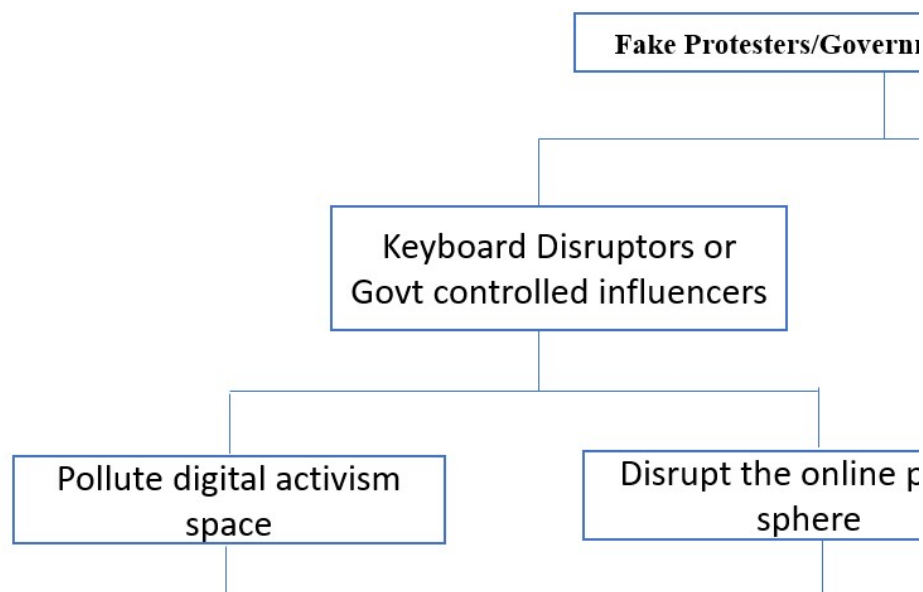


Figure 1. A typology of protest disruption tactics during the 2020 #EndSARS Protests

Figure 1 above shows practical implications of the disruption of the protests. During the protests, the Nigerian authorities needed to ‘pollute’ the public sphere and to soil the image of the protesters in the court of public opinion with violence. The authorities engaged the services of ‘Agbero’- street urchins, to cause violence in the protest grounds as a ruse to declare state of emergency to end the protests. While their henchmen were disrupting the protests, their online celebrities and influencers started tweeting and pushing pro-government narratives and views that were critical of the protesters. The online influencers, referred to in this study as ‘Keyboard Disruptors’ used their mammoth followership to contaminate the digital activism space as a way of dousing people’s interests in the protests.

Keyboard Disruptors are online influencers who are contracted by authorities to covertly poison the online public sphere and digital activism space. During the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, Keyboard Disruptors, pushed government narratives about the protests and hyped the violence and thuggery that were perpetrated by fake protesters who were planted in the protests venues by the authorities to disrupt the protests. They were also tasked with the cover-up of the killing of protesters at the Lekki Tollgate in Lagos, Nigeria.

This is not new in Nigeria. It has been argued that post-military democratic regimes in Nigeria perpetuate norms and practices that were characteristics of the previous openly authoritarian era (Adebanwi & Obadare 2011; Obadare 2005, 2010). While the popular and vicious methods of censorship and arrests are increasingly becoming unattainable, disruption of the public sphere with fake public participants has been sustained (Obadare, 2005, 2010; Uwalaka, 2015, 2016). Findings from this study illuminate the fake public sphere, fake protests participants phenomenon in Nigeria. In the case of the 2020 #EndSARS protests, the authorities adopted these tactics to disperse the protests. The two-throng approach of physical destabilization and pollution of digital activism space by Keyboard Disruptors was adopted and implemented to bring a stop to the protests before protesters demand further government accountability.

This study illustrates that while social media platforms is useful for protest organisation and coordination (Bosch 2019; Bosch et al. 2018; Olaniyan & Akpojivi 2021), that social media platforms also provide the authorities with affordances and space to muzzle as well as censor speech. These platforms also avail the Nigerian authorities with covert means to distort realities that undermine social movements. Social media platforms such as Twitter provided the Nigerian authorities with the means of fighting back against the protesters. Digital networks provided the authorities with the avenue to attack and pollute the protest (social movement) image and opinion formation process about the protests. The study demonstrates that Nigerian authorities stealthily created systems and agents that helped them to clampdown and ridicule protesters during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria.

Data from this study support the findings from Chenzi (2021) who argued that fake news disseminated via digital networks influence xenophobia in South Africa. In this study, fake news propelled by Keyboard Disruptors were meant to negatively influence the protests. The perpetrators attempted to invalidate the protests and protesters. This apparent sabotage effort was done to protect those in power in Nigeria.

This study suggests that improved digital media literacy will help Nigerians to detect covert information warfare. Such knowledge will expose pay-to-destabilise agents such as Keyboard Disruptors and will help digital activists and their community to filter messages that they receive especially from covert purveyors of disruptive messages and those that fight change. In the case of the 2020 #EndSARS protests, digital activists engaged, debated and fact checked Keyboard Disruptors that their potency and effectiveness was mild. Increased digital media literacy among digital activists and their community members will further reduce the effectiveness of such clandestine operations.

This study reminds scholars that while the popularisation of social media platforms has decentralised communicability, the platforms have also increased capabilities of government authorities in the dissemination of propagandistic materials and messages as well as spying on the people and censorship. Other studies have cautioned digital activists on the need to critically manage their online groups in to mitigate concrete and physical risks that social media can create for activists (Mundt et al. 2018). Like other studies, this study revealed the problematic aspects of social media during digital activism as this double edge impact of social media platforms was evident during the 2020 #EndSARS protests in Nigeria.

This study has some limitations. Although the data for this study was from scraped tweets from Twitter users and semi-structured interviews with protesters in Nigeria who were asked to join the protests online and offline politicians. Findings reported in this study reflect mainly the views of these participants. A bigger qualitative sample proffer greater result. Also, the fact that only one participant identified as female could be seen as a limitation to this study. Based on the foregoing, it is suggested that further research is conducted with a bigger



sample to test extent to which government digital militias are used in Nigeria during protests.

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