

Civic engagement and the online–offline participation gap in Nigeria's 2023 general election

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital technologies and social media has transformed political communication and civic engagement across Nigeria, creating new opportunities for political awareness, mobilisation, and participation. However, despite unprecedented levels of online political activity during Nigeria's 2023 general elections, electoral turnout declined to its lowest level since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999. This study examines the relationship between online political engagement and offline civic participation by investigating the apparent disconnect between digital political expression and electoral behaviour. The study employs a secondary research design, drawing on electoral statistics, internet penetration data, election observation reports, and scholarly literature on digital activism and political participation. It then uses social movement theory to compare the 2023 general elections with the 2020 #EndSARS protests, both of which featured prominent digital expression. Still, only One translated into large-scale offline political participation. The findings reveal that while digital platforms lower the costs of political expression, raise political consciousness, and facilitate rapid mobilisation, they do not necessarily overcome the barriers associated with electoral participation. The study concludes that there is a need for meaningful translation of digital engagement into offline political participation, which requires not only technological mobilisation but also stronger civic Education, credible institutions, organisational capacity, and supportive political opportunity structures. The paper contributes to ongoing studies on digital democracy by demonstrating that online political engagement, although valuable for awareness and mobilisation, is insufficient on its own to guarantee sustained civic or electoral participation.

Keywords: civic participation, elections, social media, political engagement, voter turnout

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The Nigerian Journal of Business and Social Sciences, Volume 13, 2026 (Special Issue)
A Journal of the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Lagos, Akoka, Lagos, Nigeria
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Introduction

The rapid expansion of internet access and mobile communication across Africa has generated considerable expectations about the civic potential of digital technology. As the continent's most populous nation and One of its most dynamic digital economies, Nigeria occupies the centre of these expectations. With over 100 million internet users, Nigerians maintain a vast online community for political discussion, debates, challenging government policy, coordinating social movements, organising campaigns, and so on. The internet and social media play a major role not only in electoral politics but also in non-electoral civic activities such as protests, community service, raising awareness, and contacting officials. All of these represent Nigerians' online activities to drive political and civic awareness, expression, mobilisation, and organisation. However, even though social media has amplified engagement, much of that digital activity fails to translate into on-the-ground participation, particularly in electoral politics. The electoral politics qualification is crucial because online-to-offline transmission of political expression is demonstrably not impossible in the Nigerian context. In Light of civic participation in the 2023 general elections, the 2020 EndSARS protest stands as a compelling counterexample. The protest, in which young people occupied the streets of Lagos and other major cities and towns, lasted several days and was largely organised via Twitter (now X) and other social media platforms. However, the 2023 general election, which occurred in a political atmosphere still charged with post-EndSARS energy, produced the opposite outcome. Despite heightened political consciousness, the election produced the lowest turnout figures in Nigeria since the return to democracy in 1999. This discontinuity between the demonstrated capacity for online-to-offline transmission in 2020 and its apparent failure in 2023 is the core anomaly that this study seeks to analyse. By examining the similarities and differences in political engagement between these two episodes, we intend to highlight the conditions under which online political action does and does not translate into offline democratic behaviour. To achieve the stated aim, the study is anchored around three central questions, as follows:

- a. What was the nature and scope of Nigerian political engagement on social media in the period leading up to the 2023 general election?
- b. How did online political engagement influence (or fail to influence) offline participation in the 2023 election relative to the 2020 EndSARS protests?
- c. What must online political engagement accomplish for it to transfer into offline political action meaningfully?

Literature Review

Political Participation and Civic Engagement

Over the past several decades, scholarly paradigms have shifted from institutionalist-based definitions of political behaviour to a multidimensional framework. Early paradigms, most notably articulated by Verba and Nie (1972), offered behaviourist definitions, characterising political behaviour as activities by private citizens aimed, more or less directly, at influencing the selection of government personnel or the actions they take. This framework traditionally prioritised activities such as voting, campaign activity, and contacting public officials. However, as citizens increasingly turned to extra-parliamentary actions such as protests, boycotts, and digital activism, this classical definition faced criticisms of being overly restrictive. Consequently, scholars like van Deth (2014) have proposed a more sophisticated operational definition. Specifically, van Deth established decision rules to identify political participation, delineating between a 'minimalist' definition (that is, voluntary, amateur activities located within the sphere of government) and broader 'targeted' or 'motivational' variants that encompass actions aimed at community problems. Importantly, a significant portion of the theoretical literature has been devoted to explaining the fundamental motivation behind participation, with much of this heavily influenced by rational choice economics. Downs (1957) introduced the 'calculus of voting,' postulating that a rational, utility-maximising individual will abstain from voting because the costs of participation (time, effort, information-gathering) almost invariably exceed the marginal benefit, given the infinitesimal probability that a single vote will determine the election outcome. Despite Rike and Ordeshook (1968) positing that citizens are motivated by the intrinsic psychological benefit they derive from participation, pure rational-choice models frequently

