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„Hashtags and Movements: The Role of Social Media in Political
Activism in Africa South of the Sahara“

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Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht die Rolle sozialer Medien im politischen Aktivismus in Afrika südlich der Sahara anhand von vier zentralen Bewegungen: #BringBackOurGirls (Nigeria), #FeesMustFall (Südafrika), #ThisFlag (Simbabwe) und #EndSARS (Nigeria). Im Mittelpunkt steht die Frage, wie digitale Plattformen wie Twitter, Facebook und Instagram zur Mobilisierung, Bewusstseinsbildung und zur Ausübung von Druck auf staatliche Institutionen genutzt werden.

Die zentralen Forschungsfragen befassen sich mit (1) dem Einfluss sozialer Medien auf politische Entscheidungsprozesse, (2) den gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen, die mit Hashtag-Aktivismus verbunden sind, und (3) der Nachhaltigkeit solcher digitaler Bewegungen. Die Analyse erfolgt auf Grundlage eines qualitativen Forschungsdesigns, das eine Literaturlauswertung, detaillierte Fallstudien und einen vergleichenden Ansatz kombiniert.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass soziale Medien eine schnelle Mobilisierung und internationale Sichtbarkeit ermöglichen. Der langfristige Einfluss solcher Bewegungen hängt jedoch stark vom Engagement im analogen Raum, den strukturellen Rahmenbedingungen und der Fähigkeit ab, über die digitale Aufmerksamkeit hinaus Wirkung zu erzielen. Alle untersuchten Bewegungen verdeutlichen sowohl das Potenzial als auch die Grenzen digitalen Aktivismus in komplexen politischen Kontexten.

Diese Arbeit trägt zu einem besseren Verständnis digitaler politischer Partizipation in Afrika südlich der Sahara bei und beleuchtet das sich wandelnde Verhältnis zwischen Technologie, Aktivismus und staatlicher Macht. Sie bietet zudem Handlungsempfehlungen für Aktivist:innen, Wissenschaftler:innen und politische Entscheidungsträger:innen, die digitale Plattformen für gesellschaftlichen Wandel nutzen möchten.

Abstract (English)

This thesis explores the role of social media in political activism in Africa south of the Sahara. It focuses specifically on four prominent movements: #BringBackOurGirls (Nigeria), #FeesMustFall (South Africa), #ThisFlag (Zimbabwe) and #EndSARS (Nigeria). Examining how digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have been used to mobilise support, raise awareness, and exert pressure on governments and institutions, the study sheds light on the transformative power of social media in the realm of political activism.

The central research questions are: (1) What is the influence of social media on political decision-making? (2) What societal transformations are linked to hashtag activism? and (3) How sustainable are these digital movements over time? The analysis is based on a qualitative methodological framework combining a literature review, detailed case studies, and a comparative analysis.

The findings demonstrate that social media facilitates rapid mobilisation and visibility, frequently bringing local struggles to the attention of the international community. However, the long-term impact of such activism depends on offline engagement, structural conditions, and the ability to maintain momentum beyond viral moments. Each movement studied illustrates both the potential and the limitations of digital activism in politically complex environments, with these limitations being a result of the digital nature of activism, which makes it difficult to engage with the offline world.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of digital political participation in Africa South of the Sahara and highlights the evolving relationship between technology, activism, and state power. The research also provides recommendations for activists, scholars, and policymakers who are seeking to utilise digital platforms for social and political change.

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Writing this thesis has been an intellectually transformative journey and one that I did not undertake alone.

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As a social media professional and content creator, I also want to acknowledge the vibrant communities: activists, educators, and creatives, who use digital platforms every day to challenge injustice and amplify hope. Your voices and visions inspired much of this work.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to everyone who believes in the power of words, networks, and collective action to change the world, online and beyond.

Lorin-Bernadette Ödek

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and reasons

In the digital age, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for political activism, particularly in Africa south of the Sahara, where access to traditional media is often limited or subject to state control. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have created new channels through which citizens can organise, mobilise, and amplify their voices in response to political injustice and social inequality. These platforms enable decentralised communication, real-time coordination, and the dissemination of emotionally resonant narratives that transcend national borders.

Prominent examples of digital activism include the #BringBackOurGirls campaign in Nigeria, the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa, the #ThisFlag campaign in Zimbabwe, and the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. These movements have demonstrated the capacity of hashtag activism to empower communities, generate global awareness, and pressure governments into action. However, the power of social media is not without limitations. Criticisms include its reliance on digital infrastructure, the temporary nature of online engagement, its susceptibility to state surveillance and censorship, and the question of its long-term effectiveness and institutional impact. Given the transformative yet contested role of social media in civic life, this topic warrants comprehensive academic inquiry. It is essential to understand how digital platforms shape political behaviour, influence decision-making processes, and support or hinder societal transformation in order to evaluate their broader role in contemporary African sociopolitical contexts.

1.2 Personal Motivation and Academic Context

The inspiration for this thesis originated in the course „Current Research Trends in African Studies" taught by Professor Adams Bodomo at the University of Vienna. Through this course, I was introduced to the innovative and often underrepresented role of digital platforms in African political activism. Professor Bodomo emphasized the potential of social media to amplify marginalized voices, challenge authoritarian governance, and reshape participatory politics on the continent. These insights resonated deeply with me and sparked an enduring interest in the interplay between technology and social change.

As a professional content creator and social media strategist since 2017, I bring practical insights from nearly a decade of experience in the digital sphere. Through my work with brands, institutions,

and diverse communities, I have gained firsthand understanding of how narratives, visuals, and engagement dynamics shape perception and participation on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. This dual role, as both academic observer and active practitioner, deeply informed my perspective throughout this thesis. It enabled me to critically assess not only the strategies behind hashtag activism but also the algorithmic logics, attention cycles, and audience behaviours that influence digital mobilization.

What I found particularly significant was the realization that social media is not merely a communicative tool but a catalyst for social transformation. The cases discussed #BringBackOurGirls, #FeesMustFall, #ThisFlag, and #EndSARS, illustrated how collective digital engagement can influence public discourse and political outcomes. This realization became the foundation for this thesis. Beyond the scope of this project, I aspire to contribute to this field academically, with the long-term goal of designing and leading a university course focused on digital activism in Africa.

1.3 Research Problem and Objectives

While hashtag activism has successfully created visibility and mobilized large-scale participation, two critical challenges persist:

- 1. Sustainability of Hashtag Movements:** Viral moments often fail to translate into long-term political or structural change. Many movements struggle to maintain momentum beyond initial public interest.
- 2. Impact on Political and Societal Transformation:** The extent to which social media activism leads to tangible policy changes or shifts in societal attitudes remains underexplored.

This thesis seeks to address these challenges by examining how digital activism functions as a vehicle for political and societal transformation in Africa South of the Sahara. It aims to evaluate the effectiveness of social media platforms in sustaining activism, influencing political outcomes, and reshaping public discourse.

1.4 Research Aim and Questions

The overall aim of this thesis is to examine how social media-driven activism contributes to political decision-making and broader societal transformation in Africa south of the Sahara. Using four major case studies: *#BringBackOurGirls*, *#FeesMustFall*, *#ThisFlag*, and *#EndSARS* the research sets out to achieve the following specific objectives:

- To analyse the strategies and narratives employed by each movement on social media.
- To assess the influence of hashtag activism on political decision-making processes.
- To examine the extent and nature of societal transformations linked to these digital campaigns.
- To evaluate the sustainability and long-term impact of social media-driven movements in different political contexts.

In line with these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do social media campaigns influence political decision-making in Africa south of the Sahara?
2. What forms of societal transformation can be attributed to hashtag activism in the selected case studies?
3. To what extent are the effects of movements such as *#BringBackOurGirls*, *#FeesMustFall*, *#ThisFlag*, and *#EndSARS* sustainable across different political and social contexts?

These questions are intended to examine both the short-term outcomes and the long-term transformative potential of digital activism. Together, they provide a structured framework for evaluating how social media shapes political discourse and drives societal change across varied African contexts.

1.5 Methodology and Structure of the Thesis

This study follows a qualitative research approach based on multiple case study analysis. The methodology is discussed in detail at the beginning of Chapter 3, prior to the individual case studies.

Methodology:

The analysis combines interpretive methods and comparative logic to explore the dynamics of digital activism in four movements across varied national and political contexts. The following elements form the methodological foundation:

- **Case Study Approach:** Each movement (*#BringBackOurGirls*, *#FeesMustFall*, *#ThisFlag*, *#EndSARS*) is examined as a distinct case, with attention to its historical background, online strategies, leadership dynamics, and political impact.
- **Comparative Analysis:** Cross-case comparison is used to identify shared features, divergent tactics, and broader patterns in hashtag-based activism.
- **Empirical Materials:** In addition to academic sources, this study analyses selected digital content (tweets, Instagram posts, visuals) to capture the real-time engagement and visual framing of the movements. A curated set of these digital artifacts is presented in Appendices A and B.

(Note: The literature review is presented separately in Chapter 2, forming the theoretical foundation of the study.)

Structure of the Thesis:

- **Chapter 1: Introduction** Presents the background, research problem, aim and questions, and gives an overview of the methodology.
- **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review** Reviews key theories and prior academic work on digital activism, political participation, and social movements, with a focus on African contexts.

- **Chapter 3: Case Studies and Methodology** Introduces the methodological approach in detail and presents the four case studies.
- **Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis** Synthesizes similarities, differences, and emerging trends across the movements.
- **Chapter 5: Discussion** Interprets the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework, highlighting implications and limitations.
- **Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations** Summarizes key insights and offers recommendations for activists, policymakers, and future research.

1.6 Scope and Terminology

Scope of the Research: This thesis examines the role of social media in political activism within Africa south of the Sahara, focusing specifically on four key movements: #BringBackOurGirls (Nigeria), #FeesMustFall (South Africa), #ThisFlag (Zimbabwe), and #EndSARS (Nigeria). The temporal scope is limited to the period between 2014 and 2020, a timeframe during which these movements prominently utilized social media as a mobilization and advocacy tool. This period also allows for an examination of how platform usage evolved in parallel with activist strategies.

The study deliberately excludes:

- Regions outside Africa south of the Sahara
- Technical analyses of social media algorithms or platform mechanics
- Movements that did not significantly rely on social media for mobilization

While acknowledging the relevance of digital inequality in the region, this study does not engage in a detailed exploration of access disparities. The primary focus remains on the sustainability and societal impact of hashtag activism.

Terminology:

- **Hashtag Activism:** The use of hashtags on social media platforms to raise awareness, mobilize support, and advocate for political or social change. This term encompasses both the viral dissemination of campaigns and the engagement of global audiences.
- **Africa south of the Sahara:** Following the terminology preferred by Professor Adams Bodomo, this thesis uses the phrase "Africa south of the Sahara" in place of "Sub-Saharan Africa." This choice reflects a critical stance toward historically charged terminologies and aims to center the geographic, cultural, and political realities of the region.
- **Political Mobilization:** The process of rallying individuals and communities around a political cause, often with the goal of influencing policy, raising awareness, or initiating reform.
- **Sustainability:** Refers to the long-term viability and effectiveness of social media-driven activism, specifically, whether movements can maintain relevance, achieve structural impact, and extend their influence beyond digital platforms.

1.7 Ethical Considerations

This thesis is based exclusively on publicly available material, including academic literature, media reports, and social media content retrieved from open platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. No personal data, private messages, or identifiable user information beyond what is already publicly visible has been collected or analyzed.

Nevertheless, ethical considerations remain central to any research involving digital activism and public discourse. The movements examined in this thesis, #BringBackOurGirls, #FeesMustFall, #ThisFlag, and #EndSARS, often involve sensitive topics such as violence, repression, and state surveillance. Therefore, the inclusion of visual material or social media examples has been conducted with caution and transparency.

Whenever user-generated content or protest imagery is referenced, it is used in a way that preserves the dignity and safety of individuals involved. All social media posts cited are publicly posted and include no personal or protected information. In cases where screenshots are used (see Appendix A), these are presented strictly for illustrative and academic purposes in compliance with fair use principles and citation ethics.

