



Social Media as a Mechanism for Public Accountability in Nigeria: Lessons from #EndSARS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social media as an emerging mechanism of public accountability in Nigeria, using the 2020 #EndSARS movement against police brutality as an illustrative case. Drawing on Social Accountability Theory and the networked public sphere perspective, the study explores how digitally networked citizens used platforms such as Twitter (now X), Instagram, and WhatsApp to expose abuses by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), document the Lekki Tollgate shooting, mobilise nationwide protest, and pressure state institutions into establishing judicial panels of inquiry. Adopting a qualitative, document-based case study design, the article synthesises peer-reviewed literature, official inquiry findings, and reputable secondary sources to trace how social media performed three interlocking accountability functions during #EndSARS: mobilisational, evidentiary, and agenda-setting. The findings show that while social media substantially expanded the answerability of state actors, converting a local incident into sustained national and global scrutiny, its capacity to secure enforceable sanctions and institutional reform remained constrained by state pushback, including the June 2021 Twitter suspension, security-force repression, and the selective implementation of panel recommendations. The article concludes that social media functions in Nigeria as a potent but incomplete accountability mechanism, one whose long-term effectiveness depends on complementary formal institutions, digital rights protections, and sustained civic organisation beyond the moment of viral outrage. Policy and scholarly recommendations are offered for strengthening the accountability potential of digital civic action in Nigeria and similar democracies.

Keywords: Social Media, Public Accountability, EndSARS, Nigeria, Digital Activism, Social Accountability Theory, Networked Public Sphere

INTRODUCTION

Public accountability which is defined as the ability of citizens to demand answers from and sanction holders of public authority has characterised Nigeria's democratic trajectory since independence. Nigeria's formal accountability institutions, such as the legislature, the judiciary, and constitutionally established anti-corruption agencies have been weakened by tendencies towards elite capture, lack of enforcement powers, and limited accessibility for citizens (Lawal, 2025; Malena et al., 2004). The country's dismal record on global indices tracking governance quality and trends is reflective of this reality. Despite several policies by the government to curb corrupt practices, Nigeria scored just 26 out of 100 points on Transparency International's 20th Corruption Perceptions Index 2025, ranking below 33 other African countries at position 142 out of 182 countries included on the Index (Transparency International, 2026).

However, against the backdrop of these weak institutions, Nigeria has also experienced explosive growth in the adoption of internet-enabled smartphones and social media platforms over the last decade, creating an informal avenue through which citizens seek to enforce accountability. The popular protest movement popularly referred to as #EndSARS in October 2020 is arguably the most significant demonstration yet of this informal avenue of accountability. Emerging initially as a Twitter movement calling for the disbandment of the Nigeria Police Force's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)

unit, infamous for committing extortion, torture, and unlawful killings against Nigerians (Uwalaka, 2024; Dambo et al., 2020), #EndSARS quickly escalated to nationwide street protests that coerced the federal government to publicly promise to disband SARS, inaugurated state judicial panels of inquiry into police violence across Nigeria, and ultimately resulted in the killing of unarmed protestors by troops at the Lekki Tollgate in Lagos on 20th, October 2020 (Uwalaka, 2024; Dambo et al., 2020). The dynamics of the #EndSARS protests provide a useful empirical context for exploring how, if at all, social media can serve as an accountability mechanism in contexts where citizens face high barriers to engaging formal accountability institutions.

The remainder of this article attempts to answer three interrelated research questions that position it within existing literatures while highlighting its novel contributions. Specifically, how and to what extent did Nigerians utilise social media platforms to communicate and publicise allegations of police misconduct during the #EndSARS protests? Through what mechanisms did these actions translate into pressure on state institutions, and with what consequences for these institutions? And how did the Nigerian state ultimately repress social media as an avenue of accountability, as evidenced by both the shooting at the Lekki Tollgate and the Nigerian government's attempt to suspend Twitter in 2021 following the 2020 movement? By comparatively analysing these two dimensions of continuity and change during and after #EndSARS, this study positions itself as making two theoretical and empirical contributions to literatures on digital accountability in Africa's burgeoning democracies. First, this study positions itself among a minority of studies that offer theoretical frameworks for understanding digital accountability by developing and applying an integrated theoretical framework combining insights from Social Accountability Theory with theories of the networked public sphere. The study then moves beyond events during the 20as to consider how youth-powered social media activism during #EndSARS continued to influence institutional reforms and protests regarding governmental accountability (e.g. #EndBadGovernance).

The next section reviews scholarship on social media, civic mobilisation, and accountability in Nigeria and other political contexts that have similarities to Nigeria. Theoretical approaches that inform the analysis herein are outlined subsequently. The methodology thereafter elaborates on the qualitative, document-based case study approach taken in this research. The study then discusses its findings, disaggregating the ways social media was used as a tool for accountability into its mobilisational, evidentiary, and agenda-setting functions before discussing various ways in which this tool was limited by state forces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media and Civic Mobilisation in Nigeria

A growing body of scholarship in Nigerian media and communication studies has established the important role of social media in facilitating civic engagement, political participation, and collective mobilisation. Uwalaka (2023), in examining mobile internet use during the 2020 #EndSARS protests and the 2022 #EndSARSMemorial protests, found that participants who depended on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter for information about protest activities and coordination were significantly more likely to participate during the early stages of the demonstrations. The study further demonstrated that mobile social networking platforms helped sustain solidarity and collective engagement beyond the initial phase of street protests. In a related study, Uwalaka (2024) reported that platform usability and age were associated with the timing of protest participation, suggesting that patterns of digital mobilisation are influenced by differences in digital accessibility, familiarity, and literacy. These findings reinforce earlier scholarship on Nigerian hashtag activism, which situates #EndSARS within a broader history of digitally mediated civic mobilisation, including the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protests against the removal of fuel subsidies (Uwalaka, 2023).