struggle to account for high-cost, high-risk activism and the immense impact of social structures on behaviour. To address the limitations of rational choice theory, political scientists pivoted toward resource-based explanations. The most prominent of these is the Civic Voluntarism Model (CVM) developed by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). The CVM addresses the question of why people participate by pointing to three factors: resources ("because they can"), psychological engagement ("because they want to"), and recruitment ("because someone asked"). This theory places a profound emphasis on socioeconomic status, arguing that resources such as time, money, and civic skills are unequally distributed in society and directly determine participatory capacity. While the CVM emphasises the demand-side capacity of the individual, mobilisation theories focus on the supply-side, arguing that political participation is fundamentally a social act catalysed by political elites, parties, and networks. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) assert that citizens participate because they are actively encouraged or inspired by political leaders or social movements. Political actors behave as "rational prospectors," selectively targeting individuals who possess resources and a history of activism, thereby exacerbating existing socioeconomic biases in participation. Challenging the individualistic assumptions of both the CVM and rational choice paradigms, Rolfe (2012) advanced a "social theory of voter turnout" rooted in conditional choice. In this framework, an individual's decision to vote is not a forward-looking optimisation of personal utility. Still, it is instead conditional on the social environment and the observed behaviours of others. Rolfe posits that political mobilisation generates waves of political discussion that increase the salience of an election; thus, individuals with larger or more politically active social networks are systematically more likely to participate.

The Nature of Digital Political Behaviour

The advent of digital communication technologies has fundamentally reconfigured the landscape of political engagement, giving rise to a complex, hybridised media environment in which the boundaries between online and offline political spheres are increasingly porous. As political discourse migrates toward social networking sites, microblogging platforms, and mobile messaging applications, scholarly inquiry has pivoted toward understanding how individuals navigate, consume, and participate in these digital ecosystems. A foundational challenge in the literature is defining what constitutes political participation in a digital context. Traditional definitions, which narrowly focused on institutional, elite-directed actions aimed at influencing government policy (such as voting or campaigning), have proven too restrictive for the digital age (Mayer, 2022). Meanwhile, critics have frequently dismissed low-cost, low-risk online actions (such as "liking" a post, sharing a political meme, or utilising a hashtag) as performative "slacktivism" or "clicktivism" (Christensen, 2012). To resolve this conceptual limitation, scholars have expanded theoretical models to encompass the "motivational" dimensions of political acts. In these updated frameworks, non-institutional and seemingly passive activities are recognised as valid political participation if they are driven by the intent to express political aims and grievances (van Deth, 2014). Consequently, digital behaviour is increasingly theorised through the lens of "expressive participation". Rather than pursuing purely instrumental goals, individuals utilise social media platforms as "spaces of appearance" to perform political identities, articulate lifestyle politics, and engage in meaning-making processes (Murru, 2017). This performative dimension is vividly illustrated in "selfie activism" and the proliferation of political internet memes, where the personal self is inserted into broader political narratives, effectively blurring the lines between popular culture, humour, and civic engagement (Ibrahim, 2020). In addition, the networked logic of political participation via social media has given rise to "flash activism," in which ephemeral yet massive bursts of online participation generate sudden, destabilising shocks of attention and outrage (Earl & Kenski, 2022). While previously dismissed as superficial, evidence indicates that these digital micro-donations of time successfully lower the transaction costs of engagement, recruit marginalised demographics, and often serve as gateways to more sustained offline mobilisation. The digital ecosystem facilitating this activism is layered: public-facing platforms (such as Twitter/X) are utilised for narrative framing, visibility, and agenda-setting, while closed-network messaging apps (such as WhatsApp) serve as crucial logistical tools for secure, grassroots coordination (John & Abutu, 2025).