Furthermore, the decision not to conduct interviews or surveys was deliberate. Given the time constraints and the sensitivity of the topics, the study prioritizes document-based analysis over direct engagement with activists or vulnerable populations. This approach minimizes potential harm while still allowing for a robust and critical examination of digital protest cultures.

Future research, especially with an ethnographic or participatory design, should integrate formal ethics protocols and consent-based interactions with movement participants, particularly in contexts where state surveillance or political retaliation is a concern.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction to the Theoretical Framework

The transformative role of social media in modern political movements has been widely acknowledged, particularly in Africa south of the Sahara, where traditional media channels often fail to provide adequate representation or access to marginalized voices. To analyze the impact of social media on political activism effectively, it is crucial to establish a strong theoretical foundation. This chapter introduces the key theories and concepts that guide this research, linking them to the specific context of hashtag activism in the region.

Theoretical frameworks provide the tools to interpret and understand the complex dynamics of social movements in the digital age. Social media has fundamentally altered the way movements are organized, communicated, and sustained, creating new paradigms of collective action (Castells, 2012). By examining established theories of social movements alongside digital-specific concepts, this study aims to bridge the gap between traditional and contemporary activism.

This chapter is structured as follows:

- Section 2.2 explores foundational theories of social movements and digital activism, including the theory of collective action, network society theory, and framing theory.
- Section 2.3 examines the specific role of social media in mobilizing, amplifying, and sustaining political activism.
- Section 2.4 reviews existing literature on hashtag activism in Africa south of the Sahara, focusing on the selected movements: #BringBackOurGirls, #FeesMustFall, #ThisFlag, and #EndSARS.

- Section 2.5 discusses the evolution of social media platforms between 2014 and 2020, analyzing how changes in platform functionality and user behavior shaped the dynamics of these movements.

By integrating these perspectives, this chapter lays the groundwork for a nuanced analysis of the case studies presented in Chapter 3. Understanding the interplay between theoretical concepts and empirical data is essential for assessing the broader implications of social media-driven activism in Africa south of the Sahara.

2.2 Theories of Social Movements and Digital Activism

To understand the role of social media in political activism, it is essential to examine the theoretical frameworks that underpin the dynamics of collective action, and digital mobilization. This section introduces key theories that provide insight into the functioning of hashtag activism, linking them to the selected movements: #BringBackOurGirls, #FeesMustFall, #ThisFlag, and #EndSARS.

2.2.1 Theory of Collective Action

The theory of collective action focuses on how individuals are motivated to participate in group efforts to achieve a common goal. Traditionally, collective action was constrained by geographical and resource limitations. However, social media has transformed this dynamic by reducing barriers to participation and creating new opportunities for engagement (Shirky, 2011). Platforms like Twitter and Facebook enable individuals to coordinate protests, disseminate information, and mobilize resources quickly and efficiently.

In movements like #BringBackOurGirls, the theory of collective action helps explain how social media amplified the voices of ordinary citizens, enabling global solidarity. The campaign's success in pressuring governments and international organizations demonstrates how digital platforms can overcome the traditional challenges of collective action.

2.2.2 Network Society Theory

Manuel Castells' network society theory argues that power in the digital age resides within networks, which have become the dominant structure of social organization (Castells, 2012). Social

movements thrive in networked environments where information flows freely, enabling decentralized coordination and horizontal decision-making.

Movements such as #FeesMustFall in South Africa exemplify how students used networked platforms to bypass traditional hierarchies, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose. By leveraging networks, activists could rapidly disseminate their demands and connect with international allies, amplifying their impact.

2.2.3 Framing Theory

Framing theory examines how social movements construct narratives to shape public perception and mobilize support. Hashtags serve as powerful framing tools, condensing complex issues into concise messages that resonate with diverse audiences (Tufekci, 2017).

For example, the #ThisFlag movement in Zimbabwe utilized the national flag as a unifying symbol, framed as a call to reclaim the country's values from corrupt leadership. This strategic use of framing helped galvanize widespread support despite the movement operating in a highly repressive environment.

2.2.4 Diffusion of Innovation Theory

The diffusion of innovation theory explores how new technologies are adopted and spread within societies. Social media platforms, as innovations, have significantly influenced the way political movements emerge and gain traction. Early adopters within movements often play a crucial role in encouraging broader participation (Rogers, 2003).

In the case of #EndSARS, younger activists in Nigeria embraced platforms like TikTok and Instagram to share videos and testimonies, making the movement more accessible to a global audience. The rapid adoption of these platforms highlights how innovations in communication technology can reshape activism.

2.2.5 Relevance to the Study

These theories collectively provide a framework for analyzing the selected movements. They illuminate how social media facilitates collective action, leverages networks, frames narratives, and spreads innovations. By applying these theoretical perspectives to #BringBackOurGirls,

#FeesMustFall, #ThisFlag, and #EndSARS, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the transformative potential and limitations of social media in political activism.

2.4 Literature Review of Hashtag Activism in Africa South of the Sahara

The movements #BringBackOurGirls, #FeesMustFall, #ThisFlag, and #EndSARS have garnered significant attention in academic and non-academic literature, reflecting their unique roles in leveraging social media for political and societal change. This section provides a detailed review of the existing literature on each movement, identifying key themes, gaps, and contributions to the field of hashtag activism.

2.4.1 #BringBackOurGirls

The #BringBackOurGirls movement emerged in 2014 following the abduction of 276 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Chibok, Nigeria. Literature on this movement highlights its ability to mobilize international attention through social media, particularly Twitter. Authors such as Parkinson and Hinshaw (2021) document how the campaign successfully brought global attention to the issue, with high-profile endorsements from figures like Michelle Obama.

Studies also explore the movement's challenges. For example, the reliance on Twitter excluded populations without internet access, raising questions about the inclusivity of digital activism (Tufekci, 2017). Additionally, the campaign faced criticism for its limited impact on long-term policy changes despite its global reach (Alozie, 2018).

2.4.2 #FeesMustFall

The #FeesMustFall movement began in 2015 as a student-led protest against rising university fees in South Africa. Academic literature on this movement focuses on its use of Facebook and Twitter to coordinate nationwide protests and build solidarity among students (Booyesen, 2016).

Scholars emphasize the movement's innovative use of social media to bridge linguistic and cultural divides in South Africa, fostering a unified narrative around decolonization and economic justice (Luescher et al., 2017). However, studies also highlight the limitations of social media, such as the challenges of translating online momentum into sustained offline activism (Naicker, 2016).

2.4.3 #ThisFlag

The #ThisFlag movement, which emerged in Zimbabwe in 2016, utilized social media to protest government corruption and economic mismanagement. Research on this movement often highlights

the role of Facebook and WhatsApp as tools for organizing protests in a highly repressive environment (Mare, 2020).

Framing theory plays a central role in analyzing #ThisFlag. Activists used the Zimbabwean flag as a unifying symbol, framing their protest as a reclamation of national identity (Maguranyanga, 2017). However, literature also notes the movement's vulnerability to state surveillance and crackdowns, which significantly hindered its ability to achieve lasting change.

2.4.4 #EndSARS

The #EndSARS movement gained momentum in 2020 as a response to police brutality in Nigeria. Literature on this movement emphasizes its innovative use of multiple social media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, to share testimonies, organize protests, and garner international support (Akinfaderin, 2021).

Studies praise the movement's ability to adapt to censorship and misinformation, leveraging decentralized organization to maintain momentum (Okonkwo & Uwalaka, 2021). However, the literature also critiques the movement's challenges in achieving structural reforms, highlighting the gap between online visibility, and tangible political outcomes (Adejumo, 2022).

2.5 The Evolution of Social Media Platforms (2014–2020)

The period between 2014 and 2020 marked a transformative phase in the development and use of social media platforms. This section examines how changes in platform functionality and user behavior shaped the dynamics of political activism in Africa south of the Sahara, with a particular focus on the movements #BringBackOurGirls, #FeesMustFall, #ThisFlag, and #EndSARS.

2.5.1 Platform Dynamics over Time

In 2014, platforms like Twitter and Facebook dominated the social media landscape, serving as primary tools for political activism. Twitter's concise format and use of hashtags made it particularly effective for campaigns such as #BringBackOurGirls, allowing activists to spread their message globally. Facebook, on the other hand, offered a more versatile platform for community building and event coordination.

By 2016, the rise of WhatsApp added a new dimension to digital activism. Its encrypted messaging service provided a secure channel for activists operating in repressive environments, as seen in the #ThisFlag movement in Zimbabwe. WhatsApp groups became critical for organizing protests and disseminating information privately.

The period from 2018 to 2020 saw the growing influence of Instagram and TikTok, particularly among younger demographics. Visual platforms like Instagram were used to share powerful imagery and videos, enhancing the emotional appeal of movements like #EndSARS. TikTok's short-form videos allowed activists to creatively engage audiences, making political content more accessible and shareable.

2.5.2 Regional Preferences and Usage Patterns

In Africa south of the Sahara, platform usage was influenced by factors such as internet penetration, smartphone affordability, and governmental policies. For example:

- **Twitter** remained a dominant platform for global outreach and political commentary, though its use was often concentrated in urban areas with relatively stable internet infrastructure.
- **WhatsApp** emerged as the most widely used platform due to its low data consumption and encrypted messaging, particularly in rural or surveillance-heavy environments.
- **Facebook** retained a strong user base, especially for community organizing and local information sharing, but has seen declining engagement among younger users.
- **Instagram** gained popularity among urban youth for visually-driven content, allowing activists to combine aesthetics and advocacy. It played a key role in shaping the identity and visibility of movements, especially through Stories, Lives, and carousel posts.
- **TikTok** has recently become influential in digital activism, particularly among Gen Z users. Its short-form video format enables rapid dissemination of protest narratives, satire, and emotionally charged content that resonates beyond national borders.

Regional preferences also reflected local socio-political contexts. In Nigeria, Twitter was instrumental during the #EndSARS movement, linking domestic activism to global audiences. In Zimbabwe, the #ThisFlag movement relied heavily on WhatsApp to navigate state censorship and mobilize supporters. Meanwhile, platforms like Instagram and TikTok are increasingly being used in countries like South Africa and Kenya to visually document protests, challenge dominant narratives, and appeal to international solidarity.

2.5.3 Relevance to the Selected Movements

The evolution of social media platforms directly influenced the strategies and outcomes of the selected movements:

- #BringBackOurGirls (2014): Twitter was the primary platform, enabling global awareness through high-profile endorsements.
- #FeesMustFall (2015-2016): Facebook and WhatsApp facilitated nationwide coordination among students.
- #ThisFlag (2016): WhatsApp provided a secure means of communication under repressive conditions.
- #EndSARS (2020): Instagram and TikTok expanded the movement's reach to younger audiences, while Twitter remained central for international advocacy.

These examples demonstrate how platform dynamics shaped the trajectory of each movement, highlighting the interplay between technological advancements and activist strategies.

3.1 #BringBackOurGirls (Nigeria)

3.1.1 Context and Background

On April 14, 2014, Boko Haram, an Islamist militant group based in northeastern Nigeria, abducted 276 girls from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State. The act shocked the world, but it was not an isolated incident; it was a culmination of years of escalating violence, particularly against women, education, and Western influence. Boko Haram's ideological stance opposes Western education ("boko" meaning book or Western knowledge), and schools, especially those for girls, have become symbolic targets of their war on the Nigerian state (Campbell, 2014).

The Nigerian government was slow to respond. Then-President Goodluck Jonathan downplayed the incident initially, leading to public outrage. In this context of state inaction and insecurity, civil society, activists, and concerned citizens turned to social media to pressure local and global leaders to act. Thus, the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls emerged as a rallying cry for justice, attention, and mobilization.

3.1.2 Social Media Strategies and Framing

The hashtag was first tweeted by Nigerian lawyer Ibrahim M. Abdullahi, who echoed the call of Oby Ezekwesili, a former Nigerian Minister of Education, during a speech in Port Harcourt. It quickly gained traction in Nigeria, then globally, with over 3.3 million tweets in just one month (Tufekci, 2017). The campaign exemplifies the viral power of hashtag activism and how a simple phrase can transcend national borders.

