

## SOCIAL MEDIA AGENDA SETTING IN NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY AND THE DIGITAL NATIVES' PERCEPTION OF #ENDSARS PROTESTS

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### Abstract

This study applies agenda-setting theory to social media by investigating digital natives' perception and social media posts on #EndSARS protests. A cross-sectional design was used for content analysis and survey data gathering. As a result, 1285 X tweets and Facebook posts were content analysed to ascertain the social media agenda for the #EndSARS protests; and an online survey of 373 youths was done to generate their perception on the #EndSARS protests. The study reveals the dominants agenda in the social media posts on #EndSARS protests are: police brutality, bad governance, injustice, and police reform ( $r_s = .745$ ,  $N=6$ ,  $p= .021$ ). These also resonated with the digital natives who attached importance to #EndSARS agenda and provoke nationwide response. These findings further substantiated the assumptions of agenda setting that media agenda could influence public consensus on issues and event, which in this case, is the #EndSARS. The study was able to test agenda setting by establishing a correspondence between social media posts and digital natives' perception of #EndSARS protests. The study found the significance of social media agenda in fostering policy change in democracy. The #EndSARS protests on social media has led to government engaging in policy reforms to address social injustice, police harassment, extrajudicial activities of security agencies and taking measures to reduce bad governance.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Digital Natives, Agenda Setting, #EndSARS protests, and Democracy.

### Introduction

Agenda formation studies have acknowledged the significance of a social media agenda, and it is currently a strong argument. In their empirical studies, Hong (2012), Bastos and Zago (2013), Sparks (2016), and Ashong and Henry (2017) all confirmed how the internet and social media are better than traditional legacy print and broadcast mainstream media for news and information in the last two decades. Social media is effective, interactive, and

economical news source for the public. Because of this, digital natives may easily access news online at a low cost and at a speed that is unmatched by traditional mainstream media. The mainstream media has shifted to the internet to remain relevant, utilizing social media journalistic techniques to reach an online audience. Social media is now known as a significant source of agenda production due to the changing nature of production and delivery of news and information; as well as the way that people seek and consume news. This has created an

emerging aspect regarding agenda-setting investigation that is important to research (Aruguete, 2017; Kim, Kim & Zhou, 2017). According to theory, agenda setting and its function in agenda formation have been closely examined, and the mainstream media sources its agenda from political and economic elites as well as government bureaucracy (Lopez-Escobar, Llamas & McCombs, 1998; McCombs, 2008). However, social media's rise as an agenda source is currently seen as a new area of study in agenda setting (McCombs, 2014; Aruguete, 2017). Digital natives in the public realm are creating the social media agenda, which is now being used as an agenda-setting instrument. Studying the theoretical role of social media in agenda-setting on issues that affect digital natives is therefore crucial. Social media is now regarded as a strong and reliable tool for social advocacy, social mobilization, and activism by the digital natives, who typically comprise the majority of a democracy's population (Grzywinska & Borden, 2012). Because of their desire to have their views heard in a democratic and traditional media arena that is primarily governed by elite interests, youth have turned to social media and citizen journalism, which offers them the chance to participate as active citizens.

In recent time, social media is being used to raise awareness on problems that impact youth. For instance, social media's ability to create agenda was credited with the success of the 2008 Obama election, the 2012 Arab Spring movement, the 2020 #BlackLivesMatters global movement, and the 2020 #EndSARS protest (Sparks, 2016; Ashong & Henry, 2017; Uwazuruike, 2020). World leaders like Joe Biden who was the then-US President-elect, António Guterres the UN Secretary-General, Mike Pompeo and Hillary Clinton who were former US Secretary of State, Anthony Joshua the heavyweight boxing champion, and Mesut

Ozil former Arsenal footballer were among those who spoke out, bringing the #EndSARS movement which aims to end police brutality in Nigeria to a climax when it garnered international attention (Uwazuruike, 2020). Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey created a special emoji for the campaign, and for many days in October 2020, the hashtag #EndSARS was the top global trending topic on Twitter. The government swiftly responded to this incident by declaring policy changes, including police reforms, and outlawing the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS).

In Nigerian democracy, there are not many studies regarding agenda setting studies employing social media or new media (Mustapha, 2014; Chambers, 2015; Okaiyeto, 2017; Moyo, 2018). In democracies including the US, Latin America, Europe, and Asia, agenda-setting and agenda-building theories have been repeatedly supported by research (Alonso, 2014; Aruguete, 2017; Aruguete, 2016; Grzywinska & Batorski, 2016; Zhang & Kioussis, 2018).