The civic role of social media extends beyond the organisation of protests to include the promotion of transparency and public accountability. Osazuwa and Oghogho (2024) contend that platforms such as Twitter and Instagram played significant roles during the #EndSARS protests by amplifying protesters' perspectives, facilitating the coordination of demonstrations, and documenting alleged human rights violations. Through these functions, social media provided citizens with alternative channels for communicating political grievances and contesting dominant narratives within Nigeria's digital public

sphere. Similarly, Odoh and Olagunju (2025), based on qualitative interviews with Nigerian media professionals, found that socially and politically informed citizens employ social media to expose alleged corrupt practices and demand greater accountability from public authorities. The authors consequently associate digitally mediated civic engagement with the broader objectives of Sustainable Development Goal 16, particularly the promotion of peaceful, accountable, and inclusive institutions.

Akindoyin (2024) similarly observes that social media has expanded opportunities for Nigerian citizens to express grievances, participate in democratic processes, and engage political leaders more directly than may be possible through conventional institutional mechanisms. From this perspective, social media reduces some of the traditional barriers between citizens and political actors by enabling rapid dissemination of information and facilitating direct public responses to governmental decisions and actions. However, Akindoyin (2024) also recognises the dual nature of these platforms, noting that their potential for civic empowerment is accompanied by vulnerabilities to misinformation, manipulation, abuse, and other forms of harmful communication. This suggests that the effectiveness of social media as an instrument of civic mobilisation and accountability depends not only on its technological affordances but also on the quality of information circulating through digital networks and the regulatory environment within which these platforms operate.

#EndSARS as a Case of Digital Accountability

The #EndSARS movement provides a particularly important case for understanding how social media can function as an instrument of digital accountability in Nigeria. Dambo et al. (2021), through a qualitative examination of Twitter activity surrounding the Lekki Tollgate incident, demonstrated that citizens transformed the platform into what they described as an “**office of the citizen**”, where eyewitnesses could livestream events, disseminate photographic and video evidence, challenge official accounts, and construct alternative narratives concerning the incident. Social media therefore performed more than a communicative function; it became a form of citizen-generated documentation through which individuals could preserve and circulate evidence of events occurring in real time.

The evidentiary significance of this digital activity is particularly important in contexts where citizens question official accounts of state conduct. During the Lekki Tollgate incident, visual materials and eyewitness accounts circulated widely online and challenged initial official narratives concerning what had occurred. Subsequent investigations, including the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry, examined evidence relating to the actions of security personnel during the incident and the circumstances surrounding the reported shooting of protesters (Al Jazeera, 2021; CNN, 2021). Thus, social media contributed to the preservation and circulation of alternative accounts that could be scrutinised alongside official narratives.

The experience of #EndSARS also illustrates the importance of social media affordances in transforming individual acts of witnessing into collective forms of digital accountability. Ronzhyn et al. (2023), in their systematic review of social media affordance research, identify visibility, persistence, and association as important affordances through which digital content can acquire political and evidentiary significance. Visibility enables information to reach large and geographically dispersed audiences, persistence allows content to remain accessible beyond the immediate event, while association facilitates connections between users, posts, networks, and collective causes. Within the Nigerian context, these affordances enabled individual citizens who witnessed or documented events during #EndSARS to contribute to a broader body of publicly accessible evidence.

The international visibility generated through these digital networks further illustrates the accountability potential of social media. By rapidly circulating information, images, videos, and eyewitness testimonies beyond Nigeria's physical and institutional boundaries, #EndSARS transformed what began primarily as a domestic protest against police brutality into an issue that attracted international attention. The movement subsequently generated concern from foreign governments and international organisations regarding human rights and the conduct of security agencies (Freedom House, 2021). Social media therefore served simultaneously as a mobilisation mechanism, an alternative information channel, an evidentiary archive, and a means through which domestic grievances could enter transnational human rights discourse.

Nevertheless, the literature also indicates that the accountability potential of social media should not be interpreted as inherently transformative. The same affordances that facilitate visibility and rapid information dissemination can also facilitate misinformation, manipulation, selective framing, and the rapid circulation of unverified claims. Consequently, digital accountability depends on the credibility of user-generated evidence, the capacity of citizens to evaluate information critically, and the willingness of institutions to respond to digitally mediated demands. The #EndSARS experience therefore demonstrates both the considerable potential of social media to strengthen citizen voice and the structural limitations that can constrain its ability to produce lasting institutional accountability.

Government Response and the Limits of Digital Accountability

A significant strand of scholarship has examined the limitations surrounding the accountability potential of social media, particularly the ability of the Nigerian state to restrict, retaliate against, and withstand digitally mediated civic pressure. Human Rights Watch (2021) reported that, shortly after Twitter removed posts made by President Muhammadu Buhari that were broadly interpreted as threatening references to the Nigerian Civil War, the Federal Government suspended Twitter's operations in Nigeria indefinitely. The government justified the decision by arguing that activities on the platform had the potential to undermine the country's "corporate existence." The suspension remained in force for approximately seven months and attracted criticism from the #KeepItOn coalition and more than fifty civil society organisations, which argued that the measure violated regional and international standards relating to digital rights and freedom of expression (Access Now, 2023). The action was also widely interpreted as a governmental response to Twitter's prominent role in facilitating and sustaining #EndSARS mobilisation (Freedom House, 2021). Following the eventual restoration of access in January 2022, reports indicated that Twitter was required to comply with conditions relating to local registration, taxation, and cooperation with Nigerian authorities concerning prohibited content. These requirements generated concerns that the resolution of the dispute may have involved concessions that weakened rather than strengthened protections for digital rights (Global Voices, 2022).