Key figures such as Michelle Obama, Malala Yousafzai, and celebrities like Alicia Keys posted photos of themselves holding signs with the hashtag. Michelle Obama's image, in particular, became iconic, symbolizing empathy, international pressure, and the involvement of the Global North in a predominantly African issue. This international visibility is reflected in symbolic gestures, including high-profile figures like Michelle Obama holding protest signs (see Appendix A.3). The hashtag encapsulated a morally urgent narrative, succinct, emotionally charged, and universally resonant. It asked for something universally understood, the return of innocent schoolgirls to their families. In addition to academic literature, this study includes a curated set of

digital artifacts such as tweets, Instagram posts, and visual media. These are presented in *Appendix A* and *Appendix B* to support the case study analysis and to illustrate the real-time engagement dynamics of hashtag movements.

Framing theory helps explain why this campaign was so effective in garnering attention. Snow and Benford (1988) identify three core framing processes in social movements: diagnostic (identifying a problem), prognostic (proposing solutions), and motivational (inspiring action). The #BringBackOurGirls campaign effectively framed the abduction as a moral crisis, proposed awareness and international pressure as solutions, and motivated global participation through emotionally charged messaging.

Additionally, Tufekci (2017) highlights that social media platforms enable "networked framing," where individuals, organizations, and influencers collaborate in real-time to reinforce key messages. This decentralized but highly coordinated framing strategy amplified the campaign's visibility and legitimacy.

However, despite the massive online mobilization, the campaign faced structural and political barriers. Many of the girls remained missing for years. The Nigerian government initially rejected foreign assistance and struggled with intelligence coordination. As the campaign's media momentum declined, criticism emerged about the effectiveness of hashtag activism. Some scholars labeled it an example of "slacktivism," where online support substitutes for meaningful offline action (Morozov, 2009).

3.1.3 Outcomes and Limitations

The #BringBackOurGirls campaign did achieve several tangible and intangible results. It pressured the Nigerian government to eventually acknowledge the scale of the crisis and accept international help, including support from the United States and the United Kingdom. Several dozen girls were later released through negotiations and military operations.

Moreover, the campaign set a precedent for global digital solidarity. It demonstrated that African-led digital activism could influence international discourse, leading to global awareness of regional crises. The hashtag appeared on CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera, and trended on Twitter globally for

weeks. In this sense, the campaign empowered a new generation of Nigerian activists and validated social media as a tool for political messaging and pressure.

However, its limitations were also stark. The campaign highlighted the fragile relationship between online attention and offline political change. Despite widespread visibility, structural issues such as government inefficiency, military limitations, and local insecurity persisted. In many rural parts of Nigeria, internet access was limited, and the communities most affected were often digitally excluded from the very platform being used to advocate on their behalf (Egbunike, 2015).

Furthermore, critics pointed out that the Western media narrative often centered on celebrity involvement and emotional appeals, sometimes at the expense of deeper political analysis. The voices of local Nigerian activists, especially women who had been advocating for educational access and gender rights for years, were at times overshadowed by international attention (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013).

3.1.4 Relevance to Comparative Analysis

#BringBackOurGirls represents one of the earliest and most globally resonant examples of African hashtag activism. The hashtag #BringBackOurGirls reached over 266,000 posts on Instagram alone, as documented in Appendix A.5.1. It set the stage for later campaigns like #FeesMustFall and #EndSARS. Its strengths lay in its symbolic clarity, emotional framing, and global traction. However, it also underscores the limits of digital activism in the absence of strong political institutions, robust local infrastructure, and sustained offline organizing. These contrasts and parallels will be explored in the following case studies and the comparative analysis in Chapter 4.

3.2 #FeesMustFall (South Africa)

3.2.1 Context and Background

#FeesMustFall emerged in 2015 as a student-led movement against proposed increases in university tuition fees in South Africa. The movement began at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits University) in Johannesburg and rapidly spread across major academic institutions, including the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University. Although the immediate trigger was a proposed 10.5% fee increase, the movement quickly evolved to address broader issues: institutional

racism, the lingering effects of apartheid-era inequalities, and calls for the decolonization of education (Luescher et al., 2017).

South Africa's history of structural inequality, especially in the education system, formed the backdrop for the protests. Black students and those from working-class backgrounds were disproportionately affected by high university fees and limited access to higher education. As such, #FeesMustFall became not only a call for affordability but a broader critique of systemic exclusion and elitism in South African academia (Booyesen, 2016).

Visual examples from Instagram further demonstrate how students mobilized online and shared protest materials during the #FeesMustFall movement. See Appendix A.5.2 for posts and hashtag activity.

3.2.2 Social Media Usage and Student Mobilization

From its inception, the #FeesMustFall movement effectively utilized social media to organize, inform, and mobilize. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp played pivotal roles in unifying disparate campus protests into a coordinated national movement. Visuals from the movement, such as the widely circulated slogan 'Education is not for sale', illustrate the narrative framing employed by student activists (see Appendix A.2.).

Facebook was used to create event pages, circulate protest schedules, and provide updates. Twitter became a space for real-time commentary, trending hashtags, and solidarity-building across universities and borders. Hashtags like #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall (its predecessor), and #OutsourcingMustFall were used not only to organize but also to frame the movement's goals in accessible, resonant terms.

WhatsApp groups functioned as closed, semi-private spaces for strategic coordination, especially in the face of surveillance and on-the-ground police presence. This hybrid use of open and closed platforms reflects the concept of "networked publics," where digitally connected groups create spaces for both discourse and action (boyd, 2011).

Framing theory applies significantly in this context. The movement framed tuition hikes not as isolated financial decisions but as extensions of structural injustice. Protest slogans such as "Access to education is a right, not a privilege" and calls to "decolonize education" resonated with wider

public sentiment, especially among youth who felt marginalized in post-apartheid South Africa (Bosch, 2017).

3.2.3 Impact and Institutional Response

The #FeesMustFall protests yielded immediate and significant responses. In October 2015, then-President Jacob Zuma announced a freeze on tuition fee increases for the following academic year. Universities and government officials were forced to engage in dialogue with student representatives, and the issue of educational inequality was propelled to the center of national debate.

Beyond short-term policy concessions, the movement sparked broader conversations about the curriculum, institutional culture, and the representation of Black academics and students. The calls for "decolonized education" led to reviews of university syllabi, the removal of colonial-era statues, and more inclusive academic spaces.

However, the movement was not without challenges. State repression, police violence, and the arrest of student leaders marked many protests. There were also internal tensions regarding strategy, leadership, and representation. Moreover, while social media facilitated visibility and engagement, it also exposed activists to surveillance, trolling, and misrepresentation in mainstream media (Bosch, 2016).

In theoretical terms, the movement exemplifies Castells' (2012) concept of the "network society," where power is distributed through communication networks. Students leveraged their digital fluency to shift narratives and force institutional responses. Yet, the limitations of digital mobilization also became apparent when sustained offline support wavered. Platform-specific visuals played a major role in conveying the urgency of the protests, as exemplified by Instagram-based posts shown in Appendix A.5.2.

3.2.4 Relevance to Comparative Analysis

#FeesMustFall offers a compelling contrast to movements like #BringBackOurGirls. While the latter focused on state accountability in response to terrorism, #FeesMustFall interrogated systemic injustice within established institutions. It shows how social media can not only respond to crisis

but also fuel sustained ideological critique. The movement's use of digital platforms for both emotional and intellectual framing sets it apart and provides rich material for comparative analysis in Chapter 4.

3.3 #ThisFlag (Zimbabwe)

3.3.1 Political Context and Origins

The #ThisFlag movement emerged in 2016 in Zimbabwe, during a period marked by deepening economic crisis, high unemployment, government corruption, and increasing public dissatisfaction. At the center of the protest was Pastor Evan Mawarire, who posted a YouTube video draped in the Zimbabwean flag, lamenting the state of the nation and calling on citizens to reclaim their national identity. The symbolism of the flag and the direct emotional appeal struck a chord with thousands of Zimbabweans, particularly the youth, many of whom felt excluded from political and economic opportunity. The image of Pastor Mawarire wrapped in the Zimbabwean flag became emblematic of the movement's ethos (see Appendix A.4).

The movement arose under the authoritarian rule of Robert Mugabe, whose presidency (1987–2017) had become synonymous with political repression, economic collapse, and elite enrichment. Traditional forms of protest in Zimbabwe had been heavily suppressed through state violence, media control, and the criminalization of dissent. In this context, #ThisFlag offered a new model of resistance: digital, decentralized, and symbolically potent (Mare, 2020).

3.3.2 Symbolism and Digital Resistance

#ThisFlag was primarily driven by social media, with Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp as its main channels. Facebook was used to distribute videos, organize digital protests, and share testimonies from ordinary citizens. Twitter amplified key messages, while WhatsApp allowed activists to communicate securely and mobilize in real time, despite surveillance risks.

The movement used the Zimbabwean flag as a powerful framing device. By wearing, displaying, and sharing images of the national flag, citizens reclaimed a state symbol that had previously been co-opted by the ruling party, ZANU-PF. This form of symbolic resistance exemplifies what Castells (2012) describes as the "reprogramming of cultural codes" through networked communication. The

flag became a rallying point, not of state power, but of civic disappointment and hope. Protest visuals redefined the flag as a symbol of resistance (see Appendix A.4.)

Framing theory is particularly relevant here. The flag, stripped of partisan allegiance, was reframed as a symbol of unity and demand for accountability. Mawarire's videos, often emotional and conversational, encouraged personal identification with the movement's goals. He emphasized values such as integrity, responsibility, and national pride, qualities many believed had been eroded by the regime.

The movement remained largely non-violent and avoided formal political party structures. This helped attract a broad cross-section of Zimbabweans, including diaspora communities. The hashtag #ThisFlag trended regionally and even internationally, drawing attention to Zimbabwe's internal struggles in a global media landscape often focused elsewhere.

Appendix A.3 provides visual material including protest symbols and direct quotes shared on Twitter and Facebook that became central to the #ThisFlag campaign.

3.3.3 Suppression and Legacy

Despite its initial momentum, #ThisFlag faced swift state retaliation. Mawarire was arrested and charged with inciting public violence, although he was later released after widespread public outcry. The government increased surveillance and internet censorship, including temporary shutdowns of social media platforms during key protest periods (Freedom House, 2016).

The decentralized nature of the movement made it resilient but also vulnerable. Without formal leadership or organization, coordination became difficult under pressure. Some activists went into exile, while others turned to underground organizing. Over time, the movement's visibility declined, although its influence endured in shaping civic discourse and inspiring later protests such as #ShutDownZimbabwe.

The movement highlighted both the opportunities and limitations of digital resistance in authoritarian regimes. Social media provided tools for visibility, solidarity, and framing, but state power over digital infrastructure remained a powerful counterforce.

3.3.4 Relevance to Comparative Analysis

#ThisFlag stands out among the selected case studies for its bold use of national symbolism and its emergence under an intensely repressive regime. Compared to movements in more open contexts, #ThisFlag demonstrates how social media can serve as a lifeline for dissent when traditional media and protest spaces are inaccessible. The movement offers a key contrast in the comparative analysis, particularly in terms of government response, platform dependence, and symbolic framing.

3.4 #EndSARS (Nigeria)

3.4.1 Background: Police Brutality and Youth Mobilization

#EndSARS emerged in Nigeria in 2017 as a digital protest against the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a controversial police unit notorious for harassment, unlawful arrests, extortion, torture, and extrajudicial killings. The movement gained significant momentum in October 2020 after a viral video allegedly showing SARS officers shooting a young man circulated online. Young Nigerians mobilized en masse, both online and in the streets, calling for the complete disbandment of SARS and an end to police brutality more broadly.

Nigeria's demographic profile, with over 60% of the population under the age of 25, provided fertile ground for youth-driven digital mobilization. Decades of state corruption, unemployment, and institutional neglect had already created an atmosphere of deep frustration. SARS was a focal point, but #EndSARS represented a broader generational demand for justice, accountability, and reform (Akinfaderin, 2021).

3.4.2 Platform Dynamics and International Visibility

The #EndSARS movement made exceptional use of social media platforms, particularly Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. Twitter was central to organizing and amplifying the message, with the hashtag #EndSARS trending globally for several weeks. Activists used the platform not only to share testimonies and coordinate protests but also to tag international human rights organizations, celebrities, and political figures, effectively internationalizing the campaign.