There is, therefore, need for more research in Nigeria, which is in the third stage of its embrasure, to test the effectiveness of agenda-setting in the context of social media in democracies, even though McCombs (2014), one of the pioneers of agenda-setting theories, thought that the theory's effectiveness would be more noticeable in states that practice representative democracy (Mustapha, 2014; Majek, 2017; Moyo, 2018). Thus, this study examined the dominant social media agenda on #EndSARS protests, digital natives' perception of dominant agenda on #EndSARS protests, and correlation between perceived salience of #EndSARS protests and digital native advocacy for policy change in Nigeria's democracy.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study was guided by the following specific objectives:

1. To ascertain the dominant agenda of #EndSARS protests perceived by the digital natives;
2. To determine how the dominant agenda manifested in social media posts of the #EndSARS protests;
3. To examine the relationship between social media posts and digital native perception of the #EndSARS protests; and
4. To examine how the #EndSARS protests by digital natives influenced police reforms and policy changes in Nigeria's democracy.

### **Study Hypotheses**

Scholars believe that the theory can explain other issues such as the economy, environment, corruption, social movement, protest, and activism, all of which are vital to any democracy. The following hypotheses are put forth in light of research trends that have validated or supported agenda-setting, the need to explain it in relation to social media and other issues outside of election-related concerns, and the characteristics of candidates.

H0<sub>1</sub>: Dominant social media #EndSARS protests agenda did not match perception of digital natives.

H0<sub>2</sub>: There is no relationship between digital natives' perception of #EndSARS protests and police reforms/policy changes in Nigeria.

### **Literature Review**

This section contains the review of related concepts (social media, digital native, democracy), theory (agenda setting), the theoretical framework and justification for the study.

#### **Agenda Setting, Social Media and Digital Native Advocacy in Democracy**

The agenda-setting concept was first put forth in 1972 by Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs who looked into the possibility of a connection between issues in the public sphere at the time and those in the mainstream media throughout the 1968 Chapel-Hill, North Carolina, election campaign. The study found that the public agenda and media agenda had a strong +979 relationship (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In other words, the people would be successfully informed about importance by the press. Agenda-setting serves as a susceptible media affect theory for this reason, impacting both the collective and individual levels (Shehata & Stromback, 2013). By creating consensus, the theory explained the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda (Chernov, Valenzuela, & McCombs, 2011), even though agenda formation's influence depends on subject-matter expertise (Basova & Cooley, 2010). However, since the introduction of the internet, which led to public fragmentation due to the availability of several information sources, academics have raised concerns about the legitimacy of agenda-setting, noting that, various online news sources reduce the impact of agenda-setting (Shehata & Stromback, 2013). However, as noted by McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver (2014), the growth of online as news sources broadens the scope of public discourse beyond what is only influenced by traditional media. However, there is now worry that social media may replace traditional media in setting agendas, given its current importance as a major news source for particular populations. Online news articles, which are consequently shareable, are quite comparable to the once in "legacy media" (Maier 2010). According to recent research by Trilling, Tolochko, and Burscher (2016), news produced on social media sites is much more focused than on other online media platforms. This is

significant for the study of how social media is used to set agendas in the mass media. According to Trilling, Tolochko, and Burscher (2016), 'sharing on Facebook focuses more on a few prominent problems, whereas on Twitter there is more variation'. This is indicated by the fact that popular media topics receive more shares and distributed on Facebook than that of Twitter.

Given that users create personal networks, some may anticipate that Facebook may facilitate informational echo chambers; nevertheless, the content shared on the social media site is really quite varied (Bakshy et al. 2012). Therefore, social media may be used to spread socio-political news and information to users, which would have the agenda-setting effect which reflects the contents of mainstream media. This is more pronounced when audience are exposed to accidental information through social media.

In recent time, social media has been investigated as a means of expressing the prevailing public opinion discourse. In the field of agenda planning, there are two tenable research avenues. First, how much the political agenda influences the media agenda, or does not impact it, and second, how journalists use new media (Aruguete, 2017). A 2019 study by Moyo claims that social media and conventional media set each other's agenda. Going by the headlines in some mainstream media, social media's ability to set agenda is what made the 2008 Obama election, the 2012 Arab Spring movement, the 2020 #BlackLivesMatters global movement, and the 2020 #EndSARS protest successful (Sparks, 2016; Ashong & Henry, 2017; Uwazuruike, 2020).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Agenda-setting theory posits that journalists, news correspondents and reporters, editors and media practitioners influence the audience socio-political day-to-day reality by their coverage and reportage of news and

information, since the credibility and trust of information gathered from the media dictates what the audience views as the most important issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The macroscopic theory of agenda building focuses on how and what influences the production of media messages, while the microscopic theory of agenda setting focuses on how and what influences the development of media messages (Baran & Davis 2010; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) claimed that these activities have the power to affect the amount of time and attention that is spent on certain subjects in the media.