Nigerian Political and Digital Engagement Landscape

The Nigerian political engagement landscape encompasses a broad spectrum of participatory activities that are undergoing a significant transition from historically physical, institution-bound practices to increasingly digital and online modalities. Modern scholars often distinguish between customary engagement (such as voting, party membership, and interacting with formal political institutions) and unc customary activities, which include protests, boycotts, and civil disobedience (Hansen, 2016; Vite, 2018). However, this dichotomy is becoming increasingly blurry as digital technologies fundamentally alter the repertoires, organisational structures, and targets of political participation in Nigeria. In the physical, on-the-ground political arena, the academic literature highlights a landscape heavily constrained by systemic institutional barriers and socioeconomic inequalities. Also, traditional political participation in Nigeria is profoundly hindered by "money politics" and the pervasive phenomenon of "godfatherism," creating a zero-sum political culture where electoral contests are treated as prebendal investments. In this environment, political survival relies on vote-buying, patronage networks, and, frequently, electoral violence deployed to intimidate opposition and manipulate outcomes. In response to these structural exclusions created by the political culture, there has been a paradigm shift toward digital engagement, fundamentally democratising the flow of political information. Social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp have emerged as vital alternative public spheres where citizens can bypass traditional, state-influenced media gatekeepers to engage in relatively unrestrained political discourse (Odunlami et al., 2024). In light of the above, the literature presents a robust debate regarding the efficacy of this form of digital participation, often juxtaposing online "clicktivism" (or "slacktivism") with traditional physical activism. Critics of clicktivism argue that low-cost digital actions, such as liking posts, sharing hashtags, or signing online petitions, may foster superficial engagement without translating into sustained civic commitment or tangible policy reform (Aluko & Bello, 2023). However, substantial empirical evidence from recent Nigerian social movements challenges the notion that digital engagement is merely performative. For instance, Kenechi and Madu (2023) identify a highly complementary and hybrid relationship between digital and on-the-ground activism. Landmark movements such as the 2012 #OccupyNigeria protests against fuel subsidy removals, the 2014 #BringBackOurGirls campaign, the 2020 #EndSARS anti-police brutality protests, and the recent #EndBadGovernance campaign dynamically illustrate how digital infrastructure is utilised to coordinate physical assembly and garner wide solidarity. In these instances, clicktivism served as a critical entry point, reducing the risk of initial political engagement and thereby catalysing massive street protests and prompting government responses. Beyond protests, the digital landscape has empowered a new wave of "citizen journalists" and civic technology organisations. There are grassroots initiatives that leverage digital tools to track public spending, monitor budget implementation, and educate voters in various ways, effectively bridging the gap between virtual discourse and real-world democratic accountability (Adeyinka & Ijaiya, 2024).

Despite these emancipatory potentials, the academic literature heavily underscores the profound challenges inherent in Nigeria's digital political landscape. The weaponisation of social media through the rapid spread of fake news, misinformation, and ethno-religious hate speech poses a severe threat to democratic integrity, often polarising the electorate and undermining legitimate social movements. Furthermore, the Nigerian state has periodically responded to the perceived threat of digital mobilisation with repressive measures, ranging from internet shutdowns (such as the controversial suspension of Twitter operations) to the introduction of restrictive legislative bills to regulate online speech and curtail digital rights. Finally, researchers frequently caution against the "digital divide," noting that online political engagement is disproportionately skewed toward a younger, educated, and urban elite. This lack of digital literacy and access to infrastructure in rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities raises significant concerns about the inclusivity and representativeness of Nigeria's digital democracy.

Theoretical Framework: Social Movement Theory

To understand why viral digital political engagement frequently fails to translate into offline electoral participation in Nigeria (specifically contrasting the 2023 general elections with the 2020 #EndSARS protests), this research must be anchored in a comprehensive theoretical framework derived from Social

Movement Theory (SMT). Contemporary SMT has coalesced around a tripartite model comprising resource mobilisation, political opportunity structures, and framing processes (Beck, 2008). By extending this classical tripartite model to incorporate modern approaches, we can systematically theorise the mechanisms that govern the transmission of digital civic culture into offline democratic behaviour. Classical Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) posits that grievances alone are insufficient to sustain collective action; movements require formal Social Movement Organisations (SMOs) to marshal material and human resources and sustain contention over time (McCarthy and Zald, 1973, 1977). However, the advent of digital media has fundamentally transformed how resources are mobilised. The theoretical framework must integrate Bennett and Segerberg's (2012) "logic of connective action," which explains how contemporary movements often bypass formal organisational hierarchies, relying instead on digitally enabled, personalised action frames that travel fluidly across decentralised networks.