Instagram and TikTok played complementary roles. Instagram was used to publish visual content from protests, including powerful photos and infographics detailing victims' stories. TikTok brought

a creative, youth-driven energy to the movement, with videos combining satire, music, and protest messages. This multi-platform strategy allowed #EndSARS to dominate the digital space and sustain engagement across various demographics. The movement's online presence, especially on Instagram, surpassed 1.4 million tagged posts, as shown in Appendix A.6.4.

The Feminist Coalition, a group of young Nigerian women, played a crucial role in organizing logistics, fundraising, and legal support. They operated transparently via social media, posting daily updates on donations and expenditures. This level of digital coordination highlighted the potential for decentralized but highly organized activism in Africa south of the Sahara (Makinde, 2021).

The application of Castells' network society theory is evident here. The horizontal structure of communication, real-time coordination, and absence of centralized leadership reflect a shift in power dynamics facilitated by digital networks. Additionally, the framing of the protest evolved from police reform to systemic change, encompassing demands for better governance, education, and healthcare (Tufekci, 2020).

3.4.3 Challenges and Digital Resilience

Despite its early successes, the movement faced serious challenges. On October 20, 2020, the Nigerian military opened fire on peaceful protesters at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, an event now known as the Lekki Massacre. The incident, livestreamed on Instagram, drew widespread condemnation and marked a turning point in the movement.

In the aftermath, the Nigerian government increased efforts to suppress digital activism. Bank accounts of activists were frozen, media outlets were fined, and attempts were made to regulate social media use. Despite this, the decentralized nature of the protest allowed it to persist in other forms, with diaspora communities continuing advocacy abroad.

While the protests subsided, the #EndSARS movement significantly reshaped political consciousness among Nigerian youth. It highlighted the limits and possibilities of digital activism in repressive democracies and underscored the importance of online visibility in building international solidarity.

3.4.4 Relevance to Comparative Analysis

Among the four case studies, #EndSARS stands out for its multimedia approach and real-time responsiveness. It combines grassroots spontaneity with digital sophistication and offers insights into how protest movements can rapidly escalate from local demands to global awareness. Its decentralized leadership, reliance on encrypted communication, and resilience under repression make it an essential case for understanding modern digital resistance.

3.5 Platform-Specific Strategies

While all four movements analyzed in this thesis relied on social media, their platform strategies varied significantly, shaped by technological affordances, target audiences, and national media ecologies. Understanding these differences is crucial for analyzing the effectiveness and limitations of digital activism.

#BringBackOurGirls began primarily on Twitter, where the hashtag gained rapid global traction. The platform's real-time nature and strong presence of journalists and diplomats made it ideal for international outreach. Twitter allowed the message to be amplified by high-profile figures and media outlets, resulting in widespread visibility. However, the campaign's impact was strongest symbolically; offline pressure mechanisms were limited and scattered.

#FeesMustFall utilized both Twitter and Instagram, but also drew heavily on Facebook and student WhatsApp groups for local coordination. Twitter served as a tool for public messaging, protest documentation, and national debate, while Facebook pages facilitated campus-wide mobilization. Instagram posts were often highly visual, featuring protest signs, graffiti, or symbolic poses, which helped personalize the movement and expand its youth appeal.

#ThisFlag, though initially disseminated via Facebook Live and Twitter, leveraged symbolic imagery across platforms. The movement's most iconic image, Pastor Mawarire wrapped in the Zimbabwean flag, was shared virally on both Facebook and Twitter. However, given Zimbabwe's limited digital infrastructure and higher data costs, the movement also relied on offline sermons and word-of-mouth channels to sustain momentum.

#EndSARS demonstrated the most sophisticated use of multiplatform strategy, incorporating Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, and even Bitcoin-based donations. The Feminist Coalition used Twitter to coordinate protests, share legal support information, and provide donation transparency. Instagram was used for visual storytelling and documentation, while encrypted messaging platforms enabled secure coordination. This diversified platform strategy contributed to the movement's strength, even in the face of state censorship and internet shutdowns.

These platform choices reflect not only activist preferences but also technological and infrastructural constraints. Twitter enabled rapid political discourse, Instagram maximized visual affect, Facebook offered community building, and encrypted platforms ensured security. Recognizing these distinctions is essential for understanding how digital activism adapts to varying political and technological environments.

4.1 Introduction to the Comparative Analysis

In recent years, social media has played an increasingly pivotal role in shaping political activism across the globe. This phenomenon is particularly significant in Africa south of the Sahara, where youth-led movements have leveraged digital platforms to challenge state violence, social exclusion, and institutional neglect. While each of the four selected case studies #BringBackOurGirls (Nigeria), #FeesMustFall (South Africa), #ThisFlag (Zimbabwe), and #EndSARS (Nigeria) emerged under distinct political, cultural, and historical conditions, they share a reliance on social media as both a tool and a terrain of struggle.

The purpose of this chapter is to systematically compare these movements along key analytical dimensions: platform usage and digital strategies; framing, symbolism, and narrative construction; organizational structure and leadership models; state response and media visibility; and, finally, overall impact and sustainability. Through this comparative approach, the study aims to identify recurring patterns, contextual differences, and theoretical implications that enrich our understanding of hashtag activism in the region.

This chapter also considers the broader question of how digital activism interacts with traditional forms of protest, and what it reveals about power, participation, and resistance in African societies undergoing rapid technological change. By comparing movements that vary in geography, objectives, and outcomes, we can better understand the opportunities and limitations that digital tools offer activists operating within diverse political landscapes.

Importantly, the analysis will remain sensitive to the specific challenges of the African digital context, including digital inequality, state surveillance, and internet access disparities. The comparison will not only highlight how these movements succeeded or failed in their stated goals but also how they contributed to reshaping civic engagement and political discourse both nationally and transnationally.

Ultimately, this comparative analysis provides a deeper foundation for interpreting the dynamics of online political engagement in Africa south of the Sahara and sets the stage for the discussion in Chapter 5.

4.2 Platform Usage and Digital Strategy

One of the most distinctive aspects of modern political activism in Africa south of the Sahara is the strategic use of social media platforms to mobilize, coordinate, and communicate messages to both national and global audiences. Each of the four case studies examined in this thesis employed a unique combination of platforms shaped by technological access, generational habits, and contextual limitations.

In the #BringBackOurGirls movement, Twitter played a dominant role. Its use of a succinct, emotionally resonant hashtag enabled rapid global dissemination. Twitter's openness and visibility allowed for high-profile endorsements and transnational solidarity. The campaign's success in reaching a global audience demonstrates the strength of a simple yet compelling call to action, optimized for virality and global sympathy.

Conversely, #FeesMustFall in South Africa relied more heavily on Facebook and WhatsApp for intra-campus coordination and student mobilization. Facebook event pages, livestreams, and posts facilitated the dissemination of information within and across universities, while WhatsApp groups provided secure and immediate communication channels for protest organization. The integration of closed and open digital spaces enhanced both safety and visibility, allowing activists to maintain real-time coordination while managing risks of surveillance and infiltration.

#ThisFlag, operating under Zimbabwe's highly repressive regime, strategically employed WhatsApp and Facebook as its primary tools. Given limited internet infrastructure and the threat of government surveillance, activists used WhatsApp for secure group discussions and mobilization. Facebook, particularly live video content, enabled the founder Evan Mawarire to speak directly to the public in a personal and emotional tone, which resonated widely and helped build trust among supporters. The movement illustrates how even in constrained digital environments, creative platform use can amplify dissent.

#EndSARS represented the most multi-platform and digitally sophisticated case among the four. While Twitter remained central for hashtag coordination and real-time updates, Instagram and TikTok played vital roles in broadening the movement's appeal. Instagram offered visual storytelling through protest images and graphics, while TikTok enabled expressive, youth-led content that fused art, humor, and resistance. Additionally, Telegram and Signal were used for more

secure communication when repression escalated. The Feminist Coalition, one of the movement's organizing bodies, exemplified how digital tools can support transparent funding, legal assistance, and coordination without centralized leadership.

Across these cases, the application of Manuel Castells' network society theory becomes evident. In each context, activists adapted their platform strategies based on accessibility, audience, and political risk. The networked nature of these movements enabled them to bypass traditional media filters, build grassroots momentum, and create transnational solidarity. However, each platform also imposed its own limitations, including content moderation, algorithmic filtering, and the risk of misinformation or surveillance.

This comparative lens shows that platform choice is not merely technical or generational but deeply political. It reflects both the creative agency of activists and the structural conditions in which they operate. The next section explores how these movements framed their narratives and constructed symbolic messages through their digital strategies.

4.3 Framing, Symbols, and Narrative Power

A critical component of each movement's success and visibility lies in its ability to shape public perception through symbolic language, imagery, and emotionally resonant narratives. Hashtag activism, by its nature, relies on brevity and clarity, but also on powerful framing that transforms isolated grievances into collective calls for justice. In all four case studies, framing theory plays a central role in understanding how activists constructed their messages to inspire solidarity, legitimize dissent, and mobilize action.

In the case of #BringBackOurGirls, the framing was emotionally immediate and morally unambiguous. The phrase itself became a symbol of innocence violated, with the image of missing schoolgirls used to evoke global empathy. By using English and appealing to universal values (family, education, safety), the campaign generated widespread support beyond Nigeria. The hashtag was often paired with photographs, digital posters, and public figures holding signs, a visual strategy that enhanced its reach and emotional impact.

#FeesMustFall employed both emotional and intellectual framing. Protesters emphasized education as a basic right, linking fee increases to systemic exclusion and historical injustice. Slogans such as

"Decolonize Education" and "Access Not Privilege" tapped into long-standing grievances among Black South African students. The movement's framing was deeply ideological, grounded in post-apartheid discourse and the lived experiences of inequality. Social media posts often included excerpts from protest speeches, infographics, and personal testimonies that created a shared narrative of resistance and aspiration.

#ThisFlag used national symbolism in a strikingly subversive way. Pastor Evan Mawarire's act of wrapping himself in the Zimbabwean flag and calling on citizens to reclaim their country reframed the flag, typically associated with state authority, as a symbol of civic resistance. The movement's digital materials, including videos and hashtagged images, used the flag to unite a population under a collective identity of frustration and hope. The personal tone of Mawarire's messages fostered authenticity and trust, allowing everyday Zimbabweans to see themselves in the movement.

#EndSARS demonstrated a dynamic, youth-driven framing strategy. Initial demands focused on ending police brutality, but the narrative quickly expanded to include themes of governance, generational voice, and state accountability. Visuals played a major role, graphic design, music videos, protest art, and livestreams were used not only to inform but to inspire. Hashtags like #EndSARS, #SoroSoke ("Speak Up" in Yoruba), and #EndBadGovernanceNow allowed participants to align around shared frustrations while shaping a vision for systemic change.

In all cases, the use of emotionally resonant language, potent symbols, and accessible visuals allowed activists to bypass traditional media and speak directly to publics both local and global. Framing was not only about gaining attention but about asserting meaning and legitimacy in contested political spaces. The next section turns to how each movement was structured and how leadership was enacted or resisted.

4.4 Movement Structure and Leadership

The organizational models and leadership structures of social movements are central to their success, legitimacy, and resilience. In the case of the four digital movements examined in this thesis, a range of organizational forms emerged, from charismatic individual leadership to decentralized, collective coordination. These models influenced how each movement mobilized supporters, responded to repression, and adapted to changing political conditions.

#BringBackOurGirls was characterized by a hybrid structure. While it began as a grassroots initiative, it quickly gained visibility through the advocacy of public intellectuals and prominent women such as Obiageli Ezekwesili. Although there was no formal hierarchy, recognizable figures provided direction and legitimacy. The movement maintained a consistent message but was criticized for lacking a clear strategic follow-up once international attention diminished.

#FeesMustFall was more structurally diverse. It began with strong student leadership bodies on various university campuses but eventually evolved into a broader, loosely coordinated national movement. While the presence of student representatives facilitated negotiations, the absence of a central leadership also led to fragmentation and internal disagreements over tactics, demands, and representation. Nevertheless, this distributed model enabled flexibility and inclusivity.