This study primarily applied agenda-setting theory in the social media era of Nigeria's democracy by examining how digital natives interpreted social media posts about the #EndSARS movement. Thus, the research provides a potential explanation for the #EndSARS protest's social media agenda and coverage. A descriptive account of the media's role in protest coverage has been the main focus of earlier studies on the press and protest (Irwin-Rogers & Pinkney, 2017; Majek, 2017; Uwazuruike, 2020; Dambo et al. 2020). Furthermore, social media was not acknowledged as a new agenda-setting driver in previous agenda-setting research (McCombs, 2008; Kamau, 2016; Zhang & Kioussis, 2018). In order to completely understand the crucial role the media may play in thwarting failed governance and advancing representative democracy, this study thus closes literature gap by offering a theoretical elucidation of the social media's involvement in protests and policy advocacy among digital natives.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employed mixed method (content analysis and survey methods) for the actualization of the set objectives. For the content analysis and data gathering for the survey, a cross-sectional design was used. As

a result, a content analysis of Twitter and Facebook posts was employed to construct a social media agenda for the #EndSARS protests in order to gather data for the study. These social media platforms were used by the youth to organise and assemble for protests across the country that was done under the hashtag #EndSARS (Uwazuruike, 2020). The investigation was limited to six months social media posts about the #EndSARS protests from October 2020 to March 2021, which is a period that the #EndSARS protests gain traction across the country. Specifically, the month of October 2020 sees the protests to gained global attention that prompts social media posts and in order to avoid temporal gap in agenda-setting research (Mcombs, 2014; Wanta & Golan, 2004).

X and Facebook were the major social media platforms that serve as mobilization arena for the EndSARS protests, which resulted in persistent and regular postings by various youth groups and associations. Between October 1, 2020, and March 31, 2021, the researcher randomly picked 1285 tweets and Facebook posts with the hashtag #EndSARS to ascertain the social media agenda.

### **Content Categories and Unit of Analysis**

In order to test hypothetical statement for this study and accomplish the study objectives, three content categories are generated. The unit of analysis (#EndSARS protest) was measured using the three categories: #EndSARS substantive attributes, #EndSARS affective attributes and Policy change. The six #EndSARS substantive attributes identified are: EndSARS/EndSWART, Police Reform, End Police Brutality, End Bad Governance, Occupy Likki/Lekki shooting and Social Justice. The #EndSARS affective attribute can be positive, negative, or neutral.

The inter-coder reliability for all the three coding units revealed high reliability coefficient with Cohen Kappa statistics ranging from 0.77 to 1.00.

### **Survey**

A structured closed-ended questionnaire was employed as the data gathering research instrument for the survey. The questionnaire was created following a thorough examination of the literature and related studies (Dai et al. 2021; Apuka & Omar, 2020). Face and content validity were performed by specialists in the field of education and media studies to confirm the questionnaire's validity.

As a result, our study conducted a poll to learn how digital natives felt about the #EndSARS protest coverage on social media. The information was gathered between March 15th and May 10th, 2023.

This study employed a random sample technique due to the population's size, diversity, and demographic complexity (Ngene, 2016; Neuman, 2007; Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). To guarantee that a range of demographics were represented, a stratified sample was employed based on age, gender, and academic/non-academic people. Google forms that were hosted online were used to run the survey. Through their individual emails, Facebook Groups and WhatsApp platforms, and individual accounts throughout their schools, the target responders received the link to the forms. A study assistant assigned to each respondent was able to send them regular reminders via the Whatsapp platform. The participants' informed consent was asked on the front interface of the online questionnaire, and their privacy was assured. The data was taken between March 15th and May 10th, 2023. Three hundred and seventy-three (373) people completed the survey, which was determined to be relevant in the study.