In the Nigerian context, connective action explains the viral explosion of both the 2020 #EndSARS protests and youth mobilisation ahead of the 2023 elections. Networked platforms provide distinct affordances: public-facing platforms like Twitter (X) facilitate high-visibility agenda-setting and hashtag usage. At the same time, closed-network apps like WhatsApp serve as logistical coordination tools (John & Abutu, 2025). While connective action excels at generating what scholars term "flash activism" (ephemeral bursts of massive online participation) (Earl & Kenski, 2022), it often lacks the durable organisational infrastructure required for sustained institutional engagement. This theoretical lens explains the participation gap: digital activism significantly lowers the transaction costs of engagement (e.g., sharing a hashtag), but these low-cost actions often amount to "clicktivism" or "slacktivism". The high-visibility, low-cost nature of digital virality successfully catalysed the spontaneous street protests of #EndSARS. However, it lacked the structured, resource-intensive mobilisation networks necessary to overcome the threshold of actual voter turnout during the 2023 elections. The second pillar of the framework relies on Political Opportunity Structures (POS), which emphasises how external political and institutional environments constrain or facilitate collective action (Eisinger, 1973). The framework posits that an open digital opportunity structure does not automatically equate to an open institutional opportunity structure. During the #EndSARS protests, the political opportunity structure was shaped by a singular, unifying grievance (police brutality) that allowed citizens to contest state Power directly in the streets, a space where decentralised digital networks could rapidly scale local grievances into nationwide physical action. Conversely, electoral participation requires navigating a highly formalised and historically rigid institutional opportunity structure. In Nigeria, youth engagement has been chronically undermined by structural barriers such as institutional distrust, infrastructural limitations, and an entrenched history of electoral irregularities. Meanwhile, during the 2023 general elections, despite the introduction of digital innovations like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) intended to enhance credibility, the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) failure to transmit presidential results in real time severely dampened public trust (Agunyai et al., 2025). Under SMT, when citizens perceive the institutional POS as closed, corrupt, or unresponsive, the rational calculus of participation is altered. Digital virality failed to translate into offline voting because the systemic constraints and the threat of electoral violence effectively blocked the translation of online mobilisation into institutionalised electoral participation.

The third component of the framework addresses framing processes: the symbolic and rhetorical mechanisms movements use to assign meaning, define grievances (diagnostic framing), and articulate solutions (prognostic framing) to motivate action (Goffman, 1974). SMT highlights that successful mobilisation depends on achieving "frame resonance" with the broader public (Gahan & Pekarek, 2012). In digital spaces, frame resonance is heavily reliant on the emotionalisation of political communication; high-arousal emotions such as anger and hope serve as critical catalysts for collective action. During #EndSARS, diagnostic framing (police brutality) and emotional contagion (anger and moral outrage) synchronised perfectly with prognostic framing (defunding/dismantling SARS), leading directly to physical protests. However, the framework suggests that during the 2023 elections, the frame of voting for political candidates is more diffuse.

