

# The Public Realm, Urban Protest and Peacebuilding: The #EndSARS Protests in Nigeria

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# The Public Realm, Urban Protest and Peacebuilding: The #EndSARS Protests in Nigeria

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## Abstract

The potential of ‘protest sites’ for advancing peacebuilding has come under scrutiny with the global rise in popular dissent, especially as the catalytic effect of social media on protests became apparent following the Arab Spring. The symbiotic relationship between the taxonomies of space in the public realm and the potential of physical sites to act as defensible space is questioned in this paper. This is within the context of the EndSARS protests, which occurred from October 11 to 28, 2020, in Nigeria. The EndSARS protest is one example of an increasing tide of political dissent that has highlighted the links between ‘sites’ of urban protests and peacebuilding processes. Features of protest sites were evaluated using observations and measurements. Links between protest ‘sites’ were assessed from the content of four national dailies and X (formerly known as Twitter) chatter using the #EndSARS hashtag, as well as interviews with protesters and organizers. Findings revealed that most sites used for protest activities could benefit from design imperatives to strengthen their ability to serve as defensible spaces. Recommendations focus on policy for the design of protest sites and peacebuilding.

## Introduction

At midnight on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October 2020, Nigerian soldiers opened fire and killed youths whose safety they had sworn to defend. By morning, the death toll had risen to 12 Nigerian youth who were killed for peacefully expressing their fundamental human rights to freedom of expression in demanding accountability for rampant police brutality. This tragic event, now called the Lekki massacre, signaled a high point in the #EndSARS movement, which had begun two weeks earlier and drawn thousands of Nigerian youths to the streets. It all started with a tweeted video of the killing of a Nigerian youth by operatives of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) on the 3rd of October 2020, as well as the arrest of the young man who posted the video. This fueled the anger of Nigerian youths and triggered renewed attention on the hashtag #EndSARS, causing it to go viral on social media platforms. Consequently, from October 11 to 28, a nationwide wave of street protests began. Protests began in major cities such as Lagos and Abuja but soon spread to other capital cities across the country.

The message was the same – demanding the dissolution of SARS and to end police brutality, youth profiling, injustice, and maltreatment (George, 2020; Gladstone & Specia, 2020).

The Lekki massacre and other brutal reprisal attacks by police on protesters in recent times have refocused and reinforced research attention on the potentials of ‘sites of protest activity. This is because such sites have the potential to highlight slight differences in the dynamics and outcomes of protest activity. The potential becomes even more significant for two reasons: as the links between protest activity and peacebuilding processes become more crystallized in the literature, and as the influence of social media on the direction and intensity of ongoing social movements becomes more pronounced, as aptly demonstrated during the EndSARS protest. This paper advances the position that aspects of protest sites, with the tools of urban design, could be harnessed to safeguard protesters while mitigating collateral damage during times of protest.

The right to peaceful protest is a democratic imperative critical to peacebuilding (Koce, 2024). Africa’s youth, because of their vitality and sheer numbers, are major stakeholders in peace-building processes (Adzande, 2020; UNDP, 2016). They often deploy dissent activities to, among others, express dissatisfaction with the government, advance the cause of the marginalized, fight social injustice, or seek economic transformations (Ortiz et al., 2022). In most instances, dissent activities commence peacefully but tend to escalate into violence (Balogun and Akano, 2021) due to government reprisal attacks, inadequate coordination of structures/resources, or infiltration by hoodlums or disgruntled groups (Abimbade, Olayoku, and Herro, 2022).

Notwithstanding, a culture is emerging where protests have become a primary means of expressing popular demands and bringing about social change for peace and stability. Through the instrumentality of protest, authoritarian regimes have been toppled, more effective democracies have been established, and improved socioeconomic conditions have been achieved (Bado and Gueu, 2021; Mngutyo, 2019). Despite the constitutional guarantee in most countries for peaceful protest, the reality on the ground tells a different story: violent suppression, a lack of legal framework, a lack of dialogue between protesters and the government, as well as unaccountability from security forces, continue to hamper peaceful protest and ultimately peacebuilding.

Although there are attempts to obstruct protest activity, there is a rise of contentious politics globally and on the African continent. The highest number of protests in 15 years (2006-2020) was recorded in 2020, and the highest occurrences were from sub-Saharan Africa (Ortiz et al., 2022). This has demonstrated the reawakening of the people’s resilience to demand systemic change, including the radical disruption, reimagining, and rebuilding of the social, economic, and political status quo (Bowman and Pickard, 2021).

It has been argued that the rise in dissent activity among Africa's youth and several successful outcomes, is hinged mainly on advances in digital communication with activists increasingly able to engage with media technologies to become more visible and to ensure their voice is heard (Dijck and Poell, 2006; Howard, et al, 2011; Mason, 2014; Waldherr & Wijermans, 2017).

Further to this, in Africa, literature suggests that, social movements are on the rise and not for major issues like military hostility or threats to national security as was in the past, but, as a result of shared discontent or 'structural strains' from phenomena like poverty, faltering economies, lack of political freedom, certain foreign policies by governments, social-discrimination and inequalities or environmental degradation (Frimpong & Commodore, 2021; Bado and Gueu, 2021; Norris, 2011). This is significant to peacebuilding, especially in Africa, because these issues are consistent commonalities in many African countries, as well as strong propellants for dissent among Africa's most populous and vibrant statistic—her youth (Bangura & Sen, 2022; Mueller, 2018). Therefore, it has become imperative for urban space managers, peacebuilding scholars, and practitioners to take a closer look at "protest sites" as a locus for building peace, to develop new schemes for citizens to effectively enforce their rights and challenge governments, demand change, and ultimately achieve peace.