The four sections of the questionnaire were designed to address the research questions and evaluate the hypotheses put forth. Section 1: The demographics of the respondents were covered in this part, including their age, gender, and degree of education. Section 2: Patterns of Social Media Usage, Section 3: Perceived Dominants Agenda on #EndSARS Protests. Section 4: Policy Change. In April 2022, a pilot study was carried out by the researcher to guarantee the measurement tool's reliability. A reliability test was performed on the pilot study responses using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Creswell, 2014). The scaled items included in this study had reliability scores ranging from 0.87 to 0.94 for both the pilot test and the final survey data collection.

For analysis, the acquired data was extracted, cleaned, and loaded onto version 23 of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). According to the tradition of agenda-setting research, the findings were presented using descriptive statistics including frequency, tables, percentages, and standard deviation, and the hypotheses were tested using Spearman and Pearson correlations.

### **Results Presentation and Data Analysis**

This section contains the analysis of the survey and content analysis data generated for the purpose of this study. The survey data were first presented and analysed before the content analysis data as seen below.

**Table 1: Respondents Demographic Features**

| <b>Demographic Features</b>                 | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>Age Bracket</b>                          |                  |                   |
| Age 16- 25 Years                            | 91               | 24.3              |
| Age 26-35 Years                             | 158              | 42.3              |
| Age 36 – 40 Years                           | 124              | 33.2              |
| <b>Total</b>                                | <b>373</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |
| <b>Sex</b>                                  |                  |                   |
| Male  | 219              | 58.7              |
| Female                                      | 154              | 40.3              |
| <b>Total</b>                                | <b>373</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |
| <b>Educational Qualification</b>            |                  |                   |
| Only Secondary O'level                      | 15               | 4.0               |
| Only Diploma Certificate or NCE Certificate | 128              | 34.3              |
| Only HND or First Degree                    | 137              | 36.7              |
| Masters or PhD Degree                       | 102              | 27.3              |
| <b>Total</b>                                | <b>373</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |

**Source: Researchers field work, 2023**

The survey data were generated from 373 online respondents, majority (66.6%) of whom were 35 years and below, males (58.7%) and well educated (64%). This further substantiated the assertion that social media is dominated by younger generation who are often regarded as digital native.

**Table 2: Patterns of Social Media Usage**

| <b>Patterns of Social Media Usage</b>                             | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|---|------------------|-------------------|
| <b>the Most Used Social Media Platform</b>                        |                  |                   |
| Facebook  | 205              | 55.0              |
| X (Twitter)   | 105              | 27.0              |
| Others, such as Whatsapp, Tick Tok, Telegraphs<br>orYoutube )     | 67               | 18.0              |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>373</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |
| <b>Day(s) spend on Social Media Weekly</b>                        |                  |                   |
| 0 day   | 6                | 1.6               |
| 1 day   | 10               | 2.6               |
| 2 days  | 23               | 6.1               |
| 3 days  | 42               | 11.2              |
| 4 days  | 56               | 15.0              |
| 5 days  | 91               | 24.3              |
| 6 days  | 18               | 4.8               |
| 7 days  | 127              | 34.0              |
| <b>Total (M= 5.40, SD=1.74, Min=0 day, Max= 7day)</b>             | <b>373</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |
| <b>Social Media Exposure Level</b>                                |                  |                   |
| Little Exposure   | 81               | 21.7              |
| Much Exposure   | 147              | 39.4              |
| Very Much Exposure  | 145              | 38.8              |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>373</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |
| <b>Interval of Time Spent on Social Media</b>                     |                  |                   |
| Lower than 30 Minutes   | 79               | 21.1              |
| Between 30 Minutes to 1 Hour                                      | 147              | 39.4              |
| Between 2 Hours to 3 Hours  | 98               | 26.2              |
| From 4 Hours and Above  | 49               | 13.1              |
| <b>Total (M=2.01, SD= 0.77, Min= below 1 h, Max =<br/>4hours)</b> | <b>373</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |
| <b>Attention Given to #EndSARS Post</b>                           |                  |                   |
| No Attention  | 80               | 21.4              |
| Some Attention  | 53               | 14.2              |
| Moderate Attention  | 97               | 26.0              |
| Much Attention  | 143              | 38.3              |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>373</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |
| <b>Importance Given to #EndSARS Posts</b>                         | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
| No Importance   | 94               | 25.2              |
| Little Importance   | 80               | 21.4              |
| Much Importance   | 106              | 28.4              |
| Very Much Importance  | 93               | 24.9              |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>373</b>       | <b>100.0</b>      |

Source: Researchers field work, 2023

The data shows that over half of the respondents (55%) have facebook account and they used it the most and over one third (34.0%) are on Facebook daily, while averagely they spent 2 hours on social media. Similarly, more than one third (38.8%) have very much exposure to #EndSARS post on social media and same (38.3%) gave much attention to such stories on #EndSARS. Similarly, about half of the respondents give #EndSARS post much importance. It therefore, means that the respondents were averagely exposed to #EndSARS stories on social media. Thus, it is now ideal for the researcher to test the efficacy of agenda setting theses on the respondents because of their considerable level of exposure to the agenda of study on social media.