To specifically synthesise the gap between the 2020 protests and the 2023 elections, the framework must incorporate the concept of "arena bridging": the capacity of individuals and collective actors to combine non-electoral (protest) and electoral participation (Endre Borbáth & Hutter, 2022). SMT observes that social movements and electoral politics operate according to different logics; they only successfully merge during periods of profound transformation where political entrepreneurs actively mobilise across both arenas (Endre Borbáth & Hutter, 2022). For viral digital engagement to translate into electoral participation, digital activists must successfully cross from the extra-parliamentary protest arena into the institutionalised electoral arena. The failure of this translation in Nigeria can be modelled as a breakdown in arena bridging. While the #EndSARS movement generated immense political consciousness and altered digital civic culture, it was structurally episodic and inherently anti-establishment. Without formal political parties or well-resourced institutional actors effectively capturing and translating the "movement identity" into an organised "electoral identity," the digital momentum dissipated before it could alter aggregate voter turnout.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design grounded in secondary-source analysis. Since the aim is explanatory rather than causal, the research synthesises and interprets existing electoral statistics, internet and social media usage data, election observation reports, investigative journalism, and the academic literature on digital and on-the-ground political participation. Based on the foregoing, the selection of sources was guided by three criteria. First, in terms of recency and relevance, materials were drawn primarily from publications between 2020 and 2026 that directly address Nigerian digital political engagement, the 2023 election, and/or the #EndSARS protests. In addition, the researchers ensured that quantitative figures (such as voter turnout, internet penetration, social media usage, bot prevalence, etc.) were drawn from recognised bodies, including INEC, as well as reports from established research and monitoring organisations. On the other hand, qualitative claims were drawn from peer-reviewed scholarship and credible investigative reporting. Finally, sources were selected for their ability to address one or more components of the theoretical framework outlined above, namely resource mobilisation, political opportunity structures, framing processes, and arena bridging. The analysis proceeds in two stages. The first stage is aimed at establishing the empirical factors of each case regarding online political engagement, offline electoral participation, and the corresponding pattern with the #EndSARS protests. The second stage, presented in the discussion, applied the four-part Social Movement Theory framework to each case, using empirical material as the basis for interpretation. The analytic categories are derived from the theory and applied deductively as each part of the framework (to reiterate: resource mobilisation, political opportunity structures, framing processes, arena bridging) is used to organise and interpret comparative evidence on #EndSARS and the 2023 election. While this secondary-source methodology was chosen for its explanatory benefits in achieving the research aim, the design also has clear limitations. The absence of primary data, such as surveys or interview data, means the study cannot speak directly to individual motivations for participation or non-participation. Rather, the research speaks broadly to aggregate patterns observed in the materials analysed, rather than to those directly observed. In any case, all data used are drawn from publicly available studies, and the study involves no collection of personal or non-public information.

Online Political Engagement in the 2023 Election Period

Across two decades and fifty countries, Boulianne (2018) argues that the use of digital media has often led to greater civic and political participation. However, the Nigerian context presents a more complex reality. Despite the increasing visibility of political conversations online, this has not always translated into widespread electoral participation. This was particularly evident during the 2023 general elections. Although internet usage and social media conversations around the elections were substantial, the structure of Nigeria's digital population suggests that online political participation may still be limited to a relatively narrow segment of society.

As of the beginning of 2024, Nigeria's internet penetration stood at 45.4%, while only 16.2% of the population were active social media users (Kemp, 2024). In January 2023, Nigeria had approximately 31.6

million active social media users compared to a population of over 218 million and a registered voter population of nearly 94 million ahead of the elections. This indicates that the online political sphere in Nigeria represents only a fraction of the wider electorate. Furthermore, while 54.6% of Nigerians live in urban centres, internet access and social media participation remain heavily concentrated in these urban areas, leaving much of rural Nigeria outside digitally mediated political discussions. Consequently, although online political engagement has expanded political awareness among connected populations, its ability to produce broad-based civic engagement remains constrained by unequal digital access and structural disparities. Another significant feature of Nigeria's digital political landscape in the lead-up to the 2023 general elections was the growing use of bots and coordinated fake accounts to shape online political narratives. Political conversations and hashtags associated with major presidential candidates were often artificially amplified by automated or inauthentic accounts, creating the impression of widespread popularity or support online. An analysis by the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development found that approximately One million bot and fake accounts were linked to followers of the major presidential candidates during the elections. The report further revealed that about 17.1% of accounts following presidential election candidates Bola Ahmed Tinubu and approximately 26.5% of those following Peter Obi on X were identified as bots or fake accounts, with similar patterns observed across other candidates (Luckscheiter, 2022; CJID, 2022). This raises important questions about the authenticity of online political engagement and the extent to which digital political participation reflects genuine civic mobilisation. While social media platforms may create the appearance of vibrant political participation, coordinated manipulation through bots and disinformation can distort public opinion, manufacture artificial consensus, and undermine meaningful democratic engagement. The development is also closely linked to the increasing use of social media influencers as instruments for political messaging and, in some cases, disinformation campaigns. An investigation by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) revealed the extent to which influencers were recruited and incentivised during the electoral period, with some reportedly receiving payments of up to 20 million naira or offered material benefits, such as gifts and political appointments, in exchange for promoting particular presidential candidates. In other instances, influencers were engaged specifically to circulate misleading or false narratives across digital platforms, while some participated in spreading such content without direct financial compensation (Nwonwu & Oyedepo, 2023). Rather than serving solely as spaces for deliberation and civic mobilisation, digital platforms can also function as arenas for coordinated persuasion, where visibility, reach, and perceived legitimacy are manufactured. In such contexts, the boundary between genuine civic engagement and orchestrated political communication becomes increasingly blurred.