The Nigerian experience reflects a broader phenomenon described in the literature as the expansion of **digital authoritarianism**, whereby governments employ surveillance, platform regulation, legal restrictions, and other mechanisms to limit the capacity of online activism to generate sustained political accountability (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). Such interventions demonstrate that although social media can provide citizens with unprecedented opportunities to achieve visibility, mobilise collectively, and disseminate evidence, these advantages may be curtailed when governments possess the institutional capacity to restrict access to digital platforms or regulate the information environment.

A similar pattern has been identified in studies of post-#EndSARS anti-corruption activism in Nigeria. Odoh and Olagunju (2025) report that a substantial proportion of Nigerian social media users consider platforms such as X and Instagram effective mechanisms for exposing corruption and stimulating governmental investigations. However, the continued effectiveness of such platforms is constrained by government restrictions, algorithmic suppression, misinformation, and other challenges associated with the digital information environment. The evidence therefore suggests that social media can strengthen citizens' capacity to expose wrongdoing and demand accountability, but its ability to produce sustained institutional change remains dependent on the broader political, regulatory, and institutional context.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the expanding scholarship on social media, civic mobilisation, and accountability in Nigeria, important gaps remain in the existing body of knowledge.

First, much of the literature examines the **mobilisation and evidentiary functions of social media independently**. Relatively few studies provide an integrated explanation of how these functions interact over time to generate institutional pressure. Mobilisation can bring citizens together around a common grievance, while the production, preservation, and circulation of digital evidence can provide the factual

basis for public scrutiny and institutional response. Examining the relationship between these processes is therefore necessary for understanding how online civic action may progress from collective mobilisation to demands for institutional accountability.

Second, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to the **long-term durability of accountability outcomes generated by social-media activism** after the immediate protest period has ended. Existing research has extensively documented the mobilisation, visibility, and political significance of #EndSARS, but less attention has been directed towards assessing whether the accountability mechanisms and institutional responses that followed the protests produced enduring outcomes. In particular, the implementation of recommendations arising from judicial panels associated with #EndSARS provides an important basis for determining whether digital mobilisation translated into substantive institutional reform or primarily generated temporary public visibility.

Third, comparatively few studies have systematically examined the relationship between the #EndSARS experience and subsequent protest movements in Nigeria, including the August 2024 #EndBadGovernance demonstrations. Such an analysis is important for determining whether the strategies, experiences, narratives, and accountability expectations developed during #EndSARS subsequently influenced later episodes of digital activism. It may also reveal whether social-media-based mobilisation in Nigeria constitutes a series of isolated protest events or represents an evolving and cumulative process of civic accountability.

This study addresses these gaps by developing an integrated, theoretically informed, and temporally extended examination of the accountability function of social media in Nigeria. Rather than focusing exclusively on the capacity of digital platforms to generate protest participation, the study considers how mobilisation and evidence production interact, the extent to which they generate institutional pressure, and whether such pressure results in meaningful and sustainable accountability outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This study integrates two complementary theoretical perspectives: **Social Accountability Theory** and the **networked public sphere perspective on social media affordances**. The combination of these perspectives provides a framework for examining both the normative requirements of accountability and the technological mechanisms through which digital platforms facilitate or constrain civic action.

Social Accountability Theory provides the conceptual basis for determining what constitutes meaningful accountability, particularly in terms of citizens' ability to demand explanations and corrective action from public authorities. The networked public sphere perspective, by contrast, helps explain how the structural and communicative characteristics of social media facilitate visibility, information sharing, collective mobilisation, evidence dissemination, and interaction among dispersed citizens. Their integration therefore enables the study to move beyond examining whether social media facilitates activism to assessing whether digitally mediated civic action can translate into substantive accountability.

Social Accountability Theory

Social Accountability Theory was prominently articulated by Malena et al. (2004) in their influential World Bank working paper. The theory conceptualises social accountability as a form of accountability grounded in civic participation, through which citizens and civil society organisations directly or indirectly demand that public officials and institutions explain and justify their conduct. Unlike conventional vertical political accountability, which operates principally through elections and formal representative institutions, social accountability involves mechanisms such as citizen monitoring, public complaints, grievance redress, investigative activities, disclosure of evidence, and sustained civic pressure directed at duty-bearers.

Malena et al. (2004) argue that social accountability mechanisms are particularly valuable in settings where formal representative institutions are weak, unresponsive, inaccessible, or susceptible to elite capture. This perspective has particular relevance to Nigeria, where concerns about institutional effectiveness, corruption, public-sector responsiveness, and the enforcement of accountability remain prominent within governance

debates, as reflected in the country's continuing concerns regarding corruption and institutional integrity (Transparency International, 2026).

For this study, social accountability is conceptualised through **three interconnected dimensions: voice, answerability, and enforceability**, namely:

Voice represents citizens' capacity to articulate grievances, express demands, expose wrongdoing, and participate meaningfully in public affairs. Social media can substantially strengthen this dimension by providing individuals with relatively accessible channels through which they can communicate with large audiences without depending exclusively on conventional political institutions or traditional media organisations.