#ThisFlag centered initially around a single figure, Pastor Evan Mawarire, whose moral and spiritual authority lent authenticity and emotional weight to the movement. His personal story and courageous messaging galvanized support. However, the reliance on a singular leader also made the movement vulnerable: after Mawarire's arrest and eventual exile, momentum slowed. The movement highlighted both the power and precarity of leader-centered activism in authoritarian contexts.

#EndSARS demonstrated a high degree of decentralized coordination, particularly through the work of the Feminist Coalition. This group avoided traditional leadership roles, instead promoting transparency, collaboration, and digital accountability. Their success in organizing legal aid, medical care, and logistics showcased the potential of digitally fluent, collective leadership structures. The lack of a singular spokesperson made the movement harder to suppress but also posed challenges in sustained advocacy and negotiation.

These differing structures reflect not only internal strategic choices but also responses to external conditions such as state repression, media access, and public expectations. The next section will explore how governments and state institutions reacted to each movement, and how visibility shaped their outcomes. The comparative visibility of each movement on Instagram is summarized in Appendix A.5 and further illustrated with screenshots in Appendix B. These insights help assess the scale of user engagement per campaign.

4.5 State Response, Repression, and Visibility

Government responses and public visibility are crucial indicators of how social movements interact with power structures. Across the four case studies, state reactions ranged from reluctant concession to outright repression, with visibility, both local and global, playing a significant role in determining the outcome and resilience of each movement.

In Nigeria, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign initially faced governmental inertia. The administration of President Goodluck Jonathan was criticized for downplaying the abductions and failing to act promptly. However, after the hashtag gained international attention, including endorsements from figures like Michelle Obama, the government was compelled to respond publicly. Despite this, practical results were limited, and many abducted girls remained missing. The visibility of the campaign highlighted the discrepancy between symbolic governmental support and concrete policy action.

By contrast, the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa prompted more immediate engagement. Protests were met with a mixture of dialogue and police intervention. President Jacob Zuma announced a temporary freeze on fee increases, and several universities initiated reviews of their curricula and institutional cultures. While the state did use force in certain contexts, South Africa's democratic framework allowed for a degree of negotiation, media coverage, and student representation that was less viable in more authoritarian regimes.

In Zimbabwe, #ThisFlag faced swift and severe repression. Pastor Evan Mawarire's arrest and the state's attempts to silence the movement underscored the high-risk environment for dissent under Robert Mugabe's rule. The government used internet shutdowns, intimidation, and surveillance to suppress digital activism. Despite these efforts, the visibility of #ThisFlag on global platforms made it harder for the regime to contain the message entirely. Nonetheless, the state's heavy-handed approach led to a decline in public activity after initial peaks.

#EndSARS illustrates a complex case of both visibility and violent suppression. Initially encouraged by its decentralized organization and global reach, the movement drew massive attention on social media. The Nigerian government responded by disbanding SARS, but continued reports of police abuse, and most notably the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, revealed the limits of state accountability. International outcry followed, but domestic repression intensified. Activists had their

bank accounts frozen, were surveilled, and faced arrests. Still, digital resilience allowed the movement's message to survive even as physical protests were curtailed.

These varied responses show that visibility can serve as both a shield and a target. In more open societies, high visibility may lead to negotiation and reform. In authoritarian or semi-authoritarian contexts, it can invite repression. Nonetheless, all four movements demonstrate how social media visibility shapes public discourse, forces governments to engage (symbolically or substantively), and creates historical records that persist even after protests subside. The final section of this chapter will assess the broader impact and long-term sustainability of these movements.

4.6 Impact and Sustainability

Beyond short-term visibility and engagement, the long-term impact and sustainability of digital movements are essential indicators of their success. While all four movements garnered significant attention and mobilized large numbers of supporters, their legacies diverged in terms of political influence, structural change, and continuity of activism. A comparative timeline of hashtag peak activities is presented in Appendix A.4. This visual overview underscores the temporal dynamics and momentum behind each movement.

#BringBackOurGirls had an immediate global impact, raising awareness about the kidnapped Chibok girls and pressuring the Nigerian government to act. However, the movement's sustainability was limited. While some of the girls were eventually rescued, many remained missing. Over time, public interest declined, and the movement lacked a robust infrastructure to transform initial momentum into long-term advocacy. Nonetheless, it remains an important symbol of transnational digital solidarity and introduced many Nigerians to the power of hashtag activism.

#FeesMustFall led to more tangible institutional reforms. Beyond the temporary suspension of fee increases, the movement sparked debates on educational access, the transformation of university spaces, and the decolonization of curricula. Although internal divisions and state repression challenged the movement's cohesion, it helped institutionalize activism within South African universities and inspired related movements across the continent. Some leaders from #FeesMustFall have since entered formal political roles, illustrating the transition from protest to policy influence.

#ThisFlag's long-term impact is more symbolic than structural. Despite its brief visibility and international coverage, the movement struggled to maintain momentum after the exile of Pastor

Mawarire. However, it contributed to a renewed sense of civic agency in Zimbabwe and inspired future forms of digital dissent, such as #ShutDownZimbabwe. Its emphasis on national symbolism and civic identity marked a cultural shift in how Zimbabweans perceived their relationship with the state.

#EndSARS arguably represents the most enduring example of youth-led digital activism in Nigeria. Despite violent suppression, the movement influenced political discourse and public expectations about governance. It empowered a new generation of activists, particularly women and marginalized voices, and demonstrated the strategic potential of decentralized, transparent organizing. While structural reforms remain limited, #EndSARS continues to resonate in political conversations and online spaces, keeping the demand for accountability alive.

In comparing these outcomes, it becomes clear that sustainability is shaped by several interrelated factors: political opportunity structures, organizational resilience, public engagement, and the ability to transition from digital expression to concrete reform. Although digital activism enables rapid mobilization and heightened visibility, its long-term viability hinges on movements' ability to build institutional linkages, sustain momentum, and navigate complex political landscapes.

The next section summarizes the key findings of this chapter and prepares the ground for the broader discussion in Chapter 5.

4.7 Summary of Key Findings

This comparative chapter has examined four major digital protest movements in Africa south of the Sahara, revealing both commonalities and distinctions across multiple dimensions. All four case studies leveraged social media to amplify voices, mobilize action, and challenge power, yet they did so within different political, cultural, and technological environments.

In terms of platform usage, movements adapted to local digital ecosystems: from Twitter-driven global advocacy in #BringBackOurGirls to WhatsApp-facilitated coordination in #ThisFlag and the multi-platform, youth-driven energy of #EndSARS. The choice of platforms was shaped not only by access and generational habits but also by strategic considerations in response to state surveillance and audience reach.

The framing and symbolism employed by each movement reflected its goals and cultural context. Whether through powerful slogans, emotional appeals, or national symbols, activists constructed

narratives that legitimized dissent and galvanized support. These frames were key to establishing moral authority and sustaining visibility.

The organizational structures varied significantly, from leader-centered movements like #ThisFlag to collective, decentralized forms as in #EndSARS. Leadership models influenced resilience and adaptability, with decentralized movements showing greater flexibility under repression but also facing coordination challenges.

State responses ranged from cautious engagement (#FeesMustFall) to violent suppression (#EndSARS and #ThisFlag). In each case, visibility proved to be a double-edged sword—drawing support but also provoking retaliation. The political environment and media freedom played critical roles in shaping outcomes.

Finally, the impact and sustainability of these movements depended on multiple factors: the ability to transition from online activism to policy advocacy, internal cohesion, and the broader political opportunity structure. While some movements faded after initial peaks, others, like #FeesMustFall and #EndSARS, left more durable legacies within public discourse and civic culture.

Together, these findings highlight the evolving role of digital activism in the region. They underscore the need for both strategic innovation and structural grounding if such movements are to achieve lasting change. While this study focuses on movements between 2014 and 2020, it is important to acknowledge more recent developments such as the Gen Z-led digital protests in Kenya. These emerging movements demonstrate that hashtag activism in Africa south of the Sahara continues to evolve. They also point to new strategies of youth mobilization, increasingly fluid use of digital platforms, and growing transnational solidarity. Future research could benefit from incorporating these cases to deepen our understanding of current trends in digital civic engagement.

The following matrix provides a comparative overview of key characteristics across the four selected movements. It summarizes leadership models, state repression levels, dominant platforms, sustainability, and core framing strategies

Movement	Leadership Structure	State Repression	Platform Dominance	Sustainability	Framing Strategy
#BringBackOurGirls	Semi-centralized	Moderate	Twitter	Low (symbolic impact)	Moral urgency
#FeesMustFall	Decentralized (Student Bodies)	Moderate	Facebook / WhatsApp	Medium-High (policy shifts)	Ideological (Decolonization)
#ThisFlag	Charismatic (Leader-centered)	High	WhatsApp / Facebook	Low (symbolic legacy)	Symbolic (National Identity)
#EndSARS	Decentralized (Collective)	High	Twitter / Instagram / TikTok	Medium (ongoing presence)	Systemic critique (youth governance)

Chapter 5 will reflect more broadly on these insights and consider their implications for future political participation and social justice efforts in Africa south of the Sahara.

5.1 Introduction to the Discussion

This chapter engages critically with the findings presented in the comparative analysis of the four selected hashtag-based protest movements in Africa south of the Sahara: #BringBackOurGirls, #FeesMustFall, #ThisFlag, and #EndSARS. Moving beyond descriptive comparison, the discussion aims to interpret these movements within broader theoretical and socio-political frameworks, reflecting on the implications of digital activism in the region and how these cases challenge, confirm, or extend existing understandings of social movements in the digital age.

The discussion returns to the central research questions posed in Chapter 1, particularly: How have social media platforms shaped the formation, visibility, and impact of political protest movements in Africa south of the Sahara between 2014 and 2020? What patterns emerge when analyzing the structure, framing, and sustainability of hashtag-based activism in different national contexts? These guiding questions provide the foundation for interpreting the data and identifying both the transformative potentials and the limitations of digital mobilization.

This chapter also reflects on the theoretical frameworks discussed in Chapter 2. The relevance of framing theory (Benford & Snow, 2000), Castells' network society concept (2012), and theories of collective action are revisited in light of the empirical findings. The goal is not only to demonstrate how these theories help explain the observed phenomena, but also to explore how the movements under analysis might expand the theoretical conversation, particularly by centering African experiences and agency in digital protest discourse.

Furthermore, this discussion considers the broader significance of the findings for both academic research and practical political engagement. The unique interplay of youth, technology, and activism in the selected movements reveals important insights into the reconfiguration of civic participation in African societies undergoing rapid technological change. The discussion also addresses the constraints faced by activists, such as digital inequality, state repression, and the challenge of sustaining momentum beyond peak moments of visibility.

By critically engaging with the case studies and their theoretical implications, this chapter aims to offer a nuanced and grounded understanding of digital political activism in Africa south of the Sahara. The following sections will delve deeper into key interpretations, assess the contributions of this thesis to the broader literature, evaluate the strengths and limitations of the research process, and suggest directions for future investigation.

5.2 Key Interpretations and Theoretical Reflections

The comparative analysis presented in Chapter 4 reveals several critical insights into how digital activism functions in Africa south of the Sahara. These insights extend beyond the specific details of the case studies and point to broader patterns in the dynamics of networked protest. This section reflects on those patterns and engages with the theoretical concepts outlined earlier in the thesis, namely framing theory, Castells' notion of the network society, and theories of collective and connective action.

One of the most salient findings is the significance of platform specificity. Movements such as #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS illustrate how certain platforms, particularly Twitter, can be leveraged to achieve high levels of international visibility. By contrast, movements operating under authoritarian regimes (#ThisFlag) or within constrained public spheres (#FeesMustFall) employed more controlled platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook to balance coordination and security. This confirms Castells' (2012) concept of the "network society," in which the power of communication flows is shaped by the structure of the network and the affordances of each platform. The medium, in many ways, became part of the message.

In this regard, Castells' emphasis on the power of networked communication is particularly relevant. In all four movements, power was not only exercised through control of institutions but also negotiated in the digital public sphere. Especially in contexts of limited press freedom, social media created alternative communicative spaces, amplifying marginalized voices and producing new forms of civic engagement. However, Castells also notes the vulnerability of these networks to counter-power: surveillance, misinformation, and state repression all emerged as significant counterforces, particularly in the #ThisFlag and #EndSARS movements.

