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When Nigeria Speaks: The Divergent Paths of #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS

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Abstract

This thesis explores the divergent trajectories of two major Nigerian social movements, #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS, which relied heavily on digital platforms but experienced differing international reach and domestic engagement levels. This research investigates how resource mobilization, framing, and political opportunity interact to shape movement outcomes through a comparative case study approach and thematic analysis of secondary sources. The analysis reveals that while both movements leveraged digital tools to amplify their causes, they succeeded in different arenas. #BringBackOurGirls gained widespread international attention through elite endorsements and emotionally powerful messaging, whereas #EndSARS formed deep grassroots participation through youth-led organizing. These contrasting trajectories reflect how each movement strategized its framing, mobilized resources, and navigated political opportunities. By synthesizing multiple social movement theories and applying them to a non-Western context, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary activism. It highlights the value of multi-framework analysis in capturing the dynamics of activism in Nigeria.

Keywords: social movements, digital activism, #BringBackOurGirls, #EndSARS, Nigeria

Introduction

Social movements have long been pivotal in challenging injustice and advocating for change. From civil rights struggles to anti-colonial resistance, collective action has shaped political landscapes and carved out new possibilities for liberation. Movements are sites of solidarity and vision-building. They allow people to articulate grievances, imagine alternatives, and claim space in societies that often marginalize their voices. In many cases, movements

become the primary vehicle through which citizens contest power when institutional avenues may be blocked or unresponsive. Movements are often seen as having strength through grassroots organizing, physical demonstrations, and shared identity. But success is never guaranteed. For every campaign that breaks through to shift policy or consciousness, countless others fade, fragmented by repression, exhaustion, or internal limitations.

In recent years, new tools have entered the mix. The arrival of digital platforms has changed how movements operate, enabling them to mobilize participants, amplify their messages, and extend their reach far beyond local contexts. These technologies offer new channels for visibility and connection, especially in places where traditional media is censored or inaccessible. Yet, while digital tools can accelerate awareness, they do not automatically translate into deeper engagement or structural change. They exist within broader political and cultural environments that shape what is possible and what is not. Despite shared tactics or technologies, not all movements follow the same trajectory. These variations raise critical questions about what drives a movement's reach and resonance—questions this thesis takes up through a comparative analysis of two landmark Nigerian movements: #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS.

In Nigeria, the #BringBackOurGirls movement began in 2014 after the terrorist group Boko Haram abducted 276 schoolgirls from Chibok. What started as a local outcry rapidly became a global campaign, with the #BringBackOurGirls gaining endorsements from figures such as Michelle Obama, Malala Yousafzai, and other international leaders (Oriola, 2021). The movement drew attention to broader issues of gender-based violence and insecurity, but while it succeeded in gaining international attention, its domestic momentum dwindled over time, leaving many of its core goals unmet (Ajisebiyawo, 2022).

By contrast, the #EndSARS movement, which gained traction in 2020, focused on systemic police brutality in Nigeria, particularly abuse by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). While the hashtag had circulated since 2017, it exploded in 2020 following viral footage of police violence. Unlike #BringBackOurGirls, #EndSARS was driven by grassroots mobilization and sustained physical protests, reflecting widespread frustration with state corruption and systemic abuse (Oriola, 2021). Although the moment garnered international solidarity, particularly among the African diaspora, it faced significant obstacles, including violent repression and the government's failure to implement comprehensive reforms (Ajisebiyawo, 2022).

Both movements sought to address systemic injustices and leveraged digital platforms to amplify their causes. Yet their trajectories and outcomes diverged significantly, prompting critical questions: Why did #BringBackOurGirls gain remarkable international reach but struggle with sustained domestic engagement? Conversely, why did #EndSARS sustain strong grassroots momentum but face challenges in achieving broader demands? These questions underscore the complexities of social movements in non-Western contexts, where unique political and social dynamics shape their paths.

This thesis investigates the central research question: What accounts for the similarities and differences in the trajectories of the #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS movements? This thesis argues that while both movements utilized digital activism to address systemic injustices, they achieved different forms of effectiveness: #BringBackOurGirls garnered exceptional international visibility through elite sponsorship and moral framing, whereas #EndSARS generated strong domestic engagement through decentralized, youth-driven resistance. These divergent outcomes were shaped by the ways each movement interacted with framing strategies,

patterns of resource access, and the nature of political opportunities available to them. In this thesis, effectiveness is not defined as a singular or universal benchmark of success. Instead, it refers to the distinct capacities of social movements to achieve traction within two interconnected areas: international reach and domestic engagement. These dimensions are not ranked hierarchically but are used as analytical categories to assess what kinds of influence each movement was able to cultivate, sustain, or struggle to maintain. International reach refers to the extent to which movements capture the attention and support of transnational actors, including international media, global NGOs, foreign governments, and public figures. Reach encompasses visibility: the symbolic amplification of a movement's message across borders. It also encompasses influence: the ability to shape international discourse, diplomatic responses, or material assistance. Although both #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS emerged from deep local grievances, international reach matters because movements do not operate in isolation from the global order. Global attention can amplify movement narratives and introduce new audiences and allies that movements alone might not mobilize. Thus, international reach, even for locally rooted movements, can influence both the strategies available to activists and the pressure applied to domestic authorities. Domestic engagement, by contrast, refers to local participation and the ability of a movement to sustain momentum within its home country. This includes grassroots mobilization, community-led organizing, on-the-ground protests, and digital engagement by local actors. It also involves the capacity to challenge domestic institutions, influence national discourse, and apply pressure for policy or structural change at the state level. By using these dimensions, this study avoids simplistic notions of success or failure and instead offers a more context-sensitive evaluation of what each movement was able to accomplish within its specific constraints. While this study engages with multiple social movement theories and

articulates hypotheses as analytical tools, it adopts a fundamentally interpretive approach. The goal is not to test generalizable claims but to apply theoretical frameworks in a context-specific way to understand how particular sociopolitical dynamics shape two movements in Nigeria.

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it expands the existing literature on social movements by putting multiple frameworks—political opportunity structure, resource mobilization, framing processes, and digital activism—in conversation (Almeida 2019; Almeida and Chase-Dunn 2018; Benford and Snow 2000; Caiani 2023; Edwards and McCarthy 2004; Eisinger 1973; Fominaya 2010; Jenkins 1983; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Kiel 2011; Klandermans 1984; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Melucci 1996; Meyer 2004; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Moghadam 2012; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Snow and Benford 1998; Suh 2001; Tarrow 2011; Tilly 2015; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). While these frameworks are often studied individually, this study demonstrates the value of integrating them to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various factors interact to shape the trajectories of social movements. This integrative approach is necessary because a key limitation in the current literature is its tendency to apply theories in isolation, failing to capture the layered dynamics that shape movements. By examining the cases of #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS, this research highlights how these frameworks intersect in shaping movements' reach and resonance.

Second, although global movements like the Arab Spring have garnered significant attention, there is a noticeable gap in the literature addressing social movements in West Africa. Much of the existing scholarship on social movements remains focused on Western contexts or a few high-profile cases outside the West, often overlooking movements in the Global South. This study contributes to addressing this gap by analyzing two prominent Nigerian movements,

examining the unique challenges and opportunities faced by West African movements, and adding to the broader discussion of non-Western activism.

Finally, while the #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS movements have been studied individually, few have analyzed them together through a comparative lens. This research provides a fresh perspective by identifying the similarities and differences in their trajectories. By focusing on non-Western contexts, this research challenges assumptions in existing literature and informs broader theoretical questions about what drives movements.

This thesis investigates these questions through a comparative analysis of the #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS movements, focusing on their emergence, strategies, global resonance, and outcomes. It employs a multi-framework approach by analyzing the interplay of theoretical frameworks. This study explains why these movements achieved differing levels of international reach and engagement. Furthermore, while this study critiques the limitations of Western-centric theories, it does not reject them outright. Instead, it is arguing that no single framework is sufficient to explain the complexity of contemporary movements. By addressing the gaps in the existing literature and demonstrating the value of an integrated approach, this research contributes to a more flexible understanding of how social movements operate in contexts like Nigeria.