Answerability refers to the responsibility of public officials and institutions to provide explanations and justifications for their actions and decisions. In digitally mediated environments, the widespread circulation of eyewitness accounts, photographs, videos, testimonies, and other forms of evidence can increase public pressure on authorities to acknowledge and respond to allegations that might otherwise receive limited institutional attention.

Enforceability concerns the capacity to secure meaningful consequences, corrective measures, institutional remedies, or sanctions following the identification of wrongdoing. This dimension is particularly important because visibility alone does not necessarily constitute accountability. A grievance may become widely known through social media without producing investigation, sanction, compensation, policy reform, or other substantive forms of redress.

Accordingly, Social Accountability Theory provides an appropriate analytical framework for evaluating the #EndSARS experience beyond its success in generating online visibility and protest mobilisation. It allows the study to examine whether digital activism strengthened citizens' **voice**, compelled institutional **answerability**, and contributed to meaningful **enforceability**. This distinction is fundamental because the effectiveness of digital civic activism should not be assessed solely by indicators such as online engagement, hashtag popularity, or protest participation. Rather, its significance should ultimately be evaluated in terms of its capacity to influence institutional behaviour, generate corrective action, and produce enduring accountability outcomes.

The Networked Public Sphere and Social Media Affordances

The second dimension of the theoretical framework is derived from the concept of the **networked public sphere**, which extends Habermas's classical understanding of the rational-critical public sphere into the contemporary environment of digitally mediated communication (Habermas, 1989). In its classical formulation, the public sphere represents a discursive arena where private citizens engage in deliberation over issues of common interest and collectively form public opinion capable of scrutinising governmental authority. Traditionally, this sphere was largely facilitated through print journalism, public meetings, and physical forms of civic assembly. In the digital era, however, public discourse is increasingly organised through networked communication platforms whose affordances shape how information is produced, circulated, accessed, and contested (boyd, 2011; Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

The concept of **affordance** is particularly relevant to understanding the accountability potential of social media platforms such as Twitter/X, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Affordances refer to the technical and social possibilities that communication platforms provide to users, as well as the limitations they impose. Four affordances are especially relevant to digitally mediated accountability. **Persistence** allows content to remain available and searchable beyond the point of initial publication. **Visibility** enables information to reach audiences outside the immediate social networks of individual users, particularly through hashtags, recommendations, and algorithmic amplification. **Spreadability** facilitates the rapid redistribution of messages, images, videos, and other forms of content across interconnected networks. **Association** enables users to establish connections with wider communities and publics through shared hashtags, mentions, and network relationships (Ronzhyn et al., 2023; boyd, 2011).

These affordances should not be interpreted as purely technological or politically neutral characteristics. Their operation is influenced by platform architecture, corporate policies, algorithmic systems, and governmental regulation (Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Consequently, a feature such as visibility can have contradictory implications for digital accountability. While increased visibility can help citizens expose misconduct, document abuses, and attract public attention, it can simultaneously make activists more vulnerable to surveillance, harassment, intimidation, or restrictions on their access to digital platforms. The accountability capacity of social media is therefore contingent upon the interaction between technological affordances, user practices, platform governance, and state intervention.

An Integrated Framework for the Study

By bringing together Social Accountability Theory and the networked public sphere perspective, this study conceptualises social media's contribution to public accountability in Nigeria through three interconnected functions: **mobilisation, evidence generation, and agenda setting**.

The **mobilisational function** concerns the ability of social media to connect individuals around shared grievances, facilitate collective organisation, and generate a sufficiently strong civic voice to attract the attention of public authorities. The **evidentiary function** relates to the production and circulation of digital documentation, including photographs, videos, eyewitness accounts, and testimonies, which can strengthen answerability by creating a persistent and publicly accessible record of events. The **agenda-setting function** concerns the ability of sustained online and offline civic pressure to elevate public grievances onto the formal governmental agenda and stimulate institutional responses, such as investigations or the establishment of judicial panels of inquiry.

These functions correspond with the principal dimensions of Social Accountability Theory. Mobilisation contributes to the development of **citizen voice**, evidence generation strengthens **answerability**, while agenda setting can create pathways towards **enforceability**. Nevertheless, the framework does not presume that digital mobilisation will automatically produce substantive accountability. An online movement may achieve extensive visibility, attract international attention, and compel government acknowledgement without resulting in sanctions, institutional reform, compensation, or other enforceable outcomes.

The framework therefore incorporates the constraining influence of state power. Government authorities may attempt to limit digital accountability through platform restrictions, surveillance, regulatory interventions, legal measures, counter-narratives, or the suppression of online mobilisation. They may also withstand public pressure long enough for the initial intensity of digital activism to decline. The framework consequently treats social media as a potential mechanism for accountability whose effectiveness depends upon the interaction between digital affordances, collective civic action, institutional responsiveness, and the state's capacity to constrain or absorb public pressure.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employs a **qualitative exploratory case study design** based on documentary analysis to examine the role of social media in facilitating public accountability during and following the 2020 #EndSARS movement in Nigeria. The case study approach is considered appropriate because #EndSARS represents a bounded and information-rich case through which the relationship between digitally mediated civic action and formal institutional responses can be examined using diverse sources of evidence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Rather than collecting new primary data through questionnaires or interviews, the study relies on the systematic examination and thematic interpretation of existing documentary materials. These materials include peer-reviewed academic studies, the published findings of the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry on Restitution for Victims of SARS-Related Abuses and Other Matters, and reports produced by established human rights, digital rights, and news organisations. Drawing evidence from these different source



categories facilitates triangulation and permits the study to compare scholarly interpretations with official accountability records and independent documentation.