Closely related is the strategic use of framing to construct narratives that resonate emotionally and politically with diverse audiences. The case studies demonstrate that successful digital movements often articulate a clear, symbolic message, such as the image of the flag in #ThisFlag or the plea to "bring back our girls." According to Benford and Snow (2000), framing involves the active construction of meaning through diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational messaging. Each movement presented compelling diagnostic frames (e.g., state failure, police brutality, educational exclusion) and proposed actionable solutions, whether through protest, reform, or institutional accountability. The emotional resonance of these frames significantly contributed to the viral nature of the campaigns.

The analysis also reveals the importance of emotional and symbolic framing in sustaining engagement. Movements that managed to evoke pride (#ThisFlag), urgency (#BringBackOurGirls),

or historical justice (#FeesMustFall) generated deeper identification and participation. Framing is thus not a secondary aspect of activism but a central mechanism of mobilization, especially in digital spaces where attention is fragmented and fast-moving.

Furthermore, the findings show that collective action is increasingly shaped by decentralized and fluid structures, rather than by rigid hierarchies. This is particularly evident in the #EndSARS movement, where the absence of centralized leadership was not a limitation but a strength. The work of the Feminist Coalition exemplifies how horizontal coordination, digital transparency, and rapid responsiveness can maintain momentum even in the face of state repression. This reflects a shift from classical models of social movements toward what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) describe as "connective action," where individual participation is driven by personalized engagement and digital networks, rather than organizational affiliation.

This evolution toward connective action also raises questions about accountability and coherence. While decentralization can protect movements from co-optation or repression, it can also lead to ambiguity in messaging, difficulties in negotiating with institutions, and challenges in transitioning to formal political influence. This tension is particularly visible in #FeesMustFall and #EndSARS, where demands varied across groups and consensus was difficult to sustain.

However, the analysis also reveals limitations of digital activism, especially in terms of sustainability and political transformation. Hashtag virality does not necessarily translate into systemic change, as seen in the decline of #BringBackOurGirls or the suppression of #ThisFlag. Movements may generate awareness and spark conversation, but their long-term influence depends on their ability to institutionalize demands and form alliances with civil society, political actors, or formal institutions. The absence of such pathways often results in fragmentation, loss of momentum, or co-optation.

The theoretical frameworks also highlight regional particularities. While digital activism shares common dynamics globally, its form and efficacy in Africa south of the Sahara are shaped by factors such as digital access, authoritarian resilience, youth demographics, and postcolonial histories. These contextual elements must inform the application of theory, avoiding universalist assumptions and enabling more situated analyses.

In sum, the theoretical frameworks provide a powerful lens through which to understand the anatomy of digital activism in Africa south of the Sahara. They illuminate the evolving nature of collective action, the strategic deployment of media platforms, and the importance of narrative framing. At the same time, the findings urge a critical reflection on the gap between visibility and transformation, and on the need to contextualize digital movements within broader political and

socio-economic structures. A comparative timeline of hashtag peak activities is presented in Appendix A.4. This visual overview underscores the temporal dynamics and momentum behind each movement.

This thesis is based exclusively on document-based and media-driven analysis, combining academic literature with publicly accessible social media content. While this approach enables comparative breadth and timely insight into hashtag movements, it inevitably presents certain limitations.

First, the absence of interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, or participatory observation restricts access to the lived experiences, motivations, and strategies of individual activists. Nuances such as internal dissent, grassroots organizing efforts, or post-protest reflections often remain invisible in publicly curated online content.

Second, while social media artifacts offer valuable entry points into activist discourse, they are shaped by algorithmic visibility, platform affordances, and self-representation. As such, the voices most amplified online may not fully reflect the diversity of actors involved, especially in contexts marked by digital inequality.

Moreover, my positionality as both a researcher and a digital media professional influences the lens through which these movements were analyzed. While my professional experience provides critical insight into platform dynamics and narrative strategies, it also requires conscious reflexivity to maintain analytical distance and avoid overinterpreting media signals as proxy for political effect.

Future research may benefit from methodological triangulation, integrating qualitative interviews, participant observation, or surveys with digital analysis. Such approaches could illuminate the interplay between online and offline activism, provide deeper insights into sustainability, and strengthen the empirical grounding of comparative digital protest studies.

The following section will examine how this study contributes to existing research and what practical implications it may hold for activists, scholars, and policymakers.

5.3 Contribution to Research and Practice

This thesis contributes to the growing body of literature on digital activism by offering a region-specific analysis of hashtag-based protest movements in Africa south of the Sahara. In contrast to many studies that generalize digital political behavior from Global North contexts, this research foregrounds the socio-political specificities of African societies and the agency of African youth in

shaping online activism. It challenges reductive views of the continent as either digitally disconnected or merely reactive to global trends. Instead, it presents African digital activism as innovative, adaptive, and capable of influencing both domestic and global discourse.

From a scholarly perspective, this study provides a framework for integrating regional case studies into broader theories of media and social movements. By applying and critically engaging with framing theory, Castells' concept of the network society, and theories of collective and connective action, the research shows how global theories must be contextually grounded to remain analytically useful. It suggests that future theoretical work on digital activism should be more attuned to issues of digital inequality, repression, and socio-historical context—especially in postcolonial and semi-authoritarian settings.

Moreover, the comparative approach employed in this thesis contributes methodologically by demonstrating how diverse case studies within the same region can reveal both patterns and divergences. This has implications for regional studies and comparative political communication, encouraging scholars to move beyond isolated or single-case analyses. The thesis shows that comparative inquiry can uncover critical insights into how activists adapt their strategies to national conditions, platform ecologies, and state responses.

In terms of practical implications, the findings offer valuable insights for activists and civil society organizations. The cases highlight the importance of platform selection, symbolic framing, and decentralized leadership. Activists working in restrictive environments can draw lessons from the strategic use of encrypted communication, visual symbolism, and horizontal coordination. Equally, the limitations observed, such as sustainability challenges and message fragmentation, provide learning opportunities for refining future digital campaigns.

Policy makers and international institutions can also benefit from these findings. Understanding how youth in Africa use digital tools for political participation can inform the design of more inclusive governance models, digital literacy initiatives, and protections for online rights. The study underscores the need for governments to see digital activism not as a threat, but as a legitimate form of civic engagement that can inform more responsive and accountable governance.

Additionally, the work is relevant to educators and academic institutions seeking to develop curricula around media, activism, and African studies. The four case studies can serve as empirical anchors for classroom discussions on protest, technology, and social justice. The thesis itself could inform future seminars or courses, particularly those engaging with contemporary African politics or digital cultures.

Finally, this thesis lays the foundation for further research. It opens pathways for more in-depth investigation into underexplored movements (e.g., Kenya's Gen Z mobilizations), cross-continental comparisons, or longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of hashtag activism. The empirical material and conceptual reflections presented here contribute to an evolving academic conversation that is both globally relevant and regionally grounded.

The next section will reflect on the strengths and limitations of the study and the research process.

5.4 Strengths and Limitations of the Study

As with any academic inquiry, this thesis is shaped by certain strengths and limitations that must be acknowledged. These reflections are essential to provide transparency, assess the robustness of the findings, and guide future research.

One of the major strengths of this study is its comparative design, which allows for a nuanced understanding of hashtag activism across multiple national contexts within Africa south of the Sahara. By analyzing four distinct case studies, #BringBackOurGirls, #FeesMustFall, #ThisFlag, and #EndSARS, the research captures both shared dynamics and unique trajectories. This design enhances the depth and breadth of the analysis and avoids overgeneralization based on a single national experience.

Another strength lies in the integration of theory and empirical data. The thesis effectively applies and adapts established theoretical frameworks such as framing theory, network society theory, and collective versus connective action to regionally specific cases. This helps bridge the gap between abstract theory and lived political realities in African digital environments, demonstrating how global theories can be localized and tested.

The study is also methodologically transparent and flexible. It draws on a diverse range of secondary sources, academic literature, and media analysis. The inclusion of underrepresented cases such as #ThisFlag and the emphasis on decentralized leadership models (#EndSARS) add to the originality of the study.

However, the research is not without limitations. One key limitation is the temporal scope, which focuses on the years 2014 to 2020. While this period includes significant milestones in digital activism, it excludes more recent movements such as the 2023–2024 Gen Z-led protests in Kenya, which could provide further insight into the evolution of digital resistance. Future studies should expand this time frame to capture emerging forms of activism and platform dynamics.

Another limitation concerns the availability and reliability of sources. Given the digital nature of these movements, much of the relevant data exists on social media platforms, which are ephemeral

and often difficult to archive systematically. While academic and journalistic sources were used to triangulate data, the lack of direct interviews or ethnographic engagement may have limited the depth of insight into participant experiences.

A third limitation involves generalizability. Although the study highlights important regional patterns, the findings are most directly applicable to the specific countries and movements analyzed. Caution must be exercised in extending conclusions to other African contexts without further empirical support.

Furthermore, while movements such as #EndSARS and #FeesMustFall achieved massive online visibility and participation, it is important to critically assess the sustainability and depth of their impact. Scholars like Evgeny Morozov (2011) and Zeynep Tufekci (2017) have raised concerns about “slacktivism”, where digital engagement may replace rather than support substantive political mobilization. In the case of #ThisFlag, for instance, the creative use of national symbolism initially sparked interest, but the movement struggled to maintain long-term pressure on the Zimbabwean government. As Tufekci (2017) argues, the low threshold for online participation may paradoxically undermine the resilience of such movements, especially when they lack organizational infrastructure and institutional pathways for change.

In spite of the impressive digital presence of campaigns like #EndSARS, with over 1.4 million Instagram posts and thousands of protest visuals (see Appendix B), the long-term structural reforms remained limited. This reinforces a central challenge in evaluating hashtag activism: while digital platforms can amplify marginalized voices and attract international attention, their influence ultimately depends on broader contextual factors such as political will, offline mobilization, and institutional receptiveness.

Despite these constraints, the thesis offers a valuable contribution to the understanding of digital protest cultures in Africa south of the Sahara. The strengths—particularly its comparative scope, theoretical integration, and contextual sensitivity—outweigh its limitations and provide a strong foundation for continued research in this evolving field.

5.5 Outlook and Further Research

Building on the insights and limitations discussed above, this section outlines future directions for research and activism within the domain of digital political engagement in Africa south of the Sahara. As digital technologies evolve and new generations of activists emerge, the landscape of hashtag-based mobilization is expanding in both scope and complexity.

One particularly promising area for future research is the rise of Gen Z-led digital movements, most notably the 2023–2024 protests in Kenya. These protests, driven largely by young people opposing proposed tax increases and corruption, were characterized by creative and highly strategic use of platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter). In contrast to earlier movements, Kenyan Gen Z activists employed humor, satire, short-form video, and viral soundbites as tools of dissent. Their approach illustrates the growing sophistication of youth digital culture and highlights a generational shift in how protest is performed, shared, and sustained online.

The Kenyan case also exemplifies an emergent trend of leaderless but organized resistance, echoing elements of #EndSARS while innovating in terms of real-time content production and collaborative messaging. Moreover, the rapid escalation and national impact of the movement suggest that digital activism can create significant political pressure in a matter of days when conditions of youth frustration, technological access, and economic dissatisfaction converge.

Despite its novelty, the Kenyan movement shares key characteristics with the earlier cases explored in this thesis—particularly in terms of decentralized leadership, symbolic framing, and platform hybridity. It also points to the importance of studying real-time activism, which poses methodological challenges but offers rich insights into the dynamism of political discourse online.

Further research could investigate how African youth across different contexts are building new protest repertoires that blend culture, politics, and digital innovation. Comparative studies involving movements like Kenya's Gen Z uprising, Senegal's #FreeSenegal, or Sudan's #SudanUprising could help scholars map a broader pattern of African digital resistance in the 2020s.

Additionally, future studies might focus on the long-term institutional outcomes of hashtag activism: Do movements lead to policy shifts? Do participants remain politically engaged? What infrastructures (legal, social, digital) are needed to sustain momentum? Longitudinal and interdisciplinary research combining political science, media studies, and African studies will be key to addressing these questions.