**Research Question One:** *what are the dominants agenda of #EndSARS protests as perceived by the digital natives?*

**Table 3: Digital Natives’ Percieved Dominants Agenda on the #EndSARS**

| Agenda               | Freq       | %            | Unfavourable % | Neutral %  | Favourable % | Rank |
|----------------------|------------|--------------|----------------|------------|--------------|------|
| EndSARS/ EndSWAT     | 176        | 47.1         | 1.0            | 6.6        | 91.3         | 1    |
| End Police Brutality | 75         | 20.1         | 1.2            | 8.2        | 85.7         | 2    |
| Social Justice       | 10         | 2.6          | 0.0            | 1.5        | 57.8         | 5    |
| End Bad Governance   | 37         | 9.9          | 1.9            | 9.7        | 81.5         | 3    |
| Police Reform        | 43         | 11.5         | 0.0            | 4.6        | 72.4         | 4    |
| Occupy Lekki         | 32         | 8.5          | 2.1            | 12.8       | 51.9         | 6    |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>373</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>3.1</b>     | <b>8.6</b> | <b>89.3</b>  |      |

**Source: Researchers’ field work, 2023**

The data in Table 3 shows that EndSARS or EndSWAT tag was the dominate agenda followed by end police brutality, then police reform, end bad governance and occupy Lekki respectively. This shows that the hashtag #EndSARS was used heavily on social media during the protest to show dismay with the Nigerian police. The table also shows that the affective attributes, EndSARS or EndSWAT enjoyed the most favourable acceptance among the digital native. Police reform came second and end police brutality came third. This is not surprising considering the fact that the digital natives were the most affected by the injustice and brutality of the Nigerian police which the EndSARS protest was staged to correct.

**Research Question Two: What are the dominants agenda in social media posts of the #EndSARS protests?**

**Table 4: Dominants Agenda Manifested in Social Media Posts on #EndSARS Protest and Affective Attributes**

| Agenda               | Freq        | %            | Unfavourable % | Neutral %  | Favourable % | Rank |
|----------------------|-------------|--------------|----------------|------------|--------------|------|
| EndSARS/ EndSWAT     | 496         | 38.5         | 1.0            | 6.6        | 91.3         | 1    |
| End Police Brutality | 255         | 19.8         | 1.2            | 8.2        | 75.7         | 3    |
| Social Justice       | 175         | 13.6         | 0.0            | 1.5        | 57.8         | 5    |
| End Bad Governance   | 131         | 10.1         | 1.9            | 9.7        | 61.5         | 4    |
| Police Reform        | 158         | 12.2         | 0.0            | 4.6        | 82.4         | 2    |
| Occupy Lekki         | 70          | 5.4          | 2.1            | 12.8       | 51.9         | 6    |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>1285</b> | <b>100.0</b> | <b>3.1</b>     | <b>8.6</b> | <b>89.3</b>  |      |

**Source: Researchers' field work, 2023**

The data shows that EndSARS or EndSWAT tag was the dominate agenda followed by end police brutality, then end injustice, police reform, end bad governance and occupy Lekki respectively. This shows that the hashtag #EndSARS was used heavily on social media during the protest to show dismay with the Nigerian police. The data in Table 4 also show the affective attributes of the EndSARS agenda. According to the data, EndSARS or EndSWAT enjoyed the most favourable post on the social media. Police reform came second and end police brutality came third. This suggests a perfect alignment between social media agenda on ENdSARS and digital natives' perception of the agenda and the affective attributes.

**Research Question Three: Is there any relationship between social media posts and digital native perception of the #EndSARS protests?**

Table 5 provide the correspondence between substantive attributes of social media and digital native. The data shows perfect correspondence for EndSARS/EndSWAT and end police brutality.