The documentary case study design is particularly suitable for this research because the #EndSARS movement generated an extensive body of academic, institutional, journalistic, and digital-rights documentation. It provides assess to set of data relevant for social value to establish broader knowledge with the aid of reviewing existing reports or documents (Lawal, Otu & Apeh, 2024). Collectively, these materials provide sufficient evidence to trace the progression from social media mobilisation and citizen documentation to governmental response and subsequent accountability processes.

Data Sources and Sampling

The study employed **purposive sampling** to select documentary materials that satisfied established inclusion criteria. A source was considered suitable where it demonstrated direct relevance to the #EndSARS movement, its immediate antecedents, or its institutional aftermath; possessed verifiable authorship and was published by an identifiable peer-reviewed journal, official inquiry, established news organisation, or reputable human rights or digital rights institution; and contained adequate methodological or evidentiary information to support systematic thematic analysis.

The selected sources were grouped into three principal categories. The **first category** consisted of peer-reviewed empirical studies examining social media use, protest participation, digital mobilisation, civic engagement, and accountability during #EndSARS and related Nigerian protest movements. The studies included research employing survey methods, Twitter content analysis, and qualitative interviews, such as Uwalaka (2023, 2024), Dambo et al. (2021), Osazuwa and Oghogho (2024), and Odoh and Olagunju (2025).

The **second category** comprised official and quasi-official accountability materials, particularly evidence relating to the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry on Restitution for Victims of SARS-Related Abuses and Other Matters. Verified news reports were used where necessary to document and contextualise the findings and institutional implications of the panel's proceedings.

The **third category** comprised reports from established international human rights and digital rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, and Access Now. These reports provided additional evidence concerning government responses to #EndSARS-related digital activism, including restrictions on online communication, regulatory interventions, and broader concerns relating to digital rights and freedom of expression.

The combination of these three categories provided a basis for **source triangulation**, enabling the study to examine the accountability role of social media from scholarly, institutional, and independent human rights perspectives.

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based exploratory case study design. To address gaps in empirical evidence, the documentary analysis systematically synthesizes primary official reports, judicial white papers, digital archives, legal instruments, and peer-reviewed studies.

Table 1: Systematic Summary of Documentary Sources Analyzed

Source Category	Documents Analyzed	Period Covered	Selection Criteria	Primary Analytical Purpose
Official Judicial & Government Reports	Lagos State JPI Report (Executive Summary & Lekki Incident Report); Lagos State Government White Paper (2021); NEC Resolutions	Oct 2020 – Dec 2021	Official transcripts, panel findings, executive white papers, and state decisions.	Evaluating state answerability, evidence evaluation, and actual implementation of recommendations.
Human	Human Rights Watch,	Oct	Verified field	Assessing state

Rights & Digital Rights Reports	Freedom House, Access Now, Amnesty International reports	2020 – Aug 2024	investigations, legal filings, and digital surveillance/shutdown assessments.	pushback, digital rights violations, and international pressure.
Peer-Reviewed Academic Literature	12 empirical journal articles (e.g., Uwalaka, 2023; Dambo et al., 2021; Odoh & Olagunju, 2025)	2020 – 2025	Peer-reviewed methodologies focused on Nigerian digital activism and governance.	Theoretical framing, empirical contextualization, and validation of social media dynamics.
Social Media Archives & Digital Evidence	Verified Twitter/X threads, Feminist Coalition financial statements, livestream metadata	Oct 2020 – Aug 2024	High-engagement primary digital artifacts, real-time documentation, and campaign logs.	Analyzing real-time mobilization, crowd-sourced forensic evidence, and agenda-setting mechanics.

Data Analysis

The documentary evidence was analysed using **thematic analysis**, following the six-phase approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical process involved becoming familiar with the collected materials, generating initial codes, identifying potential themes, reviewing the themes against the source material, defining and naming the final themes, and developing the analytical narrative.

The coding framework was initially informed by the theoretical propositions underpinning the study. Accordingly, three deductive categories were established around the principal functions of social media identified in the integrated framework: **mobilisational, evidentiary, and agenda-setting functions**. During the analysis, a fourth theme emerged inductively from the evidence concerning **state countermeasures and the limitations of digital accountability**.

Particular attention was given to differentiating between digital activity that generated **visibility or answerability** and activity that resulted in **enforceable institutional consequences**. Widespread circulation of information, increased public awareness, and heightened visibility were therefore not automatically interpreted as evidence of substantive accountability. Instead, the analysis examined whether social media-driven activity resulted in official acknowledgement, explanations from public authorities, investigations, institutional interventions, corrective measures, or other tangible accountability outcomes.

This analytical distinction is important because the ability of social media to amplify grievances and expose alleged misconduct does not necessarily guarantee institutional compliance or meaningful sanctions. The study therefore evaluates the #EndSARS experience across a continuum extending from **digital mobilisation and evidence production through institutional response to substantive accountability**, while simultaneously examining the structural and political factors that may interrupt this progression.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

The credibility of the study was enhanced through **source triangulation**, systematic cross-checking of

factual claims across independent documentary sources, and preference for primary institutional evidence where such material was available. Particular reliance was placed on official documents, including the findings of the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry, rather than depending exclusively on secondary interpretations of institutional events. This approach strengthened the reliability of the analysis by enabling claims reported in academic studies, media accounts, and human rights reports to be compared against formal documentary records.