Environments for public gatherings, such as the Agora and Forum of the Greek and Roman civilizations, have evolved as societies became more advanced to include social, print, and media communication, known generally as 'the public realm.' However, the space has maintained one of its most vital characteristics as a 'site of protest and peacebuilding' (Bado and Gueu, 2021). Public spaces, such as streets, gardens, arcades, and squares, have played a central role in sustaining protest activity. Even in the reimaged version of the public realm, these spaces continue to sustain protest activity (Chellew, 2019). The form, function, and meaning of these taxonomies of space differ across numerous cultural traditions and are influenced by varying degrees of social and political control (Hou, 2010).

Literature suggests that the design, placement, or location of public space is crucial in the dynamics surrounding protest activities (Hatuka, 2023; Yakubu, 2023), especially as it concerns the protection of people using the space. The design of the physical part of the public realm informs the way conflict is collectively witnessed and voices heard; reiterates the potential impact design can have on the collective experience of public space during protest events, and reinforces the notions that well-designed, multi-functional city streets and protest sites are central to a thriving democracy (Ford and Zogran, 2017). The study by Ford and Zogran (2017) showed that Safety was at the forefront of many protesters' minds. It was concluded that by using principles adapted from concepts of defensible space, sites can be engineered through design to safeguard users, especially during protests (Perry, 2017).

Given the rise in protest activity and proliferation of social media communication tools, it becomes necessary to advance the direction of thinking towards the argument that the rise in dissent activity on the African continent also establishes the potential in the ‘public realm’ for not only protest activity but also peacebuilding, which should be protected. Essential steps to safeguarding peacebuilding processes must include the protection of the right to protest as well as the environment of protest. This study leans towards the need for attention to ‘sites for protests’ as well as to the activists who have the potential to turn these protests into a peacebuilding process. Questions arising from this line of thought include: How can sites of protest be evaluated to enhance their potential to facilitate protest activity? How can the relationship between on-site and off-site activity during protest be understood so that it can be harnessed in real time using the case study of the EndSARS protest? How can principles of urban design be used to create ideal spaces for protest activity, thereby aiding peacebuilding?

This research aims to explore the relationships between physical space, social media, and peacebuilding processes in contemporary urban protests. Its objectives are to scrutinize and map the sites of protest activity. This is achieved by evaluating the spaces that host protest activity and identifying features of the space that can be enhanced to better accommodate protest activity. It is argued here that, just like defensive urban design, a component of the design philosophy known as CPTED, involves intentional design strategies that utilize elements of the built environment to guide or restrict behavior in urban spaces. Using the same principles could involve some aspects that can be strengthened to make the public space more protest-friendly. Specifically, it emphasizes aspects of physical spaces, such as streets, plazas, parks, and squares, which host protest activities, require attention, and can be restructured with support from policymakers, international agencies, and city managers working towards long-term peace consolidation. This potential, if well-explored, should facilitate dissent while also safeguarding lives and ultimately contribute to peacebuilding.

The second objective involves examining the dynamics between on-site and off-site relationships in the public realm during the event of an actual protest activity, to identify imperatives for peacebuilding. It does this by charting the digital space of Nigeria for 17 days, from October 11<sup>th</sup> to 28<sup>th</sup>, 2020, during which the EndSARS Protest lasted. It examines the dynamics of the relationship between social media, digital technology, and the physical space. Consequently, the study examines the relationships between social media activity and on-site activity during dissent, aiming to demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between these two spaces.

## Evaluation of public spaces for protest activity

Public spaces are vital to democracy and the health of a city, and the presence, as well as the design, of such spaces can either make or mar protests (Schwartzstein, 2020). Consequently, it becomes necessary to evaluate the potential of protest spaces to act as an integral communicative device for civic action, social progress, and ultimately, urban peacebuilding (Chen, Guaralda, Kerr, 2022). Increasingly brutal reprisals against protest activity have highlighted the need for safeguarding protesters by making the environment conducive for protest and escape, as well as providing critical feedback during the event to facilitate easy movement.

In the field of urban studies, concepts like Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED) promote the idea that situational factors, such as the environment (poor lighting or design of circulation spaces) (Cozens, McLeod, and Matthews, 2018), can make crime more likely to occur at a particular time and place. As such, areas where crimes occur frequently may have situational factors that help explain the frequency. Accordingly, modifying some of these situational factors may help reduce the frequency of crime in such areas. Crime, as used in this study, implies assault on protesters involved in activism and any form of aggression against protesters. CPTED asserts that “the proper design and effective use of the built environment can lead to a reduction in the fear of crime and the incidence of crime, and to an improvement in the quality of life” (Crowe, 2020). The purpose of CPTED, as used here, involves how its principles can be applied to enhance the look and feel of places for protest activity.

For instance, studies have shown that ideal spaces that facilitate protest activity, like the streets in Athens, Greece, have the following characteristics: broad, not too long, central boulevards, a large parliament-facing square called Syntagma, and a warren of narrow streets surrounding the center, which facilitate mass gathering and easy escape. Using principles outlined by CPTED involves evaluating variables from the Greek example, such as broad central boulevards, narrow surrounding streets, and the presence of streetlights, to assess the suitability of public spaces for protest. In addition to features such as protest sites, the placement or location of public spaces, especially in relation to the seat of power, has been viewed as crucial in the dynamics surrounding protest activity (Hatuka, 2023). To measure the locations of protests, the Edge Betweenness Centrality of the street network was calculated. In a street network, intersections were used as nodes and street segments as edges, Edge Betweenness Centrality denotes the number of shortest paths that go through each edge from all nodes to all nodes this method was adopted from studies by Crucitti et al., (2006); Gao et al., (2013); Karduni et al., (2017) and used to evaluate whether protests sites were in areas of high connectivity, and if this was a factor in protesters’ decision making.