All of these raise a further question that moves beyond patterns of participation and information integrity: what forms of political expression are structurally incentivised by the design of digital platforms themselves? In other words, rather than focusing only on who participates or how information is distorted, attention shifts to how the architecture of social media platforms shapes the visibility, reach, and perceived value of political content. The concept of social media affordances provides a useful way of explaining this dynamic. As noted by Nwafor et al. (2026), affordances are the range of actions enabled by platform features such as likes, comments, shares, algorithmic curation, and visibility controls. These features do not simply facilitate communication; they also structure and constrain user behaviour by determining what is seen, amplified, or suppressed within digital environments. In doing so, they enable individuals to selectively present aspects of identity, opinion, and political positioning in ways that are often shaped by the pursuit of visibility and engagement.

Over time, this growing reliance on digital validation has implications for how political engagement translates into civic mobilisation, particularly on public platforms such as X. Political expression is increasingly shaped by what performs well within platform metrics, meaning that visibility and influence are closely tied to engagement-driven feedback loops. Within this context, online political participation becomes not only a space for expression but also a mechanism for organising, amplifying, and sustaining collective action. This dynamic is particularly evident in the emergence and trajectory of the *Obidient* Movement during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Following Peter Obi's declaration of his presidential

candidacy, his Twitter following reportedly grew by approximately 235 per cent, from 715,000 to 2.56 million followers (Agbim et al., 2023), reflecting a pattern of rapid audience aggregation characteristic of digitally mediated political campaigns. However, the affordances structuring that platform meant that this quantitative growth was expressed predominantly through visibility metrics and symbolic engagement rather than translating into sustained or structurally embedded offline mobilisation. As Kreiss and McGregor (2018) have noted, digital platforms are not neutral conduits for political communication but are dynamic environments whose design choices actively shape the possibilities and boundaries of political agency. In this respect, while the 2023 election cycle demonstrated that digital platforms could generate heightened political visibility and affective mobilisation, they simultaneously constrained the repertoire of participation toward the expressive and performative: consolidating attention without converting it into the durable civic infrastructure that meaningful political change demands. In this sense, the Nigerian 2023 elections demonstrate that while online political engagement can significantly amplify political visibility and emotional investment, its translation into electoral outcomes and institutional acceptance is neither direct nor guaranteed.

Electoral Participation: The Offline Picture

The landscape of civic engagement in Nigeria is increasingly influenced by the dynamics of both online and offline participation. While traditional forms of political involvement, such as voting and community organising, remain critical, the rise of digital platforms has transformed how citizens engage with political processes. Notably, many citizens experience barriers to offline electoral participation in Nigeria. The decline in voter participation, falling from 52% in the 1999 elections to just 26.7% in the 2023 presidential elections, highlights the urgency of addressing these impediments to ensure broader electoral engagement (Brown et al., 2022).

Socioeconomic status also plays a crucial role in voter turnout, with individuals from lower-income and less-educated backgrounds less likely to participate in elections, thereby perpetuating existing disparities in political representation (Oduola, 2023; ACE Project, n.d.). Gender-based barriers further complicate participation; traditional gender roles often restrict women's ability to engage politically, compounded by cultural stereotypes that dissuade them from entering the political sphere (Oduola, 2023). Accessibility issues, including inadequate infrastructure and a lack of information about the electoral process, disproportionately affect marginalised communities and individuals with disabilities, exacerbating their exclusion from civic engagement (Oni et al., 2025). The lack of trust in government institutions and the disintegration of affiliations with political organisations have further alienated potential voters, making it increasingly difficult for these communities to mobilise effectively. The limited influence of civil society (including citizens) on policymaking and the often-exploitative nature of political interactions have stifled genuine grassroots political action (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2026). Many citizens are disillusioned by the political system, developing apathy and a belief that their votes will not produce meaningful change. Moreover, there is an environment of fear created by electoral violence and intimidation, often linked to political thuggery, that further alienates voters from the democratic process, undermining trust in electoral institutions (ACE Project, n.d.). This sub-section has shown that the lack of transmission between online activity and offline political participation is also partly due to factors that cannot be explained by motivation alone. For instance, where people are faced with genuine threats of violence for participating in the voting process, it is a rational response to want to stay away. However, mass protests in Nigeria have often witnessed violent suppression, and at various times, people have still come out to vote; in recent times, the most prominent have been the EndSARS protests of 2020.