Nevertheless, the study has certain limitations. First, its qualitative document-based design does not provide independently generated quantitative evidence concerning the size, demographic characteristics, or composition of social media participation during #EndSARS. Where numerical estimates or demographic

information are presented, these are derived from the empirical studies cited and are explicitly attributed to those sources. Second, the scope of the analysis is constrained by the availability, accessibility, and quality of publicly obtainable documentary evidence. Certain events or dimensions of the movement may therefore remain insufficiently documented.

A further limitation arises from the contested nature of some claims surrounding the conduct of state security agencies during the protests. To minimise reliance on disputed accounts, the study gives greater evidentiary weight to findings established through formal institutional investigations, particularly those of the Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry, whenever such evidence is available. Despite these limitations, the use of multiple independent sources and systematic thematic analysis provides a credible basis for interpreting the accountability role of social media in the #EndSARS movement.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The thematic analysis generated **four interconnected findings** that correspond with the conceptual framework developed for the study. The first three concern the mobilisational, evidentiary, and agenda-setting functions of social media, while the fourth relates to the countervailing influence of state intervention and resistance. Collectively, the findings suggest that social media significantly expanded citizens' capacity to organise, document alleged abuses, and place grievances on the formal political agenda, although these gains did not consistently translate into enforceable accountability.

Social Media as a Mobilisational Infrastructure

The findings support the empirical evidence presented by Uwalaka (2023, 2024), demonstrating that social media platforms, particularly Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp, played a central role in organising and sustaining the #EndSARS movement. Rather than serving merely as channels for political discussion, these platforms became practical infrastructures through which protesters exchanged real-time information, coordinated activities, circulated safety updates, identified legal assistance, and facilitated access to medical support.

Twitter emerged as an important coordination space for the wider movement, while WhatsApp provided more decentralised and locally oriented communication channels. Instagram also contributed through visual communication and rapid dissemination of protest-related information. The hashtag **#EndSARS** was particularly significant because it connected otherwise dispersed individual experiences and grievances under a common digital identifier. In this respect, the hashtag demonstrates the associative affordance of social media described by boyd (2011) and Ronzhyn et al. (2023), enabling individuals with different backgrounds and geographical locations to participate in a shared networked public.

Digital mobilisation also extended beyond communication into the provision of material resources. The Feminist Coalition, a collective of young Nigerian women, utilised social media alongside digital payment systems to mobilise financial resources for protest logistics, legal assistance, and medical support. This development demonstrates that the accountability infrastructure created through social media extended beyond the circulation of information to include the coordination of tangible resources required to sustain collective action. However, the prominence of such digital networks also exposed them to government scrutiny and subsequent restrictions (Human Rights Watch, 2021). From the perspective of Social Accountability Theory, these activities substantially strengthened the **voice** component of accountability. Individual citizens who might otherwise have remained isolated were able to communicate collectively, attract national and international attention, and exert pressure on public authorities. Social media therefore transformed fragmented grievances into a coordinated civic demand that became increasingly difficult for government institutions to disregard.

Social Media as an Evidentiary and Documentation Mechanism

Among the identified functions, the **evidentiary role of social media** appears to have provided the strongest connection between digital activism and formal accountability processes. Dambo et al. (2021) demonstrate

that Twitter activity surrounding the Lekki Tollgate incident enabled citizens to livestream events, share eyewitness accounts, and preserve visual evidence in real time. The resulting digital record challenged early official and military accounts that denied that a shooting had occurred.

The persistence and visibility of this material became particularly important in subsequent accountability processes. The Lagos State Judicial Panel of Inquiry on Restitution for Victims of SARS-Related Abuses and Other Matters subsequently found that security personnel had used live ammunition against protesters and that evidence relating to the incident had been removed or otherwise compromised after the event (Al Jazeera, 2021; CNN, 2021). The significance of this finding lies not simply in the existence of digital documentation but in the manner in which dispersed citizen-generated evidence could be aggregated into a body of material capable of informing a formal institutional investigation.

This finding demonstrates the relationship between the **evidentiary function of social media and the answerability dimension of Social Accountability Theory** (Malena et al., 2004). General allegations of misconduct can be difficult for public authorities to address because they may be dismissed as subjective or unverifiable. By contrast, persistent visual records, eyewitness testimonies, and contemporaneous digital documentation provide more specific claims to which institutions are required to respond.

However, the findings also reveal a significant distinction between **answerability and enforceability**. Although the judicial panel produced findings and recommendations concerning the conduct of security agencies, the existence of a formal institutional response did not automatically result in the comprehensive implementation of those recommendations. Subsequent government responses also included disagreement with aspects of the panel's conclusions, with senior officials questioning elements of its findings (CNN, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2021). The implication is that social media can strengthen the evidentiary basis for accountability and compel authorities to provide explanations, but it has limited capacity to independently enforce sanctions or guarantee institutional compliance.

The evidentiary function therefore represents both the strength and limitation of digital accountability. Social media can make denial more difficult by preserving and circulating evidence, but the final conversion of evidence into justice remains dependent on the willingness and capacity of formal institutions to act.

Social Media as an Agenda-Setting Mechanism

The findings further indicate that social media contributed substantially to **agenda setting** by elevating police brutality and broader governance grievances from isolated citizen complaints to issues requiring formal governmental attention. The movement's sustained online visibility occurred alongside extensive street mobilisation and coincided with major institutional responses, including the federal government's announcement of the dissolution of SARS on 11 October 2020 and the subsequent establishment of judicial panels of inquiry across several states (Osazuwa & Oghogho, 2024; Uwalaka, 2024).