**Table 5: Substantive Social Media Agenda and Digital Native Agenda of #EndSARS Protests**

| EndSARS Substantive Attributes | Social Media |              |      | Digital Native |              |      | Comparison |        |
|--------------------------------|--------------|--------------|------|----------------|--------------|------|------------|--------|
|                                | F            | %            | Rank | F              | %            | Rank | Diff       | Change |
| EndSARS/ EndSWAT               | 496          | 38.5         | 1    | 176            | 47.1         | 1    | 0          | -      |
| End Police Brutality           | 255          | 19.8         | 2    | 75             | 20.1         | 2    | 0          | -      |
| Social Justice                 | 175          | 13.6         | 3    | 10             | 2.6          | 6    | -3         | ↓      |
| End Bad Governance             | 131          | 10.1         | 5    | 37             | 9.9          | 4    | 1          | ↑      |
| Police Reform                  | 158          | 12.2         | 4    | 43             | 11.5         | 3    | 1          | ↑      |
| Occupy Lekki                   | 70           | 5.4          | 6    | 32             | 8.5          | 5    | 1          | ↑      |
| <b>Total</b>                   | <b>1285</b>  | <b>100.0</b> |      | <b>373</b>     | <b>100.0</b> |      |            |        |

**Source: Researchers' field work, 2023**

The data above shows moderate level of correspondent between social media substantive agenda and digital native agenda during the coverage of the #EndSARS protest.

**Table 6: Affective Social Media Agenda and Digital Native Agenda of EndSARS Campaign**

| EndSARS Attributes   | Affective | Social Media |              |      | Digital Native |              |      | Comparison |        |
|----------------------|-----------|--------------|--------------|------|----------------|--------------|------|------------|--------|
|                      |           | F            | %            | Rank | F              | %            | Rank | Diff       | Change |
| EndSARS/ EndSWAT     |           | 496          | 91.3         | 1    | 176            | 91.3         | 1    | 0          | -      |
| End Police Brutality |           | 255          | 75.7         | 3    | 75             | 85.7         | 2    | 1          | ↑      |
| Social Justice       |           | 175          | 57.8         | 5    | 10             | 57.8         | 5    | 0          | -      |
| End Bad Governance   |           | 131          | 61.5         | 4    | 37             | 81.5         | 3    | 1          | ↑      |
| Police Reform        |           | 158          | 82.4         | 2    | 43             | 72.4         | 4    | -2         | ↓      |
| Occupy Lekki         |           | 70           | 51.9         | 6    | 32             | 51.9         | 6    | 0          | -      |
| <b>Total</b>         |           | <b>1285</b>  | <b>100.0</b> |      | <b>373</b>     | <b>100.0</b> |      |            |        |

Source: Researchers' field work, 2023

For the affective attributes, table 6 shows a correspondence for 3 #EndSARS. The data shows correspondence for EndSARS, social justice and occupy Lekki. This is a confirmation of the power of social media in setting agenda for the digital native.

**Research Question Four: What is the correspondence between perceived importance of #EndSARS protest and digital native advocacy for policy change in Nigeria's democracy.**

**Table 7: Digital Native Support for Policy Change**

| Youth Support  | Level of Support*(%) |      |      |      |      |             |             |
|--|----------------------|------|------|------|------|-------------|-------------|
|  | 1                    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | M           | SD          |
| Q1. I gave full support for the suspension of SARS                                     | 3.3                  | 5.3  | 3.3  | 26.3 | 61.7 | 4.38        | 1.01        |
| Q2. I Am assertive that the issue of police brutality will stop                        | 4.3                  | 17.1 | 12.7 | 35.8 | 30.1 | 3.70        | 1.09        |
| Q3. The EndSARS protests was to ensure social justice to Victims                       | 4.3                  | 21.1 | 14.0 | 33.1 | 27.4 | 3.58        | 1.21        |
| Q4. The protests was to bring about an end to bad governance                           | 3.7                  | 13.3 | 11.0 | 39.7 | 32.3 | 3.83        | 1.13        |
| Q5. I support government quest to end the operation of SARS/SWAT                       | 5.4                  | 23.1 | 19.1 | 31.1 | 44.1 | 3.40        | 1.21        |
| Q6. I fully supported the quest for police reform                                      | 3.3                  | 21.0 | 20.7 | 37.0 | 18.0 | 3.45        | 1.11        |
| Q7 I trust that those that engaged in extrajudicial killing will be brought to Justice | 4.3                  | 14.0 | 9.4  | 46.8 | 35.5 | 3.75        | 1.11        |
| <b>Total</b>   |                      |      |      |      |      | <b>3.63</b> | <b>1.06</b> |

**Source: Researchers’ field work, 2023**

Generally, the result indicates that the public is in strong support of #EndSARS crusade (M=3.63, SD=1.06). The endSARS protest led to government suspension of the SARS unit. Police brutality has reduced in the country and presently judicial panel of enquiry are being set across the county for social justice.