## **Conceptual Reflections on ‘public space,’ the ‘public realm’ and urban protests in Africa**

Public spaces, such as streets, squares, and parks, have been important since humans began to gather in settlements. They have always been considered places of exchange, dating back to the Greek Agoras and the Roman Forums, where people gathered to discuss matters of state. This is because public spaces are areas of attraction, expression, and exchange; they act as magnets by appealing to the social nature of humans, which is the need for social interaction and aggregation. The nature of supporting clustering also means that public spaces are fundamentally spaces of gathering for protest and dissent activities, which is a well-accepted premise in academic discourse (Mehta, 2007; Nemeth, 2012; Alubo, 2011).

Hatuka (2018) describes protests as “planned events in space” designed to “challenge sociospatial distance, and argues that by rearranging social and political distances, protests enact social solidarity and confront political injustices (pp. 8, 13). According to Hatuka (2018), the theatre of protest activity occurs in three stages, referred to as centralized, processional, or polycentric, with each formation taking place in a model or prototype of public space: the square, the street, and the park (Hatuka, 2018). These prototype spaces should ideally have features that enable them to facilitate each stage of protest activity.

For instance, in terms of layout, the streets of Athens, Greece, with broad yet not overly long central boulevards, are almost tailor-made for mass gatherings. The large parliament-facing square, Syntagma, forms a natural focal point for protesters, and the surrounding warren of narrow streets often facilitates remarkably easy escapes for demonstrators if the going gets rough (Schwartzstein, 2020). This arrangement aligns with the spatial choreography described by Hatuka (2018) and demonstrates that spatial logics play a significant role in protest activity. On the other hand, geographic characteristics such as limited walkable distances, small protest-friendly spaces, and low urban density can deprive protesters of the visibility and hence the momentum they need to sustain their dissent activity. These physical characteristics of protest sites raise questions about how to conceptualize physical spaces in a new way to facilitate social and political dissent activities.

Many cities in Africa are laid out in a way that discourages protest activity; there is a paucity or restriction of access to common city spaces, which often engender protest activity. Thus, attempting to deny protesters a spatial outlet. This is a subtle policy that follows violent repression by the government, which is aimed at discouraging the use of spatial contexts like grand squares, parks, and open spaces for dissent (Agbo, 2020).

The restriction of access to ‘protest sites’ appears to be a policy decision intended to create an environment of suppression and collective cultural docility (Agbo, 2020).

This direction has restricted protest activity in the past in many ways and implies that any imperative for strengthening of ‘protest sites’ as part of the peacebuilding process must originate and be propelled from external forces like international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and from the people themselves.

Meanwhile, over time, the form of public space used for dissent activity has undergone some changes. Habermas (1962, 1991) and Arendt (1958) described the concept of the ‘public realm’, which is demonstrated by the changing nature of public space from centrally placed and obvious physical areas in cities to spaces that are smaller, less centralized, more fragmented, and privately owned. With technology, these spaces have further metamorphosed to include the virtual pages of the Internet, television, print, and social media. Social media refers to the virtual communities and networks that serve as means of interaction among people, where they create, share, and/or exchange information and ideas (Tufts University, 2023).

The structural mutations of the public realm occasioned by social media and digital technology have impacted all activities in the space but in the activity of dissent, it contributes two significant areas of influence viz; accelerated connective activism which encompasses; recruitment, mobilization, communication, and dissemination of information, as well as expanded spaces of assembly that were not present in traditional mobilization techniques (Obaid, 2020).

For instance, the role of social media worldwide became evident in several urban protests and revolutions, including the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia, the Green Movement in Iran, and the Indignados movement in Spain (Khonsari et al., 2010; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). During the Black Lives Matter protests, supporters not only utilized social media to express individual support but also to organize protests, connect with other supporters, communicate and discuss their goals and demands, and convey their agenda and peaceful message (Carney, 2016).

Moreover, for social media, in addition to the physical traditional spaces of protests, platforms like Facebook (Meta), Twitter (X), Instagram, Snapchat, and many others have ensured that the functionality of social media as a means of information sharing and a tool for protest organization became a symbolic part of the protest movement. By providing a visualized possibility for imagining movement on multiple platforms simultaneously, social networking sites have successfully served as a means of information sharing and a tool for organizing protests (Bimber et al., 2012).

According to Adams & Jansson (2012), the interface between physical and virtual spaces in the production of space for activism symbolizes a typology that supports human interaction and peace-building efforts and has limitless possibilities for expression, especially among youth (International Alert, 2022; Bado and Gueu, 2021).

This typology of space has been described as a fluid setting with a significant impact on protest activity (Hatuka, 2023; Howard et al., 2011).

However, despite the advantages of this taxonomy of space, the narrative on the interactions between social media and urban protest activity is still heavily debated and inconsistent. For instance, according to Rodriguez-Amat and Brantner, social media platforms play a crucial role in the processes of activist mobilization, emancipation, and identification, in which online and offline activities become intricately intertwined. Material, especially in pictorial form, shared through social platforms acts as “artefacts of engagement,” introducing tension or emotional investment in the protest narrative, which propels actions symbolizing contemporary activism (Rodriguez-Amat & Brantner, 2016). This highlights a dual dynamic emphasizing a strong connection between what happens online and offline (Dijck and Poell, 2006; Waldherr & Wijermans, 2017). This dynamic is dominant and has been said to contribute to increasing the impact of protest activity (Sokolov, Belyakov, and Frolov, 2020).