The significance of this development extends beyond the immediate policy response. By maintaining public attention around police brutality, social media helped redefine the issue as a national governance concern rather than an isolated problem affecting individual victims. The interaction between online discourse and physical protest consequently created a form of sustained public pressure that placed the issue firmly within the formal policy agenda.

This finding is consistent with Odoh and Olagunju's (2025) observation that social media has increasingly become a mechanism through which Nigerian citizens expose corruption, stimulate public discussion, and encourage governmental investigations. Akindoyin (2024) similarly argues that digital platforms have broadened opportunities for citizens to participate in political and governance processes by enabling them to communicate grievances and exert pressure on public officials more directly than conventional institutional channels often permit.

Nevertheless, agenda-setting capacity should not be confused with policy implementation or institutional transformation. The evidence suggests that social media can influence **what government is compelled to acknowledge and discuss**, but it cannot independently determine **what government ultimately**

implements. The #EndSARS experience therefore demonstrates an important distinction between placing an issue on the institutional agenda and securing sustained policy or administrative change. This distinction reinforces the theoretical argument that social media may substantially strengthen citizen voice and answerability while leaving enforceability largely dependent upon formal institutions.

Overall, the findings indicate that the accountability contribution of social media during #EndSARS was strongest where **mobilisation, evidence production, and agenda setting operated together**. Mobilisation created collective pressure, digital documentation strengthened the evidentiary basis of grievances, and sustained visibility helped move those grievances onto the formal governmental agenda. However, the extent to which these processes produced durable accountability was ultimately conditioned by institutional responsiveness and the Nigerian state's capacity to regulate, resist, or outlast digitally mediated civic pressure.

State Pushback and the Limits of Digital Accountability

The final and arguably most significant theme concerns the constraints surrounding the use of social media as an instrument of public accountability, particularly in view of the various measures adopted by the Nigerian state in response to digitally facilitated activism. Three developments demonstrate this pattern. First, the response of security agencies to the Lekki Tollgate protest involved the use of lethal force, illustrating the state's direct attempt to suppress the physical manifestation of the movement (Al Jazeera, 2021). Second, following the protests, government actions reportedly extended to restrictions affecting digital platforms and organisations connected with the movement, including interference with the Feminist Coalition's website (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Third, and most notably, the federal government suspended Twitter's operations in Nigeria in June 2021, with the restriction remaining in place for roughly seven months. The measure was widely perceived as a retaliatory response to Twitter's contribution to the dissemination of #EndSARS-related information and mobilisation (Human Rights Watch, 2021; Freedom House, 2021).

The Twitter suspension attracted substantial criticism from digital rights advocates. The #KeepItOn coalition, together with more than fifty civil society organisations, condemned the measure as inconsistent with regional and international human rights standards. When access to Twitter was restored in January 2022, reports indicated that the resolution involved conditions relating to the platform's local registration, taxation, and cooperation with Nigerian authorities regarding prohibited content (Access Now, 2023; Global Voices, 2022). From the perspective of digital rights observers, these developments raised concerns that the episode had potentially enhanced the government's ability to regulate and restrict digital spaces rather than providing stronger safeguards for online civic participation.

Taken together, these developments demonstrate that the accountability contribution of social media in Nigeria is substantial but uneven across the three dimensions of Social Accountability Theory. Social media has considerably strengthened **citizen voice** by enabling individuals and civic groups to communicate grievances, organise collectively, and attract widespread attention. It has also enhanced **answerability**, particularly in relation to the Lekki Tollgate incident, where digitally circulated evidence contributed to sustained demands for official investigation and explanation. However, its contribution to **enforceability** has been considerably weaker. The translation of public pressure and documented evidence into prosecutions, disciplinary measures, institutional reforms, and sustained changes in police accountability has remained limited.

A similar pattern was observable during the **#EndBadGovernance protests of August 2024**, where social media again served important functions in coordinating participation and documenting responses to demonstrations. The recurrence of comparable dynamics suggests that the constraints identified in the #EndSARS case are not confined to a single protest episode. Rather, they reflect broader structural limitations affecting digitally mediated civic accountability in Nigeria, particularly where strong state institutions retain substantial capacity to regulate communication platforms, suppress dissent, or delay institutional responses to public demands.

Social Media as an Evidentiary Mechanism and Post-Panel Implementation Gaps

The most significant empirical contribution of digital mobilization was its role in generating persistent forensic evidence. Real-time livestreams, geotagged video clips, and crowd-sourced ballistic verification prevented immediate state suppression of the events of October 20, 2020.

However, as highlighted by Social Accountability Theory (Malena et al., 2004), a critical gap exists between answerability (compelling the creation of judicial panels) and enforceability (implementing panel recommendations):

Table 2: Judicial Panel Outcomes and Implementation Status Across Key Jurisdictions

State/Jurisdiction	Key Panel Findings	Awarded Compensation	Actual Implementation & Policy Outcome
Lagos State	Indicted Army/Police for Lekki shooting; recommended prosecution and compensation.	₦410+ million awarded to victims.	Partial: Released 2021 White Paper accepting 11 of 32 recommendations; rejected the finding of a "massacre" (Lagos State Government, 2021). Financial awards paid to select petitioners; security personnel prosecutions stalled.
Ogun State	Documented systemic SARS torture and unlawful detentions.	₦218 million recommended.	Unimplemented: Final report submitted to executive; victims received zero disbursement as of 2025.
Ekiti State	Validated human rights abuses; recommended institutional reform.	₦7 million awarded to 24 petitioners.	Completed (Financial Only): Full payment of awarded compensation executed; broader systemic police reforms ignored.
Federal Capital Territory (Abuja)	Confirmed extrajudicial executions and illegal asset seizures.	₦289 million recommended.	Stalled: National Human Rights Commission (NHRC, 2022) administered partial payments; systemic prosecution of indicted officers remains unexecuted.