The EndSARS Comparison

The #EndSARS movement serves as a critical case study for understanding the complexities of online mobilisation in Nigeria, particularly in contrast to the ongoing electoral processes. It underscores that while digital spaces have the potential to galvanise public action, the socio-political context significantly influences the effectiveness of such mobilisation efforts in achieving substantive political change (Akeusola, 2023).

The #EndSARS movement emerged as a significant social movement in Nigeria, primarily driven by widespread discontent regarding police brutality, particularly from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Despite prior reform movements, the entrenched culture of brutality persisted, prompting renewed calls for change during the #EndSARS protests (Etim, 2025). The movement became particularly notable during the protests that gained momentum in late 2020, when participants organised mass demonstrations across major cities, utilising social media as a powerful tool for coordination and mobilisation.

The protests showcased the Power of social media as a mobilisation tool, connecting activists, amplifying their messages, and coordinating actions across the country (Gadzekpo, 2025). Social media has democratised access to information, allowing users to challenge Power and express opinions freely, especially where traditional media oversight is weak. Its immediacy enables citizens to elevate marginalised voices and contest dominant narratives.

In particular, X (formerly Twitter) played a crucial role in the movement, facilitating the rapid dissemination of information and enabling grassroots organising (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2021; Osazuwa & Oghogho, 2024; Ibe, 2022). The ability to share experiences of police brutality and mobilise collective action online allowed participants to circumvent traditional media channels, which often downplayed or misrepresented the protests (Inobemhe & Santas, 2022). The movement's strategic use of hashtags, such as #EndSARS and #SoroSoke, helped amplify its message both locally and globally, drawing international attention to the plight of Nigerians facing state violence (Wada, 2021). It also facilitated coordinated collective actions, illustrating Resource Mobilisation Theory (RMT) in modern activism (Osazuwa & Oghogho, 2024). All of these online activities successfully mobilised several youths to take to the streets of Lagos and other major cities for about two weeks. In contrast, the 2023 Nigerian elections exhibited a different landscape for online activism and its impact on political engagement. While the elections were marked by significant youth involvement, the context lacked the same level of cohesive online mobilisation witnessed during the #EndSARS protests. According to Ayandele's (2021) study of the 2023 elections, engagement in online activism did not lead to a corresponding increase in political knowledge among the youth to the same extent as the #EndSARS movement did. The disparity in outcomes can be attributed to several factors, including the prevailing atmosphere of fear created by state repression and violence, which has a chilling effect on public gatherings and collective organisation (Iwuoha & Aniche, 2021; Amaza, 2023). The government's response to the #EndSARS protests, characterised by brutal crackdowns and widespread human rights violations, had fostered a climate of distrust towards state institutions, inhibiting the ability of youth to mobilise effectively in the electoral context so soon after the EndSARS (Ayandele, 2021).

Discussion: Synthesising the Online-Offline Participation Gap

By juxtaposing the 2023 general election with the 2020 EndSARS protests through the lenses of resource mobilisation, political opportunity structures, framing processes, and arena-bridging, we can isolate the mechanisms that govern the transmission of digital civic culture into offline political action. Our research suggests that the online-offline gap is not a simple manifestation of superficial slacktivism but a direct consequence of a structural mismatch between digital communication logics and institutional political architectures. Through the lens of Resource Mobilisation Theory, both the EndSARS protests and the early phases of the Obidient movement demonstrated connective action by using decentralised digital platforms to bypass formal organisational hierarchies. This effectively lowered the transaction costs of initial engagement. In 2020, this connective logic allowed a spontaneous video to rapidly scale into a nationwide physical occupation of urban centres, coordinated via social media. Ahead of the 2023 elections, the immense volume of user-generated campaign content was a manifestation of this logic. However, the critical vulnerability of the connective action model is its inherent lack of durable, resource-intensive organisational infrastructure. So, while decentralised networks excel at coordinating disruptive, short-term physical interventions like street protests (even One that crossed several state borders), they struggle to manage the prolonged demands of institutional politics. For instance, an electoral campaign requires