Nevertheless, it has been argued that social media contributes only to sensational activism without a significant impact on the ground, where activism’s impact is most felt (Morozov, 2009; Gladwell, 2010; Karpf, 2016; Sokolov, Belyakov, and Frolov, 2020). Terms like slacktivism, which is a combination of slack and activism, have emerged, limiting activism to joining a Facebook group, participating in a Twitter hashtag, or signing/forwarding a petition with poor showing on the actual protest activity. Alternatively, clicktivism, a combination of two words — click and activism — implies a high volume of clicks on a particular topic, but not much action on the ground. Consequently, the authors maintain that social media’s impact on activism can best be described as weak.

Urban protests globally and on the continent continually occur in public spaces. Different forms of space accommodate different aspects of activism. For instance, Hatuka, (2018) identifies three major dimensions of public protests: the process of planning the protest in a particular place; the choice of spatial choreography of the event, including the value and meaning of specific tactics; and the challenges of performing contemporary protests in public space in a fragmented, complex, and conflicted world specifically the ease of escape. The study noted that these activities often occur in taxonomies of public spaces, such as the square, the street, and the park.

To facilitate protest activity and ultimately peacebuilding, these taxonomies of space should be given attention. Most especially, these taxonomies of public spaces are either restricted in access or in short supply in many African cities, thereby limiting protest activity.

Moreover, whereas the political and social aspects of protest have been extensively studied, little attention has been paid to the physical spaces in which protests happen. However, such spaces are a crucial aspect of protests because they influence the dynamics and engagement patterns among participants. With the transmutation of protest activity facilitated by social media, digital platforms can generate tension and propel civil action; however, collective action must occur in physical space to be effective. The space is vital for protests and is viewed as an arena that functions as a vehicle for political change and peacebuilding (Ramadan, 2013; Schwartzstein, 2020).

### **Understanding the relationship between protests and peacebuilding in emerging urban centers of Africa**

This section aims to contextualize peacebuilding approaches within urban spaces, thereby providing a framework for understanding the relationship between urban protests and peacebuilding, particularly on the African continent. This direction of reasoning is significant because, apart from the fact that the unit of analysis for this study is urban public space and its nuances, the world is increasingly becoming urban, with more than 60% of the world's population residing in cities. In Africa, cities are developing in complex, multidimensional ways, making conflict, crises, and violence a constant part of African urbanism (Spooner, 2024). Cities are developing and being populated at a rapid pace, outpacing government provisions. Issues of poor economies, corruption, poverty, inequality, degraded environments, inadequate and poor-quality housing, crime, and insurgency are symptomatic of urban centers in Africa. There is a need for bridging both the 'urban gap' in African conflict studies as well as the 'political gap in African urban studies by understanding the role of 'the urban' in African conflict dynamics in order to seize their future potential as centers of stability, development, peace-building, or post-conflict reconstruction (Büscher, 2018).

Conflicts are an inherent part of human nature, and when managed peacefully, they can become a source of progress, creativity, and growth (Charron, 2011). Peacebuilding is defined as an external intervention in support of national peace processes in countries affected by conflict, aimed at ending violence and rebuilding states after wars (The United Nations (UN) Agenda for Peace, 1992). This definition presupposes that there is an existing conflict; spatial contexts or boundaries of shared governance, such as states and nations, and that there are 'outside' influences towards sustaining peace in the form of international organizations, like the United Nations and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), among others.

These prepositions have been well established in the context of Africa (Büscher, 2018; Tanui, 2018). The concept of peacebuilding, according to McNamee and Muyangwa (2021), takes on several connotations, which include: conflict prevention and mediation (e.g., early warning and urgent diplomatic measures); peacemaking (e.g., high-level envoys and summits); peace enforcement (e.g., violent and nonviolent coercive measures), and post-conflict reconstruction (including justice, institution-building, and economic development). Additionally, peacekeepers operate across various realms, including protecting civilians, delivering humanitarian assistance, helping to restore the rule of law, and even engaging in de facto reconstruction and state-building. Furthermore, the authors view peacebuilding as the institutionalization of peace and the removal of the root causes of conflict. This section examines peacebuilding through the lens of post-conflict resolution, with a specific focus on local perspectives on peacebuilding and strategies for post-conflict reconstruction. This article focuses on approaches that emphasize how urban environments condition peacebuilding efforts, rather than approaches that focus on peacebuilding responses (Ljungkvist and Jarstad, 2020).

Literature suggests that while urban areas represent a rational entry point for policy interventions (Björkdahl and Strömbom, 2015; Wennmann and Jütersonke, 2019), they can also serve as policy laboratories for evaluating peacebuilding strategies (Bollens, 2006). Studies by Bollens (2006) posit that urban policies, for instance, on land-use planning, housing development, refugee relocation, social service delivery, community planning and participation, and municipal government organization can have a direct and tangible impact on issues relating to inter-group stability or volatility, thereby creating the preconditions necessary for peacebuilding.

Studies by Björkdahl (2013) suggest that examining the specificities of peacebuilding processes in cities can help us understand how urban space influences the peacebuilding process. In the same vein, Elfversson, Gusic, and Höglund (2019), argue for an understanding of the spatial component of sites of violence in post-conflict cities because; violence reduction strategies in cities with a history of violence will have to be tailored to accommodate the diversities of such cities and the mechanisms at play in urban areas may affect mobilization for peace and actors in the peacemaking process.