Table 8 provides result on the correspondence between perceived salience

of #EndSARS agenda and public support of such policy change.

The Pearson correlation for the two measures (Perceived agenda and public support) discloses moderate significant correspondence  $r = .602$ ,  $p = .01$ . This result shows that there is connection between social media agenda and public agenda of the #EndSARS protests for policy change.

**Table 8: Pearson Correlation between Perceived Salience and Digital Native Support of Policy Change Crusade**

| Agenda Salience                      | <i>r</i> | <b>P</b> |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Perceived Attributes/ public support | .602     | .01      |

**Source: Researchers’ field work, 2023**

The result reveals a moderate significant correspondence between perceived #EndSARS agenda and digital native support of #EndSARS protests for policy change.

**Hypotheses Testing**

The following hypotheses were tested and reported as follow:

*H0<sub>1</sub>*: Dominants social media #EndSARS protests agenda did not match perception of digital natives.

The Spearman’s rho correlation for the two variables (social media and digital natives agenda) reveals a significant correspondence  $r_s = .745$ ,  $N=6$ ,  $p = .021$  as seen in Table 9. This result reveals that dominants social media #EndSARS protests agenda significantly matched the perception of digital natives on ENdSARS.

**Table 9: Spearman’s rho Correlation between Social Media and Digital Natives Agenda on #EndSARS protests**

| #EndSARS Agenda                       | <b>N</b> | <i>R<sub>s</sub></i> | <b>P</b> |
|---------------------------------------|----------|----------------------|----------|
| Social Media / Digital Natives Agenda | 6        | .745                 | .21      |

**Source: Researchers’ field work, 2023**

Therefore, the study have been able to confirmed on the correspondence social media has with the dominant agenda digital natives agenda in respect to #EndSARS protest meant to end police brutality through policy reforms in the Nigeria’s police.

*H0<sub>2</sub>*: There is no relationship between digital natives’ perception of #EndSARS protests and police reforms/policy changes in Nigeria.

The Pearson correlation for the two variables (social media attributes and public support) reveals moderate significant relationship  $r$

=.602,  $p = .01$  as indicated in Table 8 above. This result reveals the null hypothesis was jettison while the alternate hypothesis- that there is relationship between digital natives' perception of #EndSARS protests and police reforms/policy changes in Nigeria was accepted.

### **Discussion**

This study examined social media agenda setting in democratic Nigeria by assessing the dominants agenda of #EndSARS protests as manifested on the social media and as perceived by the digital natives; how the agenda translated into advocacy for police reform and policy change in Nigeria's democracy. Two null hypotheses were raised for the study. The study was anchored on Agenda Setting Theory and employed both survey and content analysis research methods.

#### ***Dominant #EndSARS Agenda as Perceived by Digital Natives***

The study found that EndSARS/EndSWAT, police brutality, injustice, bad governance, police reform and occupy Lekki ( $r_s = .745$ ,  $N=6$ ,  $p = .021$ ) were the dominant agenda perceived by the digital natives. When ranked in order of dominance, *EndSARS/EndSWAT* came first (47.1%) followed by end police brutality (20.1%). This suggests that the protest was fundamentally framed by youths as a response to systemic police brutality and institutional failure within the nation's security architecture.

That the study also reports an overwhelming favourable affective response to the aforementioned agenda especially the EndSARS/EndSWAT (91.3%), indicates that the digital natives did not only recognise these issues but strongly endorsed them. This finding therefore aligns with second-level agenda setting assumptions that media influence goes beyond issue salience to shaping how audiences evaluate and emotionally respond to issues. The digital

natives' strong affective acceptance is a reflection of their lived experiences of police brutality and harassment, hence, the protest resonated deeply with this national demography

#### ***Dominant Agenda in Social Media Posts on #EndSARS Protest***

Findings on the content analysis of dominant agenda in social media post on #EndSARS protest suggests that they strongly prioritized EndSARS/EndSWAT (38.5), end police brutality (19.8%), and police reform (12.2%). The dominance of these issues across both social media suggests a clear thematic focus by the users and suggests a collective framing of the protest narrative around policing failures and bad governance.