This thesis begins with a literature review of social movement scholarship, followed by a theoretical framework section explaining the chosen concepts and their application to the Nigerian cases. It then examines the case studies and compares the movements' strategies and outcomes. Finally, this paper concludes by discussing its theoretical and practical contributions, addressing challenges, and suggesting areas for future research.

Literature Review

The literature on social movements offers a range of theoretical frameworks to explain how collective action emerges and evolves. These approaches have been especially important in the context of digital activism, where new technologies have expanded movement repertoires and disrupted traditional forms of mobilization. While scholars have produced extensive research on core concepts such as resource mobilization, framing, and political opportunity structures, much of this work has treated these frameworks in isolation. Moreover, there remains a gap in how these theories account for movements in non-Western settings, where other institutional dynamics can significantly reshape the strategies and outcomes of activism. This review synthesizes key strands of social movement theory, organizes them thematically, and highlights the conceptual limitations that this thesis seeks to address.

Social Movement Theory

Understanding the development of social movements begins with the foundational work of Charles Tilly (Tilly 2004). Tilly's analysis emphasizes the significance of organized efforts to assert collective claims on authorities, characterizing social movements as dynamic campaigns rather than mere reactions to political changes. His concept of WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment) illustrates the essential elements that contribute to the strength of movements, prompting the discussion as to how these components manifest themselves over time (Tilly 2004). Tilly's insights remain central to contemporary debates, especially as new technologies, shifting landscapes, and the forces of globalization complicate traditional understandings of collective action. Each body of literature below both extends Tilly's ideas and raises new questions about the relationships between activists, audiences, and institutions.

Resource Mobilization

The resource mobilization approach to social movements represents a significant departure from traditional frameworks that emphasize grievances and collective ideologies as primary motivators. McCarthy and Zald (1977) foreground the role of external resources, such as funding, institutional support, and professional leadership, as central to the emergence and sustainability of social movements. They argue that professional social movement organizations often rely on “conscious constituents” rather than directly aggrieved populations (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). In addition, transnational advocacy networks (TANs) enhance the resource mobilization framework by enabling local movements to access international resources, allies, and platforms. Keck and Sikkink (1998) highlight the “boomerang effect,” where domestic groups blocked by repression leverage global actors to pressure their governments. This framework aligns with McCarthy and Zald’s (1977) emphasis on external resources, allowing movements to draw on broader support, but this risks disconnecting them from grassroots participants. Moghadam (2012) further emphasizes how digital technologies, such as social media, amplify TANs’ ability to mobilize resources and disseminate information globally. Similarly, Kiel (2011) adds to this by stating how TANs strategically align with the goals of international organizations to maximize the movements’ influence.

By contrast, Jenkins (1983) expands on this by critiquing the overemphasis on external contributions, highlighting that even resourceful movements require crises or structural shifts, such as elite actions, to catalyze mobilization. Jenkins also stresses the importance of political and social environments, pointing to the balance of support and constraints as critical to movement success. This emphasis on political context points to a potential limitation in McCarthy and Zald’s static treatment of resource dynamics.

Edwards and McCarthy (2004) extend the literature by examining the interplay between movements and other societal institutions, such as the media and authorities, while highlighting the importance of organizational interactions within the broader social movement sector.”

However, their focus on structural elements overlooks the micro-level dynamics of participation and the role of individual agency. This is where Klandermans (1984) offers a complementary perspective by integrating social-psychological insights into resource mobilization. Using his theory, he explains how individuals weigh costs and benefits when deciding to participate, revealing a more nuanced understanding of the mobilization processes. While this adds depth, Klandermans’ approach risks being overly individualistic, potentially underestimating the structural and systemic barriers highlighted by Jenkins, Edwards, and McCarthy.

Despite their shared focus on resources, these scholars diverge in their emphasis. McCarthy and Zald prioritize external contributions; Jenkins critiques this for downplaying grievances and context; Keck and Sikkink help to expand the scope of resource mobilization by introducing transnational advocacy networks; Edwards and McCarthy emphasize organizational interactions and institutional linkages, while Klandermans incorporates individual motivations into the frameworks. Additionally, Moghadam highlights the role of digital technologies, while Kiel focuses on how TANs strategically garner support by aligning themselves with the objectives of international networks. Together, these perspectives give strength to the resource mobilization approach but expose its limitations, such as ideological dynamics and the interplay between structural and psychological factors.

Framing Processes

Scholars view framing as a key way to understand how social movements work, ranking it alongside resource mobilization and political opportunities in importance (Benford and Snow

2000). Framing shows how movements actively shape the meaning of social issues, though researchers debate exactly how frames work and what makes them effective. Snow and Benford lead one major school of thought, breaking down framing into three main tasks: identifying problems (diagnostic), suggesting solutions (prognostic), and motivating people to act (motivational) (Snow and Benford 1998). While many scholars use this three-part model, Caiani (2023) points out that it has been used to study left-wing movements, leaving out how right-wing groups use frames.

Another group of scholars focuses less on how frames are built and more on whether they resonate with people. Almeida (2019) argues that frames work best when they seem credible and connect to what people already believe and value. Recent research shows that frames are not fixed; they change through ongoing negotiations between different groups (Caiani 2023). Snow and Benford describe four ways movements align their frames with audiences: bridging (connecting similar but separate ideas), amplification (strengthening existing beliefs), extension (adding new concerns), and transformation (changing old meanings) (Benford and Snow 2000). Each method has its challenges. For example, bridging may sound simple, but it can prove to be difficult when trying to reach new groups. The success of frames remains debated. Some scholars focus on how strategic movements construct their messages, while others emphasize cultural context. Snow and Benford (1998) argue frames need both credibility (do they make sense?) and salience (do they matter to people?).

Beyond traditional framing approaches, narratives also play a significant role in mobilization. Polletta (1998) argues that narratives help participants see themselves as part of an ongoing historical struggle, integrating past, present, and future into a compelling storyline.

Unlike framing, which relies on clear messaging, narratives operate through emotional appeal and moral urgency, often making them more powerful in shaping activism (Polletta, 1998).

Despite significant contributions, framing research has notable gaps. Caiani (2023) identifies three main weaknesses: too much focus on progressive movements, limited understanding of how frames work across different organizational levels, and not enough attention to international movements. This last gap is especially problematic when studying contemporary African social movements, which often operate both at local and global levels. Furthermore, as Caiani (2023) mentions, existing framing literature often assumes a Western perspective, failing to fully capture how frames operate in Global South contexts where movements must navigate complex postcolonial relationships and power dynamics. As movements increasingly extend beyond national boundaries, there needs to be a new framework for understanding how frames are translated, adapted, and sometimes transformed as they move between local and global contexts. Lastly, the literature on framing tends to overlook the role of counter-framing, how opposing groups may challenge and reshape movement narratives (Benford and Snow 2000).

Political Opportunity Structures

Political Opportunity Structures emphasize how external, institutional, and political factors shape the rise, form, and trajectory of social movements. Early scholarship by Eisinger (1973) introduced the concept of political opportunity at the city level, showing that a mix of open and closed institutional arrangements can encourage protest. When government responsiveness is unclear, excluded groups turn to protest as a strategy to breach barriers and demand representation (Eisinger, 1973). Building on this, McAdam (1982) developed the political process model, which emphasizes that movements emerge not just from political

opportunities but also from organizational strength and activist perceptions. He introduces the idea of cognitive liberation, arguing that political openings alone are insufficient—activists must also have these opportunities and believe that collective action can lead to change (McAdam, 1982). His model highlights how shifts in power structures, such as elite divisions and changing alliances, create openings that movements can exploit. Tarrow (2011) conceptualizes opportunities as both openings and constraints that encourage and discourage contentious politics. He underscores that activism must perceive these opportunities, which emerge from shifts in political alignments, elite vulnerabilities, and the presence of potential allies.

Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) add complexity by examining how structures influence not only movements but also countermovements. They argue that when the state is accessible but not fully accommodating, movements and countermovements engage in sustained interaction, each spurring the other into action (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). Similarly, Meyer (2004) contends that opportunities vary across issues and claimants and that what opens the door for one movement may not do so for another. This focus on the specificity of contents and outcomes cautions against overly simplistic, one-size-fits-all interpretations.

Suh (2001) further refines the existing literature by highlighting the role of interpretation. According to Suh, it is not just objective shifts in opportunity that matter; rather, perceived changes that are correctly or incorrectly attributed can spur movements (Suh, 2001). Misframings such as “pseudo successes” and “pseudo failures” show how subjective understandings of external conditions shape internal dynamics (Suh, 2001). In this view, political opportunity interacts with framing processes, making outcomes contingent and unpredictable.

Despite the richness of these contributions, there are several limitations. First, the literature on political opportunity structure remains vague, encompassing too many factors

without clear specification. Second, it sometimes neglects the cultural and micro-level processes through which activists perceive, interpret, and respond to opportunities. Third, there is a tendency to conflate mobilization and policy influence, overlooking that opportunities for organizing and opportunities for actual change may differ. These critiques highlight the need for a more context-sensitive approach to fully understand how political opportunities shape social movements.

Collective Identity

Collective identity theory emphasizes how shared understandings and feelings unite movement participants. Yet scholars debate whether collective identity should be understood as a stable outcome or an ongoing process, and they differ on its role in explaining movement emergence and dynamics. Melucci (1996) and Fominaya (2010) both stress that collective identity is negotiated among actors through interaction, emotional ties, and interpretive processes. Rather than treating it as a fixed trait, these authors see collective identity as constantly forming and evolving, shaped by how members define themselves in relation to allies, opponents, and the broader context.

Polletta and Jasper (2001) critique earlier treatments of collective identity as either too broad, encompassing nearly all cultural dimensions, or too narrow, reduced to a mere byproduct of structural conditions. They argue that collective identity should be seen as an analytical tool that can explain why people come together and remain engaged even when material incentives are lacking (Polletta and Jasper 2001). By asking how identities are constructed, sustained, or discarded, a bigger picture can be built of why movements form when they do and how they choose particular strategies.

These scholars highlight how collective identity can tie together activists without requiring uniform agreement (Fominaya 2010), provide cultural resources and meanings that sustain commitment (Melucci 1996), and help movements influence cultural norms and perceptions (Polletta and Jasper 2001). Identity work can therefore affect everything from recruitment and alliances to tactics and long-term impacts. One limitation is the difficulty of measuring and operationalizing collective identity. Scholars often rely on qualitative analyses, making it challenging to compare cases systematically. Additionally, focusing heavily on identity risks overlooking factors that also drive mobilization overall. Overemphasizing collective identity can lead to ignoring how differences such as race, class, or gender may complicate or fragment unity. The literature recognizes collective identity as central to understanding movement cohesion and agency but calls for clearer methods, greater attention to internal divisions, and stronger links to external factors.

Digital Activism

Scholars exploring digital activism generally agree that the internet and social media platforms have expanded movement repertoires, lowered some participation thresholds, and facilitated the transnational coordination of protests (Almeida and Chase-Dunn 2018; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). Yet, rather than producing a definitive shift in power toward activists, these authors highlight tensions and shortcomings that limit the potential of online mobilization. In examining how movements leverage digital tools, the literature moves beyond simplistic internet optimism to a more nuanced view where connectivity does not guarantee meaningful, sustained collective action.

Authors such as Van Laer and Van Aelst (2010) stress that while online platforms make it easier to recruit new supporters and disseminate information, they often fail to create enduring bonds among activists. Weak ties facilitated by digital platforms can attract large numbers of “clicktivism,” which does not always translate into on-the-ground action (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). Similarly, activists might reach global audiences more readily, but truly transnational protests remain difficult, as barriers like time, travel costs, and cultural differences persist. This echoes Almeida and Chase-Dunn’s (2018) observation that digital tools function best when integrated with existing organizational networks rather than replacing them.

A persistent theme is that online mobilization can be too easy, prompting superficial engagement with negligible risk or commitment (Almeida and Chase-Dunn 2018; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). One weakness the authors point to is that the proliferation of tactics through social media can dilute the political impact of activism by dispersing energy across countless low-cost, low-stakes interventions (Almeida and Chase-Dunn 2018; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010). Moreover, the digital divide continues to disadvantage communities lacking reliable internet access or digital literacy, potentially reinforcing existing inequalities in political participation (Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010).

Despite similar findings surrounding this literature on digital activism, one limitation is that the literature often treats online and offline activism as separate domains, paying less attention to how they can interact. For example, the role of established organizations, local social ties, and existing political structures often goes underexplored. Another weakness is that these studies focus on either praising or doubting the internet’s impact, often without carefully examining when and why digital activism leads to meaningful change versus when it only creates temporary spikes in attention.

Taken together, these bodies of literature offer insights into the various factors shaping social movements: the resources they secure, how they frame their messages, the political climates they navigate, the identities they construct, and the digital tools they can employ. These frameworks represent key approaches scholars use to study movements, offering explanations for why some may succeed while others may struggle or fail. (Almeida 2019; Almeida and Chase-Dunn 2018; Benford and Snow 2000; Caiani 2023; Edwards and McCarthy 2004; Eisinger 1973; Fominaya 2010; Jenkins 1983; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Kiel 2011; Klandermans 1984; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Melucci 1996; Meyer 2004; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Moghadam 2012; Polletta and Jasper 2001; Snow and Benford 1998; Suh 2001; Tarrow 2011; Tilly 2015; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010).

Yet as this review highlights, each of these perspectives is often one-dimensional, focusing narrowly on a single explanatory factor. Resource mobilization frameworks tend to overlook the ideological and cultural dimensions of movements, while framing theory often neglects how global-local tensions can complicate how well the message resonates (Almeida 2019; Benford and Snow 1998, 2000; Caiani 2023; Edwards and McCarthy 2004; Jenkins 1983; Kiel 2011; Klandermans 1984; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Similarly, political opportunity structure points to how external conditions shape mobilization, but they often fail to account for how activists perceive and respond to these conditions in practice (Eisinger 1973; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Kiel 2011; Meyer 2004; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996; Moghadam 2012; Suh 2001; Tarrow 2011). Collective identity sheds light on the internal cohesion of movements but struggles to address how external pressures can influence identity formation (Fominaya, 2010; Melucci 1996; Polletta and Jasper 2001). Finally, while digital activism has become a huge part

of contemporary movements, it can ignore the interplay between digital tools and traditional organizing (Almeida and Chase-Dunn, 2018; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010).

While each of these frameworks has deepened the understanding of social movements, their compartmentalized use remains a key limitation. The tendency to apply these theories in isolation reflects a broader methodological siloing that does not account for the dynamic and overlapping conditions that shape movements like #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS. Moreover, most of the frameworks were developed based on Western experiences, where movements often operated within more stable institutional environments. They often presume the presence of institutional channels through which grievances can be addressed or a civil society strong enough to pressure the state without fear of extreme reprisal. However, these assumptions unravel when applied to countries like Nigeria, where digital infrastructures are uneven, civil liberties are fragile, and state actors can alternate between responsiveness and repression in unpredictable ways.

As a result, theoretical models that treat resource access, framing, or opportunity structures as discrete variables fail to explain how these forces compound or contradict one another on the ground. For example, a movement might frame its message effectively but still be constrained by a repressive political opportunity structure or lack of local resource access. Or, transnational attention may bring symbolic capital but fracture local credibility or dampen grassroots engagement. What is needed is not a rejection of these theories but a reconfiguration of how they are used, as interdependent lenses that, when combined, offer a more complete and context-sensitive understanding.