Urban areas, due to their cosmopolitan nature, foster high tolerance, but also breed intergroup conflict through competition and proximity-based interactions, implying that urban areas simultaneously have the potential for peacebuilding and for violent conflict.

Based on the premise by Danielak (2020), this article aligns with the notion that urban environments represent a specific type of place and space, with its own dynamics, and so, urban planning approaches to peacebuilding should consider the materiality and dynamic nature of space and its impacts on both people and activities, which should be central to peacebuilding analysis.

On the African continent, the rise of contentious politics—including demonstrations, strikes, riots, and even military coups—has demonstrated how citizens have challenged their governments to demand more democracy and better socioeconomic conditions. These activities have signaled changes on the continent, as in other parts of the world, such as the U.S. civil rights movement, and have led to a transformation of "the street" into a site of peacebuilding. However, most of the existing literature has shown little analysis of street protests as a peacemaking process in African countries. The following section sheds light on the EndSARS protest in Nigeria in an attempt to understand

### **The # EndSARS protests in Nigeria**

The EndSARS protests were a series of mass protests held simultaneously in many states in Nigeria, which commenced in 2017 when Nigerian Youths began to protest brutality by a unit of the Nigerian police known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The protest was revived in 2020 when a video of brutality against a young man by members of the squad went viral and culminated in continued daily mass protests from the 11th to the 28th of October 2020. The second phase of the protests began as a Twitter campaign, where youths leveraged social media for mobilization, using the hashtag # EndSARS. The word EndSARS was coined to demand the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) (BBC News, 2020; Thecityceleb, 2020; Salaudeen, 2017; Ogundipe, 2017).

The protest garnered widespread support on social media platforms, as well as solidarity protests and demonstrations by Nigerians in the diaspora and sympathizers in many major cities around the world. It generated so much pressure on the government that, in an unprecedented move, the government responded almost immediately by banning the SARS squad. Thus emboldened, the demands by youth were quickly amplified to include appeals for employment opportunities, good and accountable governance, as well as reducing oil prices, lowering electricity tariffs, cutting legislators' salaries, and combating corruption. Following increased demand by youth and continued protest despite police attacks and the shooting of protesters in Surulere, Lagos, and Abuja, the protest quickly degenerated into violent activities in many states, which was attributed to hijacking by government agencies through the use of hoodlums and thugs.

Despite the enormous losses recorded when the protest turned violent, the initial phase of peaceful protest documented some gains which is unprecedented. This is because, although protests are part of Nigeria's history, few gains have been recently recorded through protest activity in terms of policy changes or concessions to protester demands. Before the End SARS protest, other collective actions were either stopped by the government before commencement, with phony court injunctions, the closure of public spaces, or the use of security forces to quell the protests (The Guardian newspaper, 2020).

The EndSARS protest was distinct in that it garnered global visibility and support from a broad spectrum of society, including state governments, federal lawmakers, Nigeria's entertainment industry, and Nigerians in the diaspora. In addition, for the first time notable and influential personalities like; the founder of a social media platform, Jack Dorsey the founder of twitter, one of the most revered men of God in Nigeria the general overseer of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) Rev. E.A Adeboye and notable musicians like Beyoncé and former president Goodluck Jonathan and vice president Atiku Abubakar joined in condemning the killings.

The EndSARS protests have been touted as one of the best-organized, as the epicenter of the protests had various organizations coordinating finance, refreshments, legal aid, medical services, and security for the protesters. In terms of the outcome of the protest, the conclusions are not consistent because, for the first time in the history of popular dissent in Nigeria, the government took immediate steps to assent to the demands of protesters by banning the SARS unit and setting up a new Special weapons and tactics unit with a promise not to replace the SARS unit with the SWAT unit. However, other demands, which in the scale of current realities seemed weightier, have remained unmet to this day. However, the peaceful manner recorded quickly degenerated into shootings, arson, riots, looting, attacks on police and media stations, and prison breaks to release inmates. The protests reached a high point on the Lekki toll-gate massacre (Akinbode,2022), where several social media accounts narrated how peaceful the Nigerian military was, allegedly shooting at protesters. The gains from the EndSARS protests have been attributed to the impact of social media on protest activity; yet, there seems to be an inconsistency in the success achieved by the protests.

## **Methodology**

In analyzing the suitability of protest sites, the study utilized variables adapted from the reviewed literature. The connectivity index, defined as the number of street links divided by the number of nodes and link ends, was used to measure connectivity and to determine if high connectivity was a factor in protesters' decisions to use particular sites.

The width of streets and the presence of narrow surrounding streets and streetlights were used to measure the ease of escape, while proximity to the seat of power was used as a measure of the site's functional importance for protest.

The sequence of events for the 17-day protest was critically examined to determine the inflection points that led to increased agitation. Events that provoked heightened activity were isolated from both newspaper articles and tweets based on volume of activity, as well as increased activism on the ground, and classified under dominant emerging themes. Words like killing, dead, death, injury, gunshots, brutality, harassment, illegal, force, justice, atrocities, victim, etc, which are artefacts of engagement and bring about emotions that trigger violence, were analyzed.

For the study period, the volume of news articles was analyzed using statistical boards to demonstrate a trend, which was compared to onsite activity. Tweets with mentions of specific sites' activism were captured to show areas of protest activity.