nationwide structural embedding, such as deploying trusted polling agents across tens of thousands of urban and rural units, as well as fostering localised voter mobilisation. The *Obidient* movement attempted to utilise the Labour Party as its institutional vehicle, but the decentralised digital network and the traditional party apparatus operated on parallel, unaligned logics. The digital movement lacked the formal, disciplined social movement organisations necessary to convert volatile online attention into sustained, physical voter turnout. It must be pointed out that the *Obidient* movement did not *entirely* fail at bridging arenas. Here, we draw upon the classic distinction between reinforcement and mobilisation (Nam, 2012). The former holds that digital media use tends to amplify participation among people who were already politically engaged offline. In contrast, the mobilisation hypothesis holds that digital media 'activates' people who were previously inactive in the political process. Based on this breakdown, even though the movement adopted the Labour Party as its platform for the electoral contest, the resulting arena bridging was partial and asymmetric. It succeeded partly as a conversion mechanism for channelling already digitally mobilised people to vote for a 'third force' party, resulting in the party's surge from a marginal vote share in 2019 to over six million votes in the 2023 presidential election. However, it failed to meaningfully expand the active electorate, as even digital activism largely redirected existing engagement rather than generating significant new participation. In essence, low-cost digital engagement could not substitute for the heavy resources required to navigate an institutionalised election.

In addition, Social Movement Theory emphasises that an open digital opportunity structure does not imply an open institutional opportunity structure. During the 2020 EndSARS protests, the political opportunity structure was defined by an extra-parliamentary arena in which citizens directly contested state Power in public spaces. In terms of the logistical procedure, the participation threshold was minimal. Unlike in elections, there was no registration or bureaucratic gatekeeping. Nonetheless, the risk profile of protest participation is different from that of electoral participation. The costs of participating in a protest like EndSARS included overwhelming state repression via exposure to lethal violence (culminating in a shooting at the Lekki Toll Gate) and, for many of the most prominent participants, harassment via frozen bank accounts and passport seizures. On the other hand, electoral participation faces high barriers distributed throughout the process: voter registration, obtaining a Permanent Voter's Card, transportation to polling units, hours spent queuing, the risk of results being manipulated, and exposure to violence at polling units, among others. The difference between these two arenas is not simply that One was harder than the other, but that they impose different kinds of costs at different points in the participation process. The mechanics of framing processes further clarify this participation gap. SMT establishes that successful mobilisation requires two kinds of framing: diagnostic (to identify the grievance) and prognostic (to offer a solution), and both must resonate deeply with the public. In digital spaces, frame resonance is heavily dependent on emotionalisation, where high-arousal emotions serve as primary catalysts for action. During the EndSARS protests, the diagnostic frame of police brutality was singular, highly visual, and a universal experience. In contrast, the framing processes during the 2023 electoral cycle were inherently diffuse. The diagnostic frame shifted from a unifying focus on opposition to state operations to debates over economic management, political representation, and related issues. Consequently, frame resonance during the period became deeply fractured along historical ethno-religious and partisan lines. Moreover, the commercialisation of the event through bot networks and paid influencers distorted the authenticity of the framing process. Ultimately, the online-offline participation gap in the 2023 election represents a structural breakdown in the mobilisation dimension of arena bridging. The EndSARS movement, highly potent, was explicitly episodic and intensely anti-establishment, consciously rejecting formal leadership structures and maintaining distance from traditional political parties. When the 2023 electoral cycle arrived, the political energy generated by that movement remained fundamentally extra-parliamentary. The attempt to bridge these arenas to increase voter turnout failed because digital actors could not effectively institutionalise the fluid, decentralised protest energy into a resilient electoral machinery. As such, the 'bridge' only reshuffled votes among the already participating. This is why the LP's historic performance co-existed with, rather than reversed, the lowest national electoral turnout since 1999.

Conclusion

In Light of the foregoing analysis, the study concludes that although technology fundamentally alters the modes of digital participation, effectively reducing the transaction costs of political expression, it has limited effectiveness in lowering the physical and material costs of offline political action. Such activities as standing in a polling unit for hours, navigating poor and rural transportation infrastructure, facing the threat of electoral violence, and dealing with registration challenges from the electoral commission require significant physical and emotional resources. So, even if civic technology can optimise the demand side of political consciousness, it can remain powerless without corresponding fixes to the supply side. In the case of protests such as the EndSARS period, a decentralised movement taking on logistical planning and organisation effectively assumes the role of the supply side, and the social impulse and imperative of the demonstrations at the time overrides the few it cannot meet. This is possible because the objective is disruption and visibility. However, in electoral politics, institutional compliance is imperative, and the supply side is effectively under the firm control of the state and its institutions. This means that over-relying on technological frontends while leaving structural vulnerabilities unaddressed still results in a highly fragile democratic ecosystem.

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