By applying and testing these frameworks in a comparative study of the #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS movements, this thesis addresses these gaps. The

comparative analysis not only highlights the interplay between these frameworks but also reveals how these approaches can amplify or constrain movement effectiveness. While each of these frameworks has contributed valuable insights, they are often applied in isolation. This limits their explanatory power, especially in complex contexts like Nigeria, where symbolic, material, and structural factors do not operate separately. This thesis argues that understanding the divergent trajectories of #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS requires a multi-theoretical approach because no single framework can capture the full range of forces that shape movement outcomes. By examining how these dimensions interact, this study offers a more integrated and context-sensitive model for analyzing contemporary activism.

Theory

The analytical framework for this study draws on several key social movement theories. Resource Mobilization Theory illustrates how movements utilize resources such as funding, leadership, and transnational support (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). Framing theory examines how narratives are constructed and disseminated to mobilize supporters (Benford and Snow 2000). Political Opportunity Structures highlight the role of external political conditions in shaping movement trajectories, including government responsiveness, elite alliances, and repression (Tarrow 2011). By integrating these frameworks, this study explains the variations in movement effectiveness, particularly in terms of international reach and domestic impact.

This study is guided by three key hypotheses that reflect the theoretical frameworks outlined in the analytical approach. These hypotheses explore the factors that contribute to the success and limitations of the #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS movements. Each hypothesis is informed by existing scholarship on social movements, resource mobilization, political

opportunities, and framing. Moreover, the hypotheses presented here serve as guiding propositions derived from theory rather than predictive models, and the emphasis is on explanation, interpretation, and comparison within a non-Western setting.

H1: Movements with strong framing that resonate both locally and globally are more likely to gain international reach.

Framing theory suggests that how a movement constructs its message influences its ability to mobilize support (Benford and Snow 2000). Certain frames may resonate more broadly depending on cultural, political, and media contexts. In this thesis, strong framing refers to frames that identify injustice (diagnostic), propose actionable solutions (prognostic), and mobilize action (motivational), while also being accessible to both domestic and international communities. This study examines how variations in framing strategies influence both the visibility (extent of symbolic amplification) and reach (scope of audience engagement) of a movement across domestic and international spheres.

H2: Access to diverse resources enhances a movement's sustainability and reach.

Resource mobilization theory emphasizes that movements rely on material, financial, and organizational resources to sustain engagement and expand influence (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). The presence of institutional support, funding, and transnational advocacy networks can provide movements with advantages in sustaining momentum (Keck and Sikkink, 1998). For this study, diverse resources include financial support (e.g., crowdfunding, NGOs), institutional backing (e.g., political or media elites), grassroots labor (e.g., volunteers), and symbolic capital (e.g., endorsements or visibility). Access to multiple resource types allows movements to scale up and sustain over time. Sustainability refers to a movement's ability to maintain mobilization

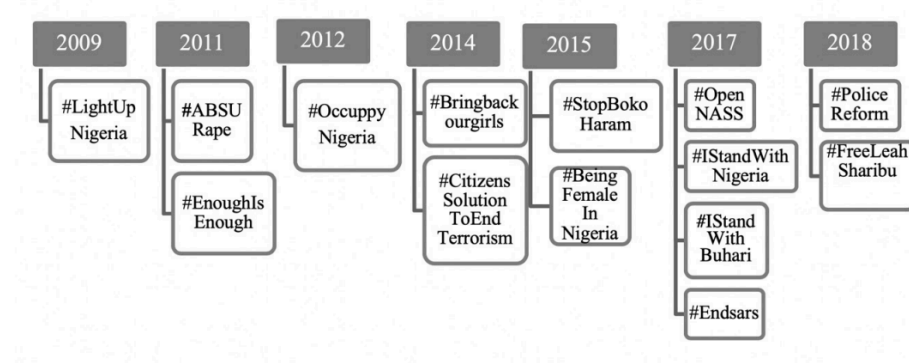
and momentum over time. This hypothesis assesses how variations in resource availability influenced each movement's ability to persist and scale its activism.

H3: Favorable political opportunities determine the timing and visibility of a movement.

Political opportunity theory posits that the success of a movement is shaped by the broader political environment, including state openness, elite alignment, and repression levels (McAdam 1982; Tarrow 2011). Movements are more likely to thrive when they perceive an opening for influence, either through state responsiveness or elite divisions. In this thesis, a favorable political opportunity refers to contexts where the government is either unable or unwilling to repress protests, where institutional channels offer openings for claim-making, and where external or internal pressures incentivize responsiveness. This study explores how political dynamics shaped the trajectories and mobilization of both movements.

Setting the Stage: Activism in Nigeria

Figure 1: Timeline of Prominent Hashtags in Nigeria



Source: Oloyede and Elegu, *Exploring Hashtag Activism in Nigeria*, 2019.

The evolution of social movements in Nigeria has always been shaped by a history of repression, colonial legacies, and persistent inequality. Historically, organized labor in Nigeria has been central to social protest, especially against unfavorable government policies.

Movements such as the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) have been pivotal in advocating for rights and reforms (Ajisebiyawo 2022). With the advent of social media, activism in Nigeria entered a new phase. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have transformed political discourse, providing accessible channels for organizing and mobilizing (Ajisebiyawo 2022). The “Light Up Nigeria” campaign marked the first significant instance of online activism, addressing electricity issues, followed by the #EnoughIsEnough campaign in 2011, advocating for electoral reforms (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Williams-Elegbe 2015).

A pivotal movement was the #OccupyNigeria movement in 2012, protesting the removal of fuel subsidies that drastically increased prices (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Williams-Elegbe 2015). This movement demonstrated the power of social media in amplifying citizens’ voices. Following this, hashtag activism became central to protest culture, with movements like #BringBackOurGirls, #StopBokoHaram, #IStandWithNigeria, and #EndSARS (Ajisebiyawo 2022).

The selection of #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS is rooted in their distinct but significant trajectories as two of Nigeria’s most internationally recognized social movements. While numerous movements have emerged in Nigeria, few have captured both national and international attention to the extent that these two have. Yet, despite similarities in digital strategy, their paths diverged dramatically, making them ideal for a comparative analysis of what shapes movement outcomes in a non-Western setting. This points to the importance of examining their trajectories in understanding the dynamics of social movements in Nigeria.

Methodology

This study investigates the factors that account for the similarities and differences in the trajectories of the #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS movements. To achieve this, a comparative case study design is employed through qualitative case studies. The comparative case study approach enables a deep examination of each movement's strategies and outcomes while identifying the broader patterns and key differences between them.

The selection of #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS is grounded in their significance in Nigerian activism. Both movements are landmark examples of contemporary Nigerian activism that relied heavily on digital platforms to mobilize support, communicate demands, and navigate state responses. This shared digital infrastructure provides a common foundation for comparison. Their divergent outcomes allow for a meaningful exploration of how different combinations of framing, political opportunity, and resource mobilization structures shape movement trajectories. These cases are particularly well-suited for a comparative study because they hold key contextual factors constant (geographic setting, reliance on social media, and origin as citizen-led mobilizations), while differing in their patterns of influence and reception. This variation enables a close examination of how theoretical concepts operate across different social and political contexts, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of digital activism in Nigeria.

To conduct this analysis, the study employs a comparative case study design, grounded in thematic analysis. It draws on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include contemporaneous media reports, NGO publications, and activist communications from the time of each movement. Secondary sources consist of academic literature, advocacy publications, and policy documents. Together, these materials illuminate the historical, political, and social contexts of both movements, as well as their broader impact on activism in Nigeria. Academic research offers theoretical perspectives on social movements, while media reports capture

real-time public discourse and government responses. Additionally, reports from human rights organizations and NGOs document key developments, demands, and institutional reactions to both movements. Through thematic analysis, this study examines how each movement framed its messaging, engaged with domestic and international audiences, and responded to political opportunities and constraints.