Data was mined from tweets and newspaper reports covering the 17 days of #EndSARS activity in Nigeria. Typically, the volume of tweets ranged from thousands to millions (Abimbade, Olayoku, & Herro, 2022). The #EndSARS movement garnered more than 28 million tweets in the first two days of the protest and almost 150 million tweets as of October 21, following the Lekki shooting in Lagos (Ugoh, 2021). To reduce the volume of data to a manageable size, tweets were mined using the APIFY app, a scraper application that limits the number of tweets it can scrape to 1,000. The sampling frame was further reduced by using only the odd-numbered dates from November 11 to 28. Consequently, the sample frame consisted of tweets on the 11th, 13th, 15th, 17th, 19th, 21st, 23rd, 25th, and 27<sup>th</sup> of October, 2020. In this study, 959 raw tweets were retrieved, with each consisting of several fields, including the tweet's text, date, number of retweets (reposts), replies, and likes. The data was mined by selecting the Twitter search list option and then typing #EndSARS in the search box. Afterwards, the basic network, which gives the option to see who replied to or was mentioned, was imported. The program was then authorized to run the search and generate an analysis automatically. The data from Apify was imported into an Excel environment and then displayed in graphical form to show the volume of tweet traffic per day during the 17 Days of Activism.

A systematic review is a research method commonly referred to as 'evidence synthesis' (Polanin, 2020), which involves searching for answers in published studies. The systematic review of scholarly articles on the EndSARS protests aimed to summarize the best available research to answer specific questions set up by the study. Twenty-one journal publications were retrieved for a systematic review, of which twelve were found relevant and analyzed.

The criteria for inclusion were: the word "EndSARS" included in the paper title, publication within the first year after the protest, and articles that were cross-cutting and multidisciplinary. These articles were accessed from reputable search engines, including ProQuest Education Journals, ProQuest Social Science Journals, Web of Science, and SCOPUS. Qualitative field data were collected through interviews and focus group discussions.

Interviews were conducted with twenty (20) respondents who participated in the protests in Lagos (n=10) and Abuja (n=10). These states recorded over three million daily turnouts of protesters for the period under study (Iwuoha and Aniche, 2023).

The respondents were drawn from Civil Society Organizations and individuals who participated in the protests. The snowball research approach was used, and the criterion for inclusion in the interview was confirmation that participants had participated in the EndSARS protest, as well as their willingness to participate in the study.

Difficulties encountered during the data collection were due to respondents' unwillingness to participate in the interview, given the sensitivity of the subject, and alleged antagonistic responses from the government towards the protest, which included silent arrests. Data from the interviews and a meta-analysis of interviews with protesters were used to examine the extent to which virtual space altered the agenda of ongoing protest activity and the factors influencing the use of particular sites for protest.

## Findings and discussions

Fieldwork on protest sites for the EndSARS protest was conducted from August to November. It involved the use of a drone to capture the physical characteristics of the sites, as well as the use of steel measuring tapes to take measurements of the sites. Protest activity occurred at several sites, including the Lekki toll gate, Surulere, the State House of Assembly, and Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS) in Lagos, as well as the Kubwa expressway, Eagles Square, Shehu Shagari Way, Power House Asokoro, and the Unity Fountain in the federal capital city of Abuja. For this study, the Lekki Toll Gate and TBS in Lagos, as well as the Unity Fountain Park in Abuja, were analyzed.

### Evaluation of protest “sites” used in the EndSARS protest

In analyzing the suitability of local sites for protest activity, variables used to measure the suitability of these sites include Broad central boulevards, proximity to the seat of power, location of the sites, and narrow surrounding streets that facilitate escape. Also, the street connectivity index for areas with surrounding streets was calculated.



Figure 4.0: Lekki Toll Gate, Lagos

**Source:** Author's Fieldwork, 2023

Findings reveal that sites for protest were typically highways (Lekki toll gate, Kubwa, and Shehu Shagari highway) taken over by protesters as a way of grounding the movement in the city to a halt, thereby gaining attention. Highways are transportation carriageways with many lanes, and are often considered public space in cities. This is because they facilitate decreased travel time, carry a high volume of traffic, and are usually the quickest route for connecting cities and towns. The Lekki highway lacks the central boulevard arrangement, which is a broad, usually tree-lined road in a city, often used as a promenade (Urban Dictionary, 2023), described as necessary for protest activity. It also has streetlights concentrated near the toll gate, only ensuring that a little distance away from the toll gate, the areas become very dark when the sun sets. The location of the highways is a long distance from the seat of government, which is Ikeja in Lagos (34.2 kilometers). Moreover, the highway is not surrounded by narrow streets, which aids the easy escape of protesters, which could have accounted for the government agents' easy target of protesters. This combination of factors means that the Lekki toll gate is less than ideal for protest activity. Limited or restricted public space can deprive protesters of visibility and, hence, the momentum they need to sustain their activism. When government agencies launch reprisal attacks and activities become violent, and an escape becomes necessary, alleyways, parks, and labyrinthine apartment buildings can make a significant difference.



Figure 4.1: Aerial view of the TBS, Marina Lagos.

**Source:** Author's Fieldwork 202



A view of the street network around the square

**Source:** Author's Fieldwork 202

The Tafawa Balewa Square (TBS), on the other hand, was designed as a parade ground for the military and is surrounded by high concrete walls. Residential and commercial streets also surround it and has a warren of narrow streets around the square.