That the substantive attributes aligned with the affective attributes in the social media posts suggests that the protest discourse was largely framed in a positive, reform-oriented manner rather than confrontational. This is contrary to the argument that social media activism is predominantly emotive without clear policy direction (see Schneider, Eli, Dolan & Ulijaszek, 2017). On the contrary, the findings indicate that digital natives used social media strategically to emphasis reformist goals, lending legitimacy to the protest movement.

#### ***Correspondence between Social Media Agenda and Digital Native's Perception***

One of the significant findings of this study is the strong correspondence between social media agenda and digital natives' perception of the #EndSARS protest. The Spearman's rho correlation ( $r_s = .745$ ,  $p < .05$ ) confirms that the issue most emphasized on social media were also the issues most salient to the youths.

This finding further empirically validates the core assumption of the agenda setting theory in a social media context: that media attention

to an issue could influence the level of attention given to the same issues by the public (McCombs, 2014). The alignment between the social media post and the digital natives' perception reinforces the effectiveness of social media in constructing a shared issue hierarchy among digital natives, despite the fragmented nature of online media environments. The existence of slight differences in issues like social justice and occupy Lekki suggests selective internalization of agenda; while they were present in the social media discourse, they were less important to the respondents, perhaps, due to their episodic framing or perceived emotional sensitivity. This finding therefore aligns with the argument that agenda setting effects are not uniform but are often mediated by relevance, personal experience, and perceived immediacy.

### ***Social Media Agenda and Advocacy for Policy Change***

Finding indicates that digital natives demonstrated strong support for policy reforms with an overall mean score of 3.63. the respondents expressed strong support particularly for the suspension of SARS (M= 4.38), police reform, and accountability for extrajudicial killings. This finding is an indication that the #EndSARS protest went beyond symbolic activism and translated into concrete demand for policy reform.

The moderately significant Pearson correlation ( $r = .602$ ,  $p < .01$ ) between perceived agenda salience and support for policy change is an indication that issues importance influenced civic engagement and reform advocacy among digital natives. The finding further substantiated the assumption of agenda building, an extension of the agenda setting theory which posits that media agenda can shape not only public opinion but also collective action and institutional responses to the issues.

In a nutshell, findings suggest that social media did not merely mirror public frustration but actively facilitated consensus-building and mobilization. The establishment of judicial panels of inquiry and the formal disbandment of SARS can therefore be interpreted as outcomes of sustained agenda pressure amplified through the social media platforms.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explored the agenda setting function of social media in democratic setting like Nigeria through the analysis of the dominant agenda of the #EndSARS protest, evaluation of digital natives' perceptions, and examination of how these social media agenda translated into police reform and policy change. This study was anchored on agenda setting theory and utilized mixed research methods-survey and content analysis to provide empirical evidence that social media functioned as a powerful agenda setting and agenda building platform during the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria.

Findings from this study clearly shows that EndSARS/EndSWAT, end police brutality, police reform, social justice, end bad governance, and occupy Lekki, were the dominant agenda of the #EndSARS protest. The study also revealed that the the above agenda were strongly internalized by the digital natives. The study also reported strong and statistically significant correspondence between social media agenda and digital natives' perceived agenda ( $r_s = .745$ ,  $p < .05$ ) as majority of the digital natives confirmed that issues emphasized on social media became salient in their minds. This upholds the assumption of agenda setting theory within the social media context, despite concerns about audience fragmentation in the digital environment.

Conclusively, this study affirms the continued relevance and explanatory power of agenda setting theory in the social media

era especially in emerging democracies like Nigeria's. The study has shown that social media effectively shape public priorities, influence perceptions, and foster collective action toward policy change.

### **Recommendations**

Going by the above findings, the recommends as follow:

1. Given that digital natives strongly perceive EndSARS/EndSWAT, end police brutality, police reform, and end bad governance as dominant agenda of the protest, this study recommends that government institutions and security agencies should always monitor and engage youth-driven social media discourse to gain better understanding of public grievances and emerging issues before they metamorphose into actual protest.
2. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and advocacy groups should continue to frame protest messages around well-articulated, issue-based agenda, instead of using vague emotional appeals, to elicit public understanding, legitimacy and sustained engagement as seen in the #EndSARS protest.
3. Public institutions should adopt proactive, transparent, and consistent social media communication strategies with the understanding that issues emphasized on social media significantly shapes public perception and can either build trust or intensify public dissent.
4. Nigerian government should institutionalize social media-enabled citizen engagement mechanisms to translate online advocacy into measurable policy actions, implementation monitoring, and long-term democratic accountability.

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