Ultimately, the trajectory of digital activism in Africa south of the Sahara is still unfolding. Kenya's Gen Z-led protests serve as a compelling reminder that new waves of activism are continually reshaping the political landscape. These recent developments underline the urgency of sustained scholarly attention and the importance of updating analytical frameworks to capture the evolving strategies, platforms, and identities involved in digital resistance.

5.6 Symbolism vs. Structural Change

One of the central tensions in digital activism lies in the disconnect between symbolic visibility and structural transformation. Hashtag movements, by their very nature, thrive on symbolic power: visual cues, emotional storytelling, and viral amplification. However, their ability to translate this symbolic momentum into institutional reform remains uneven and contested.

In movements like #BringBackOurGirls, the symbolic power was undeniable. The image of schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram and the global solidarity it evoked, amplified by figures like Michelle Obama, generated unprecedented attention. Yet despite worldwide visibility, the Nigerian government's response was slow, and the fate of many girls remains unresolved. Here, symbolic pressure did not yield sustained political accountability.

Similarly, #FeesMustFall succeeded in capturing national and international attention. The use of protest placards such as “Education is not for sale” and powerful visual protests in South Africa mobilized thousands. These symbolic gestures led to temporary freezes in tuition hikes, but the structural issues of economic exclusion and unequal access to higher education remain unresolved for many students. The symbolic visibility created cracks, but not deep institutional overhaul.

The case of #ThisFlag illustrates a different symbolic function. By reclaiming the Zimbabwean flag as a symbol of citizen ownership, Pastor Evan Mawarire reframed national identity and dissent in a single image. Yet the state's response, ranging from flag bans to arrests, highlights how symbolic dissent alone may provoke repression without necessarily shifting governance structures.

#EndSARS arguably came closest to bridging the gap. The Feminist Coalition's coordination, protest logistics, and transparent funding added a structural layer to the movement's symbolic core. However, despite public statements by Nigerian authorities and the disbanding of SARS on paper, deeper reforms within the police and judicial system remain elusive.

These examples demonstrate that while symbols catalyze momentum, they cannot substitute for strategy, infrastructure, and policy engagement. Zeynep Tufekci (2017) warns of the “fragility of networked protest“, movements may surge quickly, but without strong organizational depth, they struggle to sustain pressure or institutionalize change. Morozov (2011) similarly cautions against “solutionism“, assuming that digital tools inherently produce progress.

Thus, for hashtag activism to move beyond symbolic visibility, it must engage with offline organizing, legal advocacy, and long-term coalition-building. Symbolism opens the door, but structure must walk through it.

6.1 Summary of Findings

This thesis has explored the transformative role of social media in shaping political activism in Africa south of the Sahara, with a focus on four hashtag-based protest movements: #BringBackOurGirls in Nigeria, #FeesMustFall in South Africa, #ThisFlag in Zimbabwe, and #EndSARS in Nigeria. Through a comparative lens, the study has revealed both convergences and divergences in how these movements emerged, organized, framed their messages, and interacted with state power.

A key finding is that all four movements effectively harnessed digital platforms to mobilize support, raise awareness, and bypass traditional media filters. However, the specific platforms and strategies used varied significantly based on political context, infrastructural conditions, and movement goals. For example, Twitter enabled global visibility in #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS, while WhatsApp and Facebook provided more secure or community-based spaces for coordination in #FeesMustFall and #ThisFlag.

Another core insight relates to framing: each movement constructed symbolic, emotionally resonant narratives to galvanize participation. From the moral urgency of #BringBackOurGirls to the ideological framing of #FeesMustFall and the civic symbolism of #ThisFlag, activists demonstrated strategic use of language, imagery, and emotion. These frames were central to shaping public discourse and movement legitimacy.

Organizationally, the movements exhibited different degrees of centralization. While #ThisFlag was initially led by a single charismatic figure, #EndSARS was a fully decentralized, collective movement that demonstrated the power and flexibility of horizontal coordination. This diversity of leadership models reflects an adaptive protest culture responding to repression, opportunity, and digital infrastructure.

In terms of state response and impact, the study found that visibility was a double-edged sword. Increased global attention often provoked both engagement and repression. While some movements gained concessions or policy shifts (as in #FeesMustFall), others were suppressed or lost momentum without achieving systemic change. Nevertheless, all four cases left lasting cultural and civic legacies, reshaping how young Africans engage with politics.

Overall, the findings highlight the growing sophistication of digital activism in the region and the need to consider social media not as a neutral tool, but as a deeply political space. These insights set

the stage for addressing the research questions and drawing out practical and theoretical implications in the final sections of this chapter.

6.2 Answer to the Research Questions

The central research question of this thesis was:

How have social media platforms shaped the formation, visibility, and impact of political protest movements in Africa south of the Sahara between 2014 and 2020?

The findings from the four case studies provide a clear and multi-layered response.

Social media platforms significantly shaped the formation of these movements by lowering the barriers to participation and enabling new actors, particularly youth and previously marginalized voices, to engage in activism. The ease of content creation and dissemination, combined with real-time communication features, made platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and, in later phases, TikTok, indispensable for initiating protest, coordinating events, and building digital communities.

In terms of visibility, social media enabled movements to gain rapid national and international traction. This visibility intensified political pressure, mobilized cross-border solidarity, and attracted the attention of celebrities, NGOs, and international organizations. At the same time, it exposed activists to heightened surveillance and repression: movements like #EndSARS and #ThisFlag faced state pushback precisely because of their growing online prominence.

Regarding impact, the case studies revealed varied but tangible outcomes. While none of the movements achieved all their political demands, each left a lasting imprint on public discourse and civic engagement:

- #FeesMustFall led to a freeze on tuition hikes and sparked broader curricular reforms.
- #BringBackOurGirls triggered a global conversation on gendered violence and security in conflict zones.
- #EndSARS redefined youth-led activism in Nigeria and brought police brutality into the political mainstream.

- #ThisFlag catalyzed unprecedented digital mobilization in Zimbabwe and disrupted the culture of fear and silence surrounding government criticism.

Collectively, these examples show that even in contexts of repression, social media-enabled activism can shift discourses and empower civic participation.

In addition to addressing the main research question, this thesis also explored recurring patterns across the four cases, particularly in relation to structure, framing, and sustainability. The analysis highlighted three key tendencies:

1. Adaptive digital strategies in response to censorship and state control.
2. Emotionally resonant and symbolically charged framing, often tied to national identity or generational frustration.
3. Decentralized leadership structures, which enhanced flexibility and resilience, especially in restrictive political environments.

These cross-cutting patterns offer insight into the evolving repertoire of hashtag activism in Africa and reinforce the importance of contextual adaptability for sustained civic engagement.

However, sustainability proved elusive for most cases. Movements without institutional pathways or formal representation often struggled to maintain momentum beyond moments of digital visibility. This raises important questions about how digital protests can transition into enduring political change.

In summary, the research questions have been addressed through a combination of empirical analysis and theoretical reflection. The findings underscore the power and fragility of networked protest, and they highlight the importance of contextual factors, such as regime type, digital access, and generational identity, in shaping outcomes.

6.3 Recommendations for Activists, Scholars, Policymakers, and the Public

The findings of this thesis suggest several important recommendations for key stakeholders engaged in the digital activism ecosystem, particularly in Africa south of the Sahara. These insights aim to support more effective strategies, more responsive policies, and broader civic participation.

For Activists:

Digital movements thrive when platform selection, narrative framing, and organizational structures align with local political conditions. Activists should choose platforms not only based on reach, but also considering security, resilience, and algorithmic visibility. In repressive environments, encrypted messaging apps and hybrid offline tactics remain essential. Narrative framing should emphasize emotionally resonant, culturally grounded imagery that can be easily shared across platforms. The strategic use of the national flag in *#ThisFlag* and the coordination by the Feminist Coalition during *#EndSARS* exemplify the power of symbolic capital. Activists are also encouraged to develop long-term strategies to sustain momentum, including coalition-building, content archiving, and legal advocacy.

For Scholars:

This research underscores the need for more interdisciplinary and regionally grounded approaches to studying digital activism. Future inquiries should incorporate ethnographic fieldwork, platform-specific analysis, and visual methods. Movements such as the recent Gen Z protests in Kenya provide valuable real-time cases for exploring evolving protest dynamics. Expanding the scope to under-researched countries and emerging platforms like TikTok or Telegram can enrich the discourse. Scholars must remain critical of Northern-centric paradigms and elevate indigenous knowledge, historical context, and linguistic diversity in their frameworks.

For Policymakers:

Rather than framing digital activism as a threat, governments and institutions should acknowledge it as a legitimate form of civic engagement. Repressive responses often provoke international backlash and deepen societal mistrust. Policymakers are encouraged to create digital public consultation mechanisms, invest in digital literacy and civic education, and safeguard online freedom of expression. Partnering with youth-led movements on structural issues such as police reform, education, and employment could foster inclusion, reduce unrest, and build democratic resilience.

For the Public:

Members of the public play a vital role in sustaining democratic discourse and holding power to account. Individuals can contribute by staying informed, amplifying verified information, engaging respectfully in digital conversations, and supporting grassroots initiatives through digital and offline means. The success of digital activism often relies on collective participation, from retweets to attending town halls. Public solidarity, even when subtle, can signal shared values and create ripple effects far beyond algorithmic metrics. Civic engagement is not limited to protest; it begins with awareness, empathy, and everyday digital choices.

Finally, all stakeholders must recognize the transnational nature of contemporary digital activism. Movements no longer operate in silos, they draw inspiration, tactics, and solidarity from one another, as seen in the global resonance between *#EndSARS* and Kenya's Gen Z mobilization. Acknowledging this interconnectivity will be key to supporting transformative change, both online and offline.

6.4 Final Reflection and Outlook

This thesis began with the observation that digital technologies are transforming the political landscape in Africa south of the Sahara. The case studies analyzed here have confirmed that social media not only facilitates mobilization and storytelling, but also challenges conventional hierarchies of activism, visibility, and political participation. While the initial time frame of the study was limited to 2014–2020, the emergence of more recent movements, especially Kenya's Gen Z uprising in 2023–2024, demonstrates that this transformation is ongoing.

The Kenyan case is particularly instructive: it shows how younger generations are adapting protest strategies to a hyper-digital environment characterized by short-form content, meme culture, livestreams, and platform fluidity. These innovations in activism signal a generational shift in how resistance is performed and communicated. They also underscore the need for scholars and policymakers alike to continuously update their conceptual and practical frameworks to keep pace with the speed and creativity of youth-led mobilizations.

As new platforms emerge and state strategies evolve, future movements will likely need to become even more agile, encrypted, and culturally embedded. Researchers must develop methods to document and interpret these shifts in real time, while also being sensitive to local histories and structural inequalities. Activists, for their part, must balance speed with sustainability, ensuring that moments of digital virality are supported by long-term strategies for change.

In conclusion, this study has shown that hashtag activism in Africa south of the Sahara is not a fleeting phenomenon. It is a dynamic, multi-layered mode of political engagement that reflects both the challenges and the possibilities of the digital age. Whether it takes the form of mourning, critique, satire, or hope, digital activism in the region will continue to shape and be shaped by the struggles for justice, dignity, and democratic voice.

6.5 Bridging Research and Practice: A Personal Outlook

This thesis does not only represent an academic exploration, but also reflects my lived engagement with digital media. Since 2017, I have worked as a social media expert and content creator, managing online communication strategies for companies while also building my own platform as a lifestyle and education-focused influencer. This dual role has given me a deep, hands-on understanding of the mechanisms, challenges, and potentials of digital spaces, particularly in shaping narratives, mobilizing communities, and amplifying underrepresented voices.

My academic and professional paths are intertwined. Studying the role of social media in political activism in Africa south of the Sahara has allowed me to critically examine the platforms I work with daily, not just as tools of branding or storytelling, but as instruments of resistance, advocacy, and societal transformation.

Looking forward, I intend to continue contributing to this field. I believe that bridging the gap between academic theory and platform practice is essential, especially as younger generations increasingly engage with the world through digital interfaces.

This thesis is a first step toward that ambition. It reflects not only the current state of knowledge, but also my commitment to fostering digital literacy, political engagement, and scholarly innovation in the ever-evolving landscape of social media.