The square itself is restricted, but the area around it could serve as fairly ideal for protest because of the good network of streets, which can guarantee easy escape, the square is also well lit and so not a security risk, and the connectivity index, defined as the number of street links divided by the number of nodes and link ends, is 0.84. The higher the connectivity index, the more connected the road network. Road connectivity implies ease of movement and so ease of escape in times of peril.

The Unity Fountain in Abuja is a park located along Shehu Shagari Way. It is also a highway that links the highbrow neighborhoods of Maitama and Asokoro in Abuja. The Park overlooks the Transcorp Hilton Hotel and is supposed to be a symbol of peace and unity. Instead, it has become a favorite site for protest activity in Abuja. Recently, the government installed a security wire fence around the park to restrict access. The Park has a large boulevard described as desirable for protest activity, and it is located close to the seat of government in Aso Rock, approximately 4.1 kilometers from Shehu Shagari Way. However, the Unity Fountain is surrounded by large highways rather than by narrow streets, which do not facilitate easy escape during protests. The Park features are less than ideal for protest activity.

To further investigate the reasons behind the use of specific sites for protest, 20 active participants, comprising protesters and organizers in Lagos and Abuja, were interviewed to gather information on what informed the choice of particular sites for activism. Protesters which were mainly male (66.7%) and 33.3% female, within the age range of 40-50 years of age (83%) 66.7% 30-40(17%); were married (66.7%), single (33.3%) and mainly educated up to tertiary level (100%) Christian (100%) and civil servants (66.7%), self-employed (16.7%) and students (16.6%). The majority of respondents agreed that there were days of intensified activities. It cited passive protest activities, such as sitting down and shouting (83.3%), and active protest activities, including marching around (66.7%) and disrupting traffic (16.6%). Protest sites commonly used for activity were the Lekki toll gate (50%), Tafawa Balewa square (16.6%) in Lagos, and the Unity fountain park (66.7%) and airport expressway (33.3%). The protesters spent a range of between 3 days and 3 weeks on the protest sites, and when asked for reasons why particular sites were used for the activity, cited proximity to their homes (33.3%), information from the organizers (33.3%), and the influence of friends and peers (33.4%). While on site, all the respondents(100%) stated that they felt endangered by the presence of police (100%), hoodlums (33.3%), and the site itself (16.7%). Some of the respondents stated that while on site, the intensity of activities changed because,

*Yes, news of protesters being shot at. This led to a reduction in the intensity of the protests. Activity on the ground fed online reports, and then we got reports of government interference and them sending in well-known thugs to harass people. We became more vigilant.*

## The on-site and off-site relationship between taxonomies of public space during the EndSARS protest

In interrogating the relationship between both taxonomies of public spaces, this study interrogated a total of 959 tweets and newspaper articles in four national dailies for the period the protest lasted. The data in Figure 1 shows the volume of Twitter chatter during the protest activity.

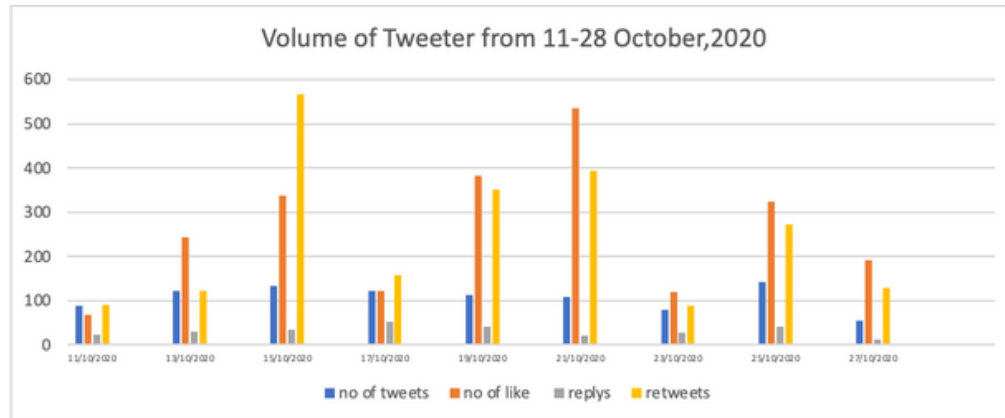


Figure 1.0 illustrates the volume of traffic on Twitter during the 17-day EndSARS protest.

**Source:** Author's analysis

Analysis of the structure and content of national dailies and X activity between 17 days during which active dissent activity occurred indicates collaboration between online conversations and offline events. Particularly after October 15, 2020, a peak in tweets and retweets was recorded, following attempts to suspend crowdfunding efforts to raise support for the protest. Peak Twitter traffic was also observed to have occurred on October 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>. In the wake and aftermath of the shooting of protesters in Lagos at the Lekki toll gate and Ogbomosho, a lockdown was declared by the government for 72 hours, suspending all government activities, and the shutdown of the VISA application center in Nigeria by the UK High Commission for 48 hours. The events of the 25<sup>th</sup> also showed a spike in Twitter chatter volume. The peak came after the deployment of additional police assets to quell the unrest. These findings reveal a dual dynamic in which the volume of digital traffic increases in tandem with the intensification of street demonstrations.

A literature review of research articles was used to explore the extent to which social media affects the trajectory of the protest agenda. The abstracts of a total of 21 articles were reviewed based on the inclusion criteria protocol established in the methodology.

Only 12 studies were deemed relevant, and the full-text articles were downloaded for analysis. The study proposed a systematic review aimed at addressing the research question: What is the impact of social media in directing the protest agenda during the #EndSARS protest?