Case Study 1: #BringBackOurGirls

On April 14, 2014, Nigeria was thrust into the international spotlight when Boko Haram, an Islamist terrorist organization, abducted 276 schoolgirls from the Government Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State, in the country's northeast (Chiluwa and Ifukor 2015). This devastating act of terror not only shocked the local community but also reverberated across Nigeria and the world, eventually catalyzing a historic global campaign for justice and the safe return of the girls (Chiluwa and Ifukor 2015; Onah 2024; Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019).

The abduction was not an isolated incident but part of a broader pattern of violence perpetrated by Boko Haram. Since its emergence in the early 2000s, the group has waged an insurgency marked by bombings, assassinations, and widespread abductions (Onah 2024; Oriola 2021). The group's name, "Boko Haram," roughly translates to "Western education is forbidden," signaling its ideological stance against modernity and particularly the education of girls (Atela et al. 2021). Boko Haram's attacks intensified after 2009, turning Nigeria's northeast into a zone of fear and displacement. Women and girls were systemically targeted, subjected to abductions, sexual violence, forced marriages, and exploitation (Atela et al. 2021; Onah 2024). The Chibok abduction represented the largest and most brazen of these atrocities, drawing

attention to the group's brutal tactics and the heightened risks faced by women and girls in regions targeted by Boko Haram.

The Nigerian government's initial response to the Chibok kidnapping was marred by confusion, denial, and inaction. For several days after the abduction, government officials failed to acknowledge the scale of the crisis, and some even suggested the reports were exaggerated or fabricated by opposition forces to embarrass President Goodluck Jonathan's administration at the time (Onah 2024). The government's slow response, compounded by conflicting statements from military and security officials, ignited outrage among Nigerians and intensified feelings of abandonment within the Chibok community (Onah 2024; Oriola 2021; Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019). Families of the abducted girls, along with concerned Nigerians, demanded answers and action, but their pleas were initially met with silence or deflection (Chiluwa and Ifukor 2015; Onah 2024; Oriola 2021). This delay and apparent indifference exacerbated the pain of the affected families and eroded public confidence in the government's ability to protect its citizens.

As the Nigerian government grappled with internal contradictions, the plight of the Chibok girls slowly gained attention beyond the country's borders. However, the global spotlight did not fall on Nigeria by mere luck. It was the determined and relentless activism of local citizens, particularly Nigerian women, that pushed the issue into international consciousness (Atela et al. 2021; Oriola 2021). On April 23, 2014, during a speech at the UNESCO World Book Capital Conference in Port Harcourt, former Nigerian Minister of Education and World Bank Vice President Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili publicly called on the Nigerian government to "bring back our daughters." Her impassioned plea captured the desperation and urgency of the moment (Oriola 2021). Watching the event unfold, Nigerian lawyer Ibrahim Abdullahi was

moved to action. He quickly transformed Ezekwesili's words into the hashtag #BringBackOurDaughters, and soon after, the more widely recognized #BringBackOurGirls was born (Atela et al. 2021; Oriola 2021). The simple yet powerful message became a rallying cry for millions worldwide.

The #BringBackOurGirls campaign began as a grassroots response, driven by the frustration and grief of those closest to the tragedy. Parents, activists, and concerned citizens gathered at Abuja's Unity Fountain on April 30, 2014, demanding swift action to rescue the girls (Atela et al. 2021). Local activists organized daily sit-ins, vigils, and marches, refusing to let the government or the world forget about the abducted girls. Despite facing police harassment, government intimidation, and public skepticism, the movement endured (Atela et al. 2021; Oriola 2021).

Social media became the engine that propelled the #BBOG movement onto the global stage. Through platforms like Twitter and Facebook, the campaign gained rapid momentum, with activists sharing updates, mobilizing protests, and calling for solidarity. The simplicity of the hashtag, combined with the emotional gravity of the issue, made it easily shareable (Onah 2024). Within weeks, #BBOG became one of the most trending topics worldwide. Michelle Obama, then First Lady of the United States, famously held a placard bearing the hashtag, amplifying the message to millions of people (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019; Ofori-Parku 2018). Other prominent figures, including Malala Yousafzai, Hillary Clinton, and celebrities like Anne Hathaway, also joined the campaign, adding their voices to the chorus of global outrage (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019; Njoroge 2016).

The wave of international attention placed immense pressure on the Nigerian government as foreign governments and international organizations began to offer assistance. The United

States and the United Kingdom sent intelligence and military specialists to aid in the search and rescue operations, while Australia, Canada, China, and Israel pledged support (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019). Yet despite this international involvement, the efforts to locate and rescue the girls remained fraught with challenges. Boko Haram used the abducted girls as human shields, placing them in locations that deterred military intervention, and as bargaining tools to demand concessions like prisoner swaps from the government, prolonging the crisis and complicating rescue operations (Oriola 2021). Moreover, the Nigerian government's initial delays and failures in responding to the crisis exacerbated the situation, hindering early intervention and increasing the difficulty of securing the girls' safe return (Oriola 2021).

The protracted nature of the crisis tested the resilience of the #BBOG movement. As weeks turned into months and then years, and now, a decade. The movement also encountered criticism from multiple fronts. Some accused it of being politically motivated, partially as Nigeria's presidential elections loomed (Onah 2024; Oriola 2021). Others questioned the effectiveness of hashtag activism, dismissing it as mere "slacktivism" lacking tangible results (Oriola 2021). Furthermore, the movement faced backlash from certain sectors of Nigerian society, where political allegiances and regional divides complicated the perceptions of the movement's motives.

Despite these challenges, the BBOG movement has persisted. It continued to organize public protests, engage with international stakeholders, and keep the spotlight on the abducted girls (Atela et al. 2021; Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019). Over time, the movement evolved, expanding its advocacy to include support for internally displaced persons and victims of Boko Haram's broader campaign of violence (Oriola 2021). Some movement members established

NGOs, such as *Adopt-a-Camp* and *Girl-Child Africa*, to address the immediate and long-term needs of those affected by conflict (Oriola 2021).

The movement's persistence yielded results, though painfully gradual and partial. Negotiations, facilitated by international organizations like the International Red Cross, led to the release of 106 girls in a series of staggered agreements between 2016 and 2017 (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019). However, more than 100 girls remain missing, their fate uncertain. The releases were bittersweet victories; each girl's return was a cause for celebration, but the absence of so many others underscored the ongoing tragedy and the limits of the campaign's successes.

Throughout its existence, #BBOG has had to navigate complex tensions between local activism and global advocacy, between maintaining non-partisan credibility and confronting a politically charged landscape, and between the immediacy of rescue efforts and the broader systemic issues of gender inequality, governance failures, and regional insecurity (Atela et al. 2021; Oriola 2021; Onah 2024). The kidnapping of the Chibok girls is not just a singular tragedy but a reflection of broader systemic failures. It symbolizes the vulnerability of girls in conflict zones, the consequences of state neglect, and the strength of communities that refuse to surrender to violence and injustice. The #The BBOG movement challenged the world to confront the horrors faced by Nigeria's most vulnerable and to stand in solidarity against terror.

Case Study 2: #EndSARS

The #EndSARS protest movement of 2020 stands as one of the most significant social movements in Nigeria's recent history. It was a powerful expression of youth activism and digital mobilization. More than just a protest against police brutality, the movement evolved into a broader struggle against governance failures, inequality, and systemic oppression in Nigeria.

Central to the movement's mobilization and sustainability was the strategic use of social media, which catalyzed awareness, coordination, and international solidarity.