This implementation gap highlights the structural limitations of digital accountability: while social media can force state acknowledgement, formal executive authority retains control over final legal enforcement.

CONCLUSION

This article has investigated the role of social media in promoting public accountability in Nigeria, using the 2020 #EndSARS movement as the principal case. By integrating Social Accountability Theory with the networked public sphere perspective and the concept of platform affordances, the study demonstrates that social media performed three closely connected functions during the movement. First, its **mobilisational function** enabled citizens to develop collective voice, coordinate activities, and sustain civic engagement. Second, its **evidentiary function** facilitated the production, preservation, and widespread circulation of digital records that helped substantiate allegations against state security agencies, particularly those relating to the Lekki Tollgate incident. Third, its **agenda-setting function** helped transform online and street-based demands into issues requiring formal governmental attention, including the dissolution of SARS and the establishment of judicial panels of inquiry.

However, the findings also demonstrate that the accountability benefits generated through social media were uneven. Although digital platforms significantly expanded citizens' capacity to exercise voice and compelled a degree of institutional answerability, their ability to generate **enforceable accountability** was considerably

more restricted. The inconsistent implementation of recommendations arising from judicial panels, together with the government's suspension of Twitter in 2021 and other responses to civic mobilisation, illustrates the difficulty of translating digital pressure into sustained institutional reform. Consequently, social media should be understood not as a complete substitute for formal accountability institutions but as a powerful complementary mechanism that expands opportunities for citizens to scrutinise public authorities.

The study therefore concludes that the effectiveness of digital accountability depends substantially on the institutional environment within which social media operates. Visibility, mobilisation, and evidence generation may create considerable public pressure, but these mechanisms cannot independently guarantee prosecutions, disciplinary action, policy implementation, or structural reform. Social media can open the accountability process, but the conversion of public pressure into durable institutional consequences ultimately depends upon responsive legal, political, and oversight institutions.

The findings have wider implications for research on digital governance and accountability in African democracies and other political environments where formal accountability mechanisms remain relatively weak. The effectiveness of social media should not therefore be evaluated primarily according to the volume of online attention, the virality of content, or the scale of mobilisation generated. Greater emphasis should be placed on whether digital visibility produces measurable and sustainable institutional outcomes. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that such conversion remains partial and is strongly influenced by the political calculations of state authorities, including whether they choose to respond to, accommodate, regulate, or suppress digitally mediated civic pressure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthening formal accountability institutions

Nigerian anti-corruption agencies, police oversight institutions, and other relevant accountability bodies should develop transparent and time-bound procedures for receiving, verifying, and acting upon evidence generated through social media. Such mechanisms would help ensure that citizen-generated evidence is transformed into formal investigations and, where appropriate, prosecution or disciplinary action rather than losing relevance after public attention declines.

2. Institutionalising digital rights protection

The National Assembly and relevant regulatory institutions should establish clearer legal safeguards governing internet shutdowns, platform restrictions, and content regulation. The experience of the 2021 Twitter suspension demonstrates the need for regulatory frameworks that protect citizens' rights to communicate, organise, document abuses, and participate in public discourse while maintaining legitimate safeguards against unlawful online activities.

3. Ensuring implementation of judicial panel recommendations

State governments should provide regular and independently verifiable reports on the implementation of recommendations arising from the #EndSARS-era judicial panels of inquiry. Such reports should clearly identify measures undertaken, outstanding actions, responsible institutions, and implementation timelines. Particular attention should be given to disciplinary and prosecutorial measures involving security personnel implicated in documented abuses.

4. Promoting digital literacy and responsible platform use

Civil society organisations, universities, and other educational institutions should expand digital literacy programmes that equip citizens with the skills required to authenticate, preserve, contextualise, and responsibly share digital evidence. At the same time, social media platforms operating in Nigeria should be

encouraged through constructive regulatory engagement to adopt transparent content moderation and algorithmic practices that protect legitimate civic and accountability-related communication.

5. Protecting civic technology and legitimate fundraising mechanisms

The demonstrated contribution of organisations such as the Feminist Coalition to the logistical and financial sustainability of #EndSARS highlights the importance of protecting legitimate civic technology and digital fundraising infrastructure. Financial and technology regulators should establish safeguards that distinguish legitimate civic fundraising from illicit financial activities, thereby preventing accountability-oriented organisations from being subjected to unjustified restrictions.

6. Expanding research beyond individual protest episodes

Future studies should move beyond single-event analyses by employing longitudinal research designs capable of tracing the development of digital accountability movements over extended periods. Comparative studies examining #EndSARS alongside subsequent movements, particularly the 2024 #EndBadGovernance protests, would provide valuable evidence on whether digital mobilisation produces enduring institutional reforms or primarily generates temporary visibility and short-term governmental responses.

Overall, the study recommends a shift from viewing social media merely as a platform for protest mobilisation towards understanding it as one component of a broader **digital accountability ecosystem**. Such an ecosystem requires not only technologically empowered citizens but also independent oversight institutions, enforceable legal protections, transparent government responses, responsible digital platforms, and sustained civic engagement.

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