The first wave of EndSARS protests began in 2017, marked by a surge of social media videos, images, and stories calling for the dissolution of SARS. Following this, an online petition was created for citizens to sign, calling for the disbandment of the SARS unit. At this point, the Nigerian Inspector-General of Police (IGP) responded by establishing a panel to investigate the issues raised, promising that the men of the SARS unit would turn a new leaf and undergo corrective training (Toromade, 2018). This response from the government seemed to pacify the protesters, and the momentum of the protests waned as they were halted at that point.

Initially, the protests central agenda was a human rights ideology demanding for the dissolution of SARS the literature strongly suggests that the basis for this ideology was fundamental rights of youth were being threatened by institutions set up to protect them (67% showing 8 of 12 reports). 9 out of 12 reports (signaling 75%) of the studies state that social media provided a platform that highlighted and projected to the world the complaints about the unprofessional conduct of the SARS unit and so was instrumental in the intervention of the Nigerian government at this point (Adedokun, 2022). Neither the intervention from the government nor the halt in protest activity served to stop the brutality of SARS, which continued unabated until the tweet of October 3, 2020, three years later, galvanized protest activity all over again after social media photos went viral.

The onset of the second wave of activism signaled a slight nuance to the human rights agenda with some elements of nationalism evidenced in the demands of the protesters which included; Justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and compensation for their families; immediate release of all arrested protesters; setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reported cases of police misconduct; in line with the new Police Act, psychological evaluation and retraining of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be deployed; and Increase in police salary (Abimbade, Olayoku and Herro, 2022). These demands evolved during the protests into demands for an end to corruption and poor governance, among others.

The #EndSARS protesters ultimately began to agitate for far-reaching political and constitutional reforms to ensure good governance, fiscal federalism, and political restructuring (Abati, 2020). Further demands included a presidential address by a president whom they considered inconsiderate of their demands due to his silence since the protests began.

Although studies suggest that activism mobilized through digital networks often falls short of an ideological framework, is weak, and struggles to achieve its goals (Uwalaka, 2023).

Throughout the protest, the agenda was clearly defined at all levels; however, as the protest gained momentum, the ground demands were constantly revised. The shift in agenda during the EndSARS protests demonstrated a mixture of nationalism, human rights, and democracy as ideological underpinnings; these leanings seem to contradict existing studies (Uwalaka, 2023). The shift in agenda also demonstrated the protesters' assertiveness due to the perceived gains from the dissent activity, which were easily and widely circulated and communicated via social media.

Information from the review showed that social media facilitated the movement's transition from hashtag to street activism by providing mechanisms for protest mobilization, such as awareness creation, moral, human, and financial resources, while providing an open space for youths to work together (Ugoh, 2021; Adedokun, 2022). As well as by highlighting the influence of celebrity personalities (Dim, 2023; Aliyu, 2020, BBC online). Sixty-five % of the articles attribute the potency of the protest to the effectiveness of Twitter (Akerele-Popoola, Azeez, & Adeniyi, 2022; Adeshokan, 2020).

To lend support to these findings and to generate information on the extent to which social media impacted the change in the intensity of the protests. Interviews with protesters were conducted to determine the cause of the change in tempo during the protests. Most of the protesters said police provocation (33.3%) and harassment by government-sponsored thugs (33. 3%) as a factor. The presence of politicians and celebrities was also reported to have changed the pace of activities (33. 4%). Information on which aspects of the protest benefited most from social media influence; respondents indicated that these included mobilization to the site (50%), sustaining action on the site (50%), and increasing the intensity of the protest (66.7%). This finding corroborates earlier findings from Twitter analysis and content analysis of newspaper articles, and supports other studies that show social media helped amplify protests (Uwalaka, 2023).

### **Policy imperatives for creating protest-friendly public spaces**

This study suggests that in Nigeria, there is an urgent need to preserve the stock of available civic spaces in the interest of promoting peace, democracy, development, and effectively managing state-civil relations without violating human rights. Although protest activity can occur in any available space, protesters seek to advance their cause. However, efforts made to preserve available space will go a long way in alleviating the current state of distrust among citizens and promoting opportunities for peacebuilding. Aspects such as having streetlights, utilizing spaces with a higher street connectivity index, and introducing street furniture could go a long way in making streets more protest-friendly.

There is also a need for holistic, broad, and essential political reforms that transcend police reform and require that the city spaces be made and remade.

The perception of increased risk control inhibits people from enjoying public space as a space of both social encounters and political identity expression.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This paper evaluated the sites of protest activity to safeguard protesters against the threat of such spaces and assessed the extent to which social media changes the trajectory and agenda of ongoing protests using the specific case of the EndSARS protests. It was observed that the sites used for protest activity are less than ideal and could benefit from design alterations to improve their ability to protect protesters. Additionally, social media influences and changes the tempo of protest activities, as the spike in online activity influences major events, causing an inflection or turning point during the protests. The agenda of the protests also changed during the activities, akin to a change of the goal post during a match. The review of articles on the protest and results of interviews with protesters attributed this change to the mutual trust deficit between the government and protesters, which escalated the protest and further deepened the repressive nature typical of the Nigerian state. The repression of protesters escalated already sore relations and led to curfews, clampdowns, and the excessive use of military force against peaceful protesters, thereby intensifying the conflict.

Based on the foregoing analysis, urban planners and policymakers need to consider recommendations for making sites more inclusive for protests by providing for street lighting and access to sites closer to the seat of government, so that officials can hear the message of protesters. Such spaces should also be amenable to the use of social media platforms that provide live streaming to give a blow-by-blow account of ongoing protests, as well as enable protesters to organize how to keep safe.

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