The origins of the #EndSARS movement can be traced to long-standing grievances against police brutality, particularly the misconduct of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). SARS was established in 1992 by the Commissioner of Police, Simeon Danladi Midenda, to combat a rising wave of violent crimes such as armed robbery and kidnapping (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021). Initially, the unit operated covertly, carrying out undercover operations to apprehend dangerous criminals. However, over the decades, SARS became notorious for gross human rights abuses, particularly targeting young Nigerians based on superficial profiling such as hairstyles, fashion choices, or possession of electronic devices (Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021). SARS officers operated with impunity, leveraging their authority to detain, torture, and extort money from innocent civilians. Victims frequently reported being forced to withdraw money under duress, falsely accused of crimes, and subjected to inhumane treatment (Agbalajobi 2020).

Despite multiple calls for reform, including a 2017 petition signed by over 10,000 Nigerians, the government's responses were largely ineffective (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021; Oloyede and Elegba 2019). SARS underwent numerous supposed reforms and restructurings, yet reports of brutality persisted (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021). The tipping point occurred in October 2020, when a viral video emerged on social media depicting SARS officers allegedly shooting an unarmed man in Ughelli, Delta State, and driving off with his vehicle (Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021). The video ignited immediate outrage, with Nigerian youths leveraging the hashtag #EndSARS to demand accountability and the

disbandment of the unit. Social media rapidly became the space for amplifying the voices of victims and protestors.

The role of social media in the EndSARS movement was important. Twitter and other social media apps became the primary platforms for organizing and mobilizing the movement. Protestors used these platforms to share real-time updates, document cases of police brutality, and coordinate protests across Nigeria's cities (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Ani and Onu 2024; Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021; Oloyede and Elegba 2019). The hashtag quickly became a rallying point, amassing over 28 million tweets within a short period (Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021). The immediacy and global reach of social media ensured that stories of police brutality could not be ignored or easily suppressed. Social media allowed for a horizontal, decentralized form of activism where individuals could contribute and participate without needing formal leadership structures (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Gumbi and Baba 2024).

The decentralized nature of the protest was one of its most defining characteristics. It was organized primarily by Nigerian youths who used digital platforms to communicate, coordinate, and disseminate information. There were no central leaders; instead, the movement thrived on collective effort and shared responsibility (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Gumbi and Baba 2024). Celebrities, influencers, and social commentators played critical roles in mobilizing support and drawing international attention. Notably, Nigerian Twitter users even offered to cover the phone bills for others to ensure online engagement was sustained (Ajisebiyawo 2022).

The concept of “*Sòrò Sókè*” (Yoruba for “speak up”) became a defining and symbolic element of the #EndSARS movement, reflecting the spirit of assertiveness and courage that characterized the protests (Okesola and Oyeboode 2023). The phrase emerged organically among young protesters as a rallying cry against oppression and enforced silence, symbolizing the

rejection of a culture of passivity that had long dominated political discourse in Nigeria (Okesola and Oyeboode, 2023). “Sòrò Sóké” was not merely a slogan but represented a broader shift with young Nigerians taking agency to confront and challenge the government’s neglect and abuse of power (Okesola and Oyeboode 2023). It embodied the younger generation’s rejection of the failures of older political leadership and their willingness to speak up for a better Nigeria (Okesola and Oyeboode 2023).

The #EndSARS protests were characterized by a clear articulation of demands, known as the #5for5, which were widely circulated and discussed across social media (Ajisebiyawo 2022). The demands included the immediate release of all arrested protesters, justice for deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families, the establishment of an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of police misconduct, psychological evaluation and retraining of all disbanded SARS officers before they could be deployed, and an increase in police salaries to reduce corruption (Ajisebiyawo 2022). These demands highlighted the movement’s commitment to systemic reform and were widely embraced by protesters across Nigeria and in the diaspora (Ajisebiyawo 2022).

Ani and Onu (2024) note how the government announced the disbandment of SARS and the formation of a new Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) unit. The decision to replace SARS with SWAT was seen as a cosmetic change, prompting continued demonstrations. Protesters argued that real reform required accountability, transparency, and structural changes within the police force, not just a rebranding (Ani and Onu 2024). The tragic climax of the #EndSARS movement happened to be the Lekki Toll Gate shootings. Security forces opened fire on peaceful protesters in Lagos, leading to multiple deaths and injuries. The attack, which was livestreamed on Instagram and documented widely on social media, shocked the nation and the world (Ani

and Onu 2024). Videos and images of wounded protesters and eyewitness accounts circulated rapidly, leading to global condemnation (Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021). The Lekki shootings became emblematic of the government's violent repression of dissent and further solidified the protest's place in global conversations about human rights and state accountability (Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021).

However, the movement also faced significant challenges, particularly related to misinformation and government repression. The proliferation of fake news and manipulated content on social media platforms complicated the narrative and was used by critics to undermine the legitimacy of the protests (Ajisebiyawo 2022). Some government officials accused the movement of being a political conspiracy aimed at destabilizing the nation, while others downplayed the severity of the incidents (Oloyede and Elegu 2019). Additionally, the government employed strategies of suppression, including freezing bank accounts of protest organizers, seizing passports, and detaining activists (Ani and Onu 2024; Odunsi 2020).

However, the movement's impact was not without limitations. The lack of centralized leadership, while initially a strength, eventually became a vulnerability. The protests were infiltrated by criminal elements, leading to incidents of looting and violence, which detracted from the movement's message and provided the government with a pretext for repression (Abbo, Njidda, and Baba 2020). In addition, the movement struggled to build national consensus, with regions like northern Nigeria expressing less solidarity. While the protests gained significant traction in the southern and urban centers of Nigeria, there was a notable divergence in perception in the northern regions. In the North, SARS was often viewed as a necessary security organization, crucial for combating the region's high levels of insecurity, including issues of banditry, kidnapping, and insurgency (Abbo, Njidda, and Baba 2020). For many in the North, the

dissolution of SARS raised fears about an escalation of these security challenges. Some northern leaders and groups openly expressed their opposition to the disbandment, arguing that SARS played a vital role in ensuring safety and order in the region (Abbo, Njidda, and Baba 2020). This contradictory perception limited the movement's capacity to mobilize and achieve a broader consensus across the whole of Nigeria.

Moreover, although the movement succeeded in forcing the government to initiate judicial panels and reforms, the outcomes have been inconsistent. Amnesty International (2022) reported that numerous protesters remained in detention without trial, and investigations into police brutality were slow and inconclusive. This underscores the challenges of sustaining activism and translating protest into substantive policy change in the face of entrenched institutional resistance.

Nevertheless, the legacy of the #EndSARS movement endures. The movement revealed the deep-seated frustrations of Nigerian youths, not only with police brutality but with broader issues of governance and corruption (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021; Human Rights Watch 2005). While the movement faced significant obstacles and did not achieve all of its objectives, it succeeded in highlighting the urgent need for systemic reform and galvanized a generation of politically conscious Nigerians.

Comparative Analysis

As two of Nigeria's most prominent social movements, #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS both harnessed digital platforms, mobilized local and global audiences, and confronted state power in their pursuit of justice. Yet, despite these similarities, their outcomes were different in striking ways. While existing literature often isolates single theories to explain

social movements, this thesis adopts an integrative framework, combining framing, resource mobilization, and political opportunity to better understand the complexity of these paths. So, what truly sets these two movements apart?

H1: Movements with strong framing that resonate both locally and globally are more likely to gain international reach.

Framing theory provides a lens for understanding why some movements resonate broadly while others remain more localized. Social movements are not just responses to grievances, but they frame them, define them, and give them meanings in ways that push for actions (Benford and Snow 2000; Almeida 2019; Caiani 2023). Through diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing, movements construct narratives that can either engage or alienate potential supporters (Snow and Benford 1998; Benford and Snow 2000). This section explores how the framing strategies of #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS influenced their international visibility.

The #BringBackOurGirls movement's framing was effective in galvanizing global solidarity. From the beginning, the message was anchored in a deeply humanizing and compelling narrative: the abduction of innocent schoolgirls by a terrorist organization (Chiluwa and Ifukor 2015; Oriola 2021). The emotional weight of the campaign, amplified by the image of young girls stolen from their classrooms, created an immediate and visceral response across borders (Ofori-Parku and Moscato 2018). The use of the word "our" in the hashtag functioned as a rhetorical bridge, inviting solidarity from people globally, regardless of nationality, race, or religion (Oriola 2021).

The movement deployed four main frames—motherist, human rights, girl-child education, and state failure—to connect with different constituencies and maximize resonance

(Oriola 2021). What made BBOG's framing so potent was its simplicity and its ability to create a shared emotional response. It bypassed the complexity of Nigerian politics and instead positioned the girls as global daughters, symbols of vulnerability, innocence, and the right to education (Oriola 2021; Atela et al. 2021). As Oriola notes, the movement's slogan reduced a multifaceted political crisis into a moral imperative, allowing international audiences to engage without needing in-depth knowledge of Boko Haram or Nigerian state failure (Oriola 2021).

Public figures such as Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Malala Yousafzai endorsed the campaign, further validating the frame's resonance in global media (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadier 2019; Atela et al. 2021; Chilwa and Ifukor 2015; Njoroge 2016; Ofori-Parku and Moscato 2018). Moreover, photos of placards reading “#BringBackOurGirls” in the hands of celebrities, activities, and ordinary citizens circulated widely, offering both symbolic protests and a form of digital participation (Abdullahi and Abdul-qadier 2019; Atela et al. 2021; Chilwa and Ifukor 2015; Njoroge 2016). These narratives centered the girl's abduction as an affront to human rights, education, and gender equality (Atela et al. 2021). In this way, BBOG's framing was not only affected but also translatable—qualities that, as Keck and Sikkink and Moghadam argue, are essential for movements to be adopted by transnational advocacy networks and media outlets (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Moghadam 2012).

By contrast, the #EndSARS movement, while deeply salient within Nigeria, faced challenges in constructing a globally legible frame. Its core issue, police brutality by SARS, was well-known domestically but lacked immediate symbolic clarity for international observers unfamiliar with Nigeria's policing structures. Unlike the clear-cut narrative of kidnapped girls, #EndSARS relied on a more diffuse frame: systemic state violence, corruption, and youth disenfranchisement (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021). While emotionally

powerful within some parts of Nigeria, this frame required more contextual understanding, which often limited its ability to provoke similar global empathy (Ajisebiyawo 2022).

The movement's framing was also deeply tied to youth identity and urban experiences, using slogans like “Sòrò Sókè” (Speak Up) to call for generational resistance against structural oppression and abuse of authority (Okesola and Oyebode 2023). While powerful and affirming for Nigerian youths, this language was not always easily accessible to the international audience unfamiliar with the Nigerian sociopolitical context, especially as protests went beyond a single demand (Abbo, Njidda, and Baba 2020; Ajisebiyawo 2022; Ani and Onu 2024). Furthermore, the government's repression of #EndSARS also complicated its framing. While the Lekki Toll Gate shootings shocked many, the state's dissemination of misinformation and framing of protesters as threats created a counter-narrative that undermined the movement's goals (Ani and Onu 2024). In contrast, BBOG faced minimal narrative disruption, as the state's initial denial of the abductions quickly collapsed under public pressure, and attempts to reframe the crisis risked losing legitimacy (Oriola 2021). This asymmetry in narrative control allowed BBOG to maintain a more consistent and morally unassailable message (Oriola 2021).

In comparing both movements, it becomes evident that framing played a crucial role in shaping international traction. BBOG succeeded in constructing a frame that was urgent and morally unambiguous, anchored in a single, horrific incident—the abduction of schoolgirls—which made the cause easily shareable across global platforms. While #EndSARS protests were catalyzed by a specific case of police violence, the movement's framing quickly expanded to cover broader grievances, including police brutality and corruption. This broader and more diffuse framing lacked the same translatability due to its reliance on context-specific grievances and its entanglement with state-driven narratives. The contrast underscores Benford

and Snow's argument that frame resonance depends not only on how well a movement constructs its message but also on the cultural and political environments into which that message is introduced (Benford and Snow 2000). Another crucial factor in #BringBackOurGirls' effectiveness with international reach was how the movement framed its cause in universally resonant terms—protection of innocent girls from terrorism—rather than as a direct indictment of the Nigerian state. This framing strategy is what allowed international figures to endorse the campaign without appearing to critique a foreign government directly. By contrast, #EndSARS explicitly challenged state authority and misconduct, making it politically riskier for international actors to offer visible support.

H2: Access to different types of resources shapes different kinds of movement effectiveness.

Resource Mobilization Theory points to the centrality of resources—material, human, and organizational—to the growth and sustainability of social movements (McCarthy and Zald 1977). This section explores how each movement leveraged different forms of resources and how they shaped their visibility and reach.

The BBOG campaign was able to rapidly access global resources, largely due to its visibility and elite sponsorship. These global resources include transnational networks, international media amplification, and assistance from NGOs. The movement's early endorsement by high-profile Nigerian figures such as Dr. Obiageli Ezekwesili, former Minister of Education and World Bank Vice President, immediately elevated its legitimacy and provided access to policy networks (Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021; Oriola 2021). These elite affiliations enabled the campaign to connect with transnational advocacy organizations, feminist networks, and international media outlets that amplified the movement's urgency (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019; Atela et al. 2021). This transnational support led to tangible material benefits:

foreign governments, including the United States and the United Kingdom, offered intelligence and surveillance assistance to Nigeria, while international NGOs highlighted the issue in global forums (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019; Oriola 2021).

BBOG's integration into transnational advocacy networks also brought symbolic capital. The campaign's ability to secure international media coverage and diplomatic attention stemmed from these strategic alliances, which functioned as multipliers for its message. However, while the movement's international resource base expanded rapidly, its domestic base was comparatively fragile. As Ajisebiyawo notes, BBOG struggles to maintain widespread grassroots participation over time (Ajisebiyawo 2022). This imbalance between international and domestic resources created a sustainability gap, where global attention outpaced local engagement.

By contrast, the EndSARS movement was built from the ground up; it drew strength from widespread frustration with systemic police brutality and was largely organized by Nigerian youth using digital platforms and decentralized networks (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Gumbi and Baba 2024). Protesters self-funded logistics, food, security, and legal aid, while volunteer groups and crowdfunding efforts—both domestic and diaspora—provided financial and technical support (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Gumbi and Baba 2024). This decentralized resource mobilization fostered a strong sense of participation, strengthening legitimacy in the early stages of protests.

However, the reliance on informal networks also posed limitations. Without formal organizations or institutional alliances, the movement faced challenges in negotiating with the state or securing policy commitments (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Ani and Onu 2024). The absence of established leadership structures made the distribution of resources uneven and at times uncoordinated (Ajisebiyawo 2022). Furthermore, the Nigerian government's response highlighted the vulnerability of movements that lack formal protections or transnational backing

(Ani and Onu 2024). Unlike BBOG, #EndSARS did not benefit from sustained support from international NGOs or governments, which may have reduced its leverage in demanding systemic reform.

While both movements effectively mobilized resources, they did so in contrasting ways that reflected their goals and constituencies. BBOG drew on elite connections and transnational advocacy networks, which boosted its international visibility and legitimacy but limited sustained grassroots momentum. In contrast, #EndSARS relied on grassroots mobilization and peer-to-peer support systems that formed strong domestic participation but lacked the institutional backing that might have offered international protection or policy leverage. These different patterns suggest that resource access alone does not determine a movement's success; rather, the kind of resources available influences the form of effectiveness a movement can achieve.

H3: Favorable political opportunities determine the timing and visibility of a movement.

Political opportunity theory highlights how the broader political environment can create windows for social movements to emerge and influence change (Tarrow 2011; McAdam 1982). Movements may thrive when institutions are receptive or divided but may struggle under closed or repressive regimes (Eisinger 1973; Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). This section explores how #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS each navigated their political environments.

The #BringBackOurGirls campaign unfolded during a period of both national insecurity and increasing international scrutiny of Nigeria's handling of the Boko Haram insurgency (Onah 2024; Oriola 2021). The abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls represented not only a humanitarian crisis but also a political embarrassment for President Goodluck Jonathan's administration, which was preparing for the 2015 general elections (Onah 2024). The government's response,

marked by denial and a lack of urgency, created public outrage and provided a powerful opening for the society to mobilize (Oriola 2021). The lack of immediate state repression allowed BBOG activists to stage consistent protests and sit-ins in Abuja (Oriola 2021).

As the campaign gained international visibility, political opportunities expanded further through external pressure. World leaders and international organizations have joined the call for action, amplifying frustration with perceived government inaction (Chiluwa and Ifukor 2015; Ofori-Parku & Moscato 2018). This transnational pressure, paired with domestic organizing, forced the administration to respond, even if reluctantly (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019). The Nigerian government accepted assistance from international organizations and initiated negotiations with Boko Haram, largely under international watch (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019). The political movement was not entirely open, but it was malleable. BBOG used the ability of the government's desire to preserve legitimacy in the eyes of both citizens and foreign actors to their advantage.

On the other hand, the #EndSARS movement initially emerged after years of public outcry against police brutality (Ajisebiyawo 2022). When the 2020 protests erupted following viral footage of police violence, the government responded swiftly with statements promising the disbandment of SARS in place of a new SWAT unit (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Ani and Onu 2024). What initially seemed like a window of opportunity rapidly closed. The Lekki Toll Gate massacre marked an important point in the movement's political opportunity structure. The violent crackdown on peaceful protesters signaled not only the end of perceived state openness but also the reassertion of state control (Nwafor and Nwabuzor 2021). Unlike BBOG, which operated in a context where international attention constrained state violence, #EndSARS

activists were subjected to digital surveillance, financial repression, and physical violence, severely curtailing their ability to organize (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Ani and Onu 2024).

Comparatively, #BringBackOurGirls operated in a more advantageous political context. While the government initially resisted, international attention made repression costly, and the campaign's alignment with global discourses on terrorism and girls' education made it politically risky to suppress (Abdullahi and Abdul-Qadir 2019; Onah 2024; Oriola 2021). In contrast, #EndSARS, despite domestic support, faced a closed political environment where demands for systemic reform were viewed as subversive (Ajisebiyawo 2022; Ani and Onu 2024; Oloyede and Elegu 2019). Ultimately, political openings shaped each movement's ability to sustain pressure and pursue meaningful outcomes.

Taken together, the cases of #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS reveal that the trajectories of social movements cannot be understood through a single lens. Each movement achieved different kinds of effectiveness—#BringBackOurGirls garnered significant international reach but struggled to build a sustained grassroots presence, while #EndSARS achieved intense domestic engagement but faced barriers in sustaining global visibility. These outcomes were shaped not by any one factor alone, but by the interaction of framing, resource structures, and political opportunity conditions, all operating within the specific constraints of Nigeria's political and media environment. This analysis highlights the need for a more integrated approach to studying social movements, one that accounts for overlapping dynamics rather than isolating variables. In doing so, the comparative analysis opens space for more grounded understandings of how movements emerge and adapt.

Table 1: Comparative Summary of #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS Across Key

Theoretical Lens	#BringBackOurGirls	#EndSARS	Comparative Insight
Framing	Clear, emotionally resonant, globally translatable.	Context-specific, emotionally charged, but less accessible internationally.	BBOG gained broader global reach through strategic framing.
Resource Mobilization	Elite-driven, transnational support, weak grassroots sustainability.	Grassroots-led, decentralized, strong local legitimacy, minimal institutional backing.	Different resource structures led to different strengths and vulnerabilities.
Political Opportunity	Benefitted from international pressure and low state repression.	Initial state openness turned to violent repression; the movement was caught off guard.	BBOG had more stable leverage; #EndSARS exposed limits of perceived political openings.

While framing, resources, and political opportunity account for the core differences in the movements' outcomes, other factors contributed to their momentum and limitations. Collective identity, for instance, helped #EndSARS cultivate strong domestic solidarity through youth-driven slogans like “Sòrò Sókè.” For #BBOG, the identity was more diffuse, often centered on shared moral outrage rather than a unified demographic or generational base. This broader but less cohesive identity helped attract global sympathy but made it more difficult to sustain widespread domestic mobilization. Similarly, both movements leveraged digital platforms to amplify their causes, but because social media was central to each, it is less useful for explaining divergence in their trajectories and outcomes. Instead, identity and digital platforms served as mobilizing facilitators that were essential in building visibility and engagement.

Analyzing #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS through a single theoretical framework would have offered a partial and potentially misleading understanding of their complexities. Each movement engaged multiple dimensions of activism simultaneously. No single theory alone

could account for both movements' emergence, divergence, and outcomes. By synthesizing these theories, this study was able to uncover how different dimensions—material and structural—interacted to shape the different forms of effectiveness for each movement. The multi-theoretical approach also allowed for a more nuanced comparison between a transnationally resonant campaign (#BBOG) and a domestically explosive campaign (#EndSARS), showing that success and sustainability are multidimensional, context-bound, and often uneven.

Limitations and Implications

While this study offers a comprehensive comparative analysis of two significant Nigerian social movements, it is not without its limitations. First, the reliance on secondary sources and publicly available sources means that internal organizing dynamics or behind-the-scenes negotiations may be underrepresented. The voices of activists who were not visible online or those who experienced state repression off-platform may not be fully captured.

Second, the comparative approach risks an overgeneralization. #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS differ not only in issue focus but also in historical timing, target institutions, and sociopolitical context. These differences complicate any direct one-to-one assessment of “effectiveness,” especially when each movement faces unique constraints and opportunities.

Nonetheless, this study has important implications for the existing scholarship. It demonstrates the value of applying an integrated framework to non-Western movements, pushing against the tendency to silo social movement theories developed in Western contexts. It has challenged the compartmentalized use of social movement theories and expanded the methodological toolkit available to scholars studying contemporary protest movements in the Global South.

Conclusion

This thesis argues that the #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS movements followed divergent paths due to how each interacted with resource access, political opportunities, and framing strategies. It asked what factors accounted for the differences in their domestic engagement and international reach and found that their paths were shaped by how strategic, symbolic, and structural elements interacted within distinct political and cultural environments.

This study not only illuminates the contrasting paths of two major Nigerian movements but also offers a methodological contribution, an integrative model of analysis that accounts for how framing, resources, and political contexts intersect in dynamic and nonlinear ways. As seen in Nigeria and other Global South contexts, where digital innovation often intersects with political repression, this model offers a more flexible framework for understanding movement trajectories that reveal the need for more integrative approaches beyond traditional theory.

By applying a multi-theoretical framework, this research highlights the value of combining perspectives to better understand social movements, especially in non-Western contexts where activism unfolds amid layered and structural constraints. Without this integrative lens, there exists the risk of misattributing movement outcomes to a single factor—whether narrative framing, material capacity, or external political conditions—when in reality, it is the interaction of these forces that defines both possibilities and limitations for activist movements. Ultimately, this thesis argues that movement trajectories are not predetermined or easily categorized. They are shaped by the interplay of framing, resources, and political opportunity—factors that intersect differently across movement goals. A comparative approach

deepens our understanding of these interactions and pushes social movement theory toward greater nuance and contextual relevance.

Future research might expand this integrative framework by applying it to a broader range of movements within and beyond Nigeria. Comparative studies across different regions, political systems, or issue areas could help test the flexibility of multi-framework approaches and reveal how contextual factors reshape movement dynamics. Additionally, intranational differences, such as regional disparities in participation, access to digital tools, or public reception, offer important avenues for exploring how localized consciousness interacts with broader structural forces. Such investigations could contribute to a more grounded and adaptable body of theory that reflects the complexity of activism in various sociopolitical environments.

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