6.5 From Research to Responsibility: A Vision for Future Engagement

This thesis is more than a conclusion to my academic studies it is a beginning.

Throughout this research, I have explored the transformative power of digital platforms in shaping political activism across Africa south of the Sahara. The movements analyzed here are not abstract case studies; they are expressions of lived resistance, collective resilience, and digital creativity in the face of structural violence. They speak to a generation that not only navigates political

marginalization but also redefines activism through hashtags, memes, livestreams, and encrypted networks.

As a social media expert and content creator who has worked professionally in the digital space since 2017, I approach these issues not only with academic curiosity, but also with practical insight. I have witnessed how narratives are shaped, communities are mobilized, and impact is measured, not in theories alone, but in views, shares, and real-world consequences.

This dual perspective, both scholarly and professional, has made me deeply aware of the responsibility that comes with digital influence. It is not enough to understand movements; we must also contribute to creating spaces where voices from the margins are heard, where online presence leads to offline change, and where African digital narratives are not merely studied, but supported and amplified.

Looking ahead, I aim to develop a university-level course that explores social media activism in African contexts, one that bridges theory and practice, encourages critical engagement, and equips students to navigate digital politics with ethical awareness and strategic vision. I also intend to continue working at the intersection of media, education, and advocacy, supporting inclusive digital communication and contributing to future research on Africa's online public spheres.

In a time when algorithms shape opinion, and hashtags shape history, we must learn to read, question, and use these tools responsibly. This thesis is my contribution to that learning process, and the foundation for what comes next.

Beyond the scope of this academic inquiry, I envision expanding this research into a broader interdisciplinary dialogue. As a long-standing social media professional and digital strategist, I see the value of translating academic knowledge into practical applications, whether in university-level teaching, digital literacy training, or activist network consulting. One of my long-term goals is to design a course that bridges the gap between theory and practice in digital activism, particularly within African contexts. This thesis lays the groundwork for such initiatives by combining empirical insight with strategic digital expertise.

Appendix A: Social Media Artifacts and Engagement Evidence

This appendix provides selected digital artifacts that illustrate the role, visibility, and digital presence of the hashtag movements analyzed in this thesis. These examples serve to contextualize the findings and complement the qualitative analysis presented in the main chapters. The appendix includes both curated social media content and original screenshots collected from Instagram, offering visual evidence of hashtag engagement, platform reach, and user interaction.

A.1 Selected Tweets from the #EndSARS Movement



Example 1:

✕ "We want a country where the police protects us, not kills us. #EndSARS #EndPoliceBrutality"
@NigeriaActivist, 15 Oct 2020

Example 2:

"We are not backing down. The world is watching. #EndSARS #EndSWAT"
@Feminist_Coalition, 18 Oct 2020

The following pictures illustrate the variety of protest forms and the central message of the #EndSARS movement:

Protester with the sign ‘#EndSARS NOW’ (Source: Al Jazeera [In Pictures: #EndSARS protests continue in Nigeria](#))



A.2 Instagram Campaigns from #FeesMustFall

Example:

Post by @FMF_StudentUnion (21 Oct 2015):

"We refuse to be excluded from education. Fees must fall now!"

The following pictures illustrate the variety of protest forms and the central message of the #FeesMustFall movement:



A demonstrator holds up a sign reading ‘#FeesMustFall’, visually emphasising the movement's central demand. (Source: Youth Village [The Fight Continues: The #FeesMustFall Campaign Resumes Today](#))



University students protest against fee increments

Protesters with the sign 'Education is not for sale' (Source: It News Africa)

A.3 Visual impressions of the #BringBackOurGirls movement

The following images illustrate the global resonance and symbolic power of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign:

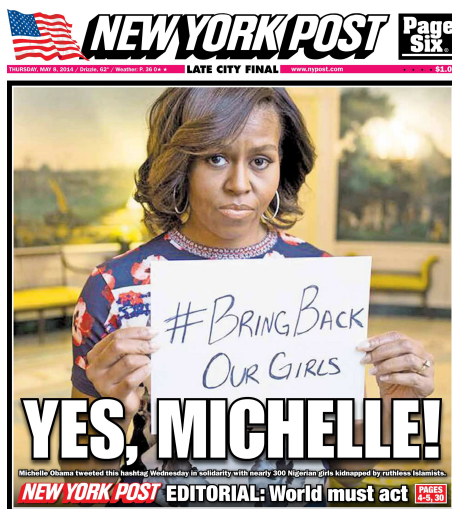


Protesters at Day 130 of #BringBackOurGirls rally on Friday

Activists in Abuja, Nigeria, carry a powerful banner emphasising the urgency of the situation. (Source: The Nation Newspaper - Day 130 #BringBackOurGirls Protest)



A child holds a handwritten sign expressing the movement's central demand. (Source: The Nation Newspaper - #BringBackOurGirls protest in London)



This picture shows Michelle Obama with the sign ‘#BringBackOurGirls’, which she published on 7 May 2014 to show solidarity with the abducted schoolgirls in Nigeria. (Source: Official Twitter account of the First Lady (@FLOTUS), 7 May 2014.)

A.4 Visual impressions of the #ThisFlag movement

These images show the emergence and influence of the #ThisFlag movement in Zimbabwe:



Image of Pastor Evan Mawarire wrapped in the Zimbabwean flag, widely shared on Twitter and Facebook in 2016.



Riot police watch a man with a Zimbabwean flag over his shoulders saluting during a protest (AP)

An activist stands with the national flag in front of a row of police officers, symbolising peaceful protest. (Source: The Independent - Zimbabwe Cracks Down on #ThisFlag Movement)

A.5 Hashtag Timeline Overview

The following timeline offers an overview of the major hashtag movements covered in this thesis. It outlines their emergence, peak activity periods, and key associated events. This helps situate the movements historically and comparatively.

Movement	Hashtag	Peak Activity Period	Notable Events
Bring Back Our Girls	#BringBackOurGirls	April–June 2014	Global response to the Chibok schoolgirl kidnappings
Fees Must Fall	#FeesMustFall	October–November 2015	Nationwide student protests and shutdowns
This Flag	#ThisFlag	April–July 2016	Online sermons, national symbols, civil dissent
End SARS	#EndSARS	October 2020	Nationwide protests against police brutality

A.6 Instagram-Based Hashtag Engagement Screenshots

This section presents screenshots collected manually from Instagram, showing:

- Total number of posts under the main hashtags
- Related hashtag variations and thematic sub-movements
- Official campaign accounts and examples of protest content

A.6.1 #BringBackOurGirls

- Over 266,000+ posts under the main hashtag
- Active campaign account: @bringbackourgirls with 17.2k followers (as of screenshot date)
- Screenshot examples include protest visuals, media coverage, and global support images

A.6.2 #FeesMustFall

- Around 44,700+ posts under the main hashtag
- Supporting tags: #feesmustfall2016, #feesmustfallmovement
- Active campaign account: @fees_mustfall with protest imagery and student solidarity visuals

A.6.3 #ThisFlag

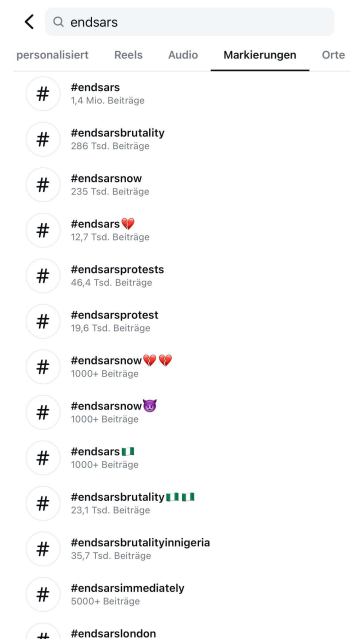
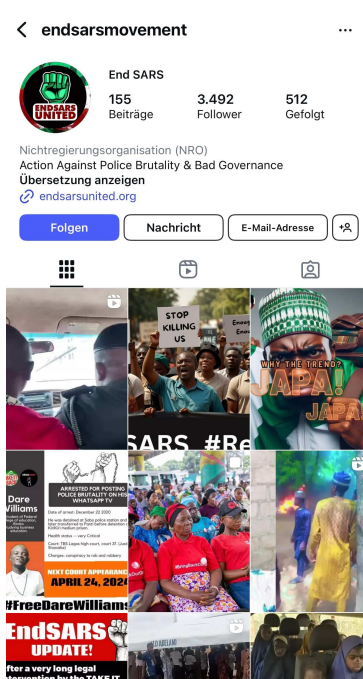
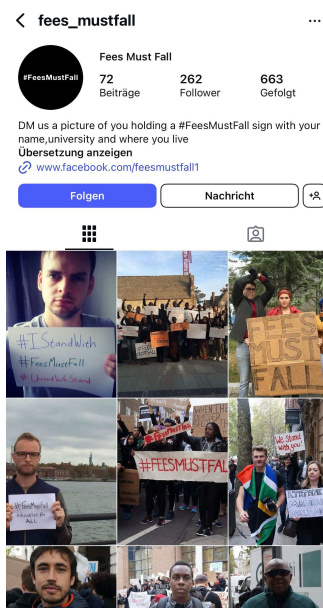
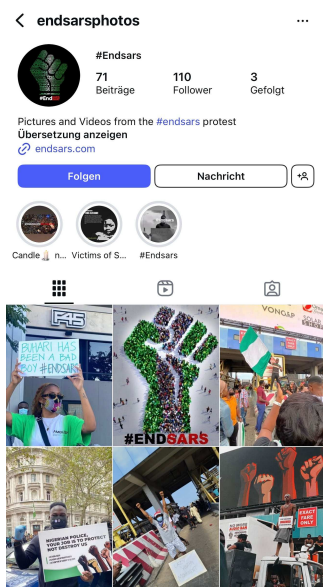
- Over 5,000+ posts under #thisflag and variations
- Related hashtags include #thisflagaintcomingdown, #thisflagstandsforfreedom, etc.
- No active campaign account found, but significant historical posting

A.6.4 #EndSARS

- More than 1.4 million posts under #endsars alone

- Additional hashtags include #endsarsbrutality, #endsarsnow, #endsarsprotests
- Active visual protest accounts: @endsarsphotos, @endsarsmovement
- Images show demonstrations, protest signs, and symbolic artwork

Appendix B: Instagram Screenshots of profiles and hashtags



< bringbackourgirls ...



bringbackourgirls

437 Beiträge

17,2 Tsd. Follower

55 Gefolgt

270+ Nigerian school girls were kidnapped. Get involved. Tell the world that we demand they are rescued.
www.bringbackourgirls.us

Übersetzung anzeigen

www.cnn.com/2016/10/13/africa/nigeria-...

Folgen

Nachricht



Nigeria Chibok girls: At least 80 freed by Boko Haram

May 2017 · Africa



Bring Back Our Girls Now



Educate a Girl Change the World



Nigerian School Girls Released



Bring Back Our Girls



Educate a Girl Change the World



Bring Back Our Girls Now



Educate a Girl Change the World



Bring Back Our Girls

- < bringbackourgirls
- Nicht personalisiert

Reels

Audio

Markierungen
- #

#bringbackourgirls

266 Tsd. Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirls

100+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirlsnow

1000+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirlsalive

500+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirls1908

500+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirls

100+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirls1906

100+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirls1913

100+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirlsfromisis

100+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirlsdic

100+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirls1911

100+ Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirlscampaign

Weniger als 100 Beiträge
- #

#bringbackourgirlsplease

< thisflag

- Nicht personalisiert

Reels

Audio

Markierungen
- #

#thisflag

5000+ Beiträge
- #

#thisflag

1000+ Beiträge
- #

#thisflagaintcomingdown

100+ Beiträge
- #

#thisflagwasmadeforyouandme

100+ Beiträge
- #

#thisflagstillstandsforfreedom

Weniger als 100 Beiträge
- #

#thisflag

Weniger als 100 Beiträge
- #

#thisflagstandsforfreedom

Weniger als 100 Beiträge
- #

#thisflagmeansdeath

Weniger als 100 Beiträge
- #

#thisflag

Weniger als 100 Beiträge
- #

#thisflagstudents

Weniger als 100 Beiträge
- #

#thisflag

Weniger als 100 Beiträge
- #

#thisflagaintcomindown

Weniger als 100 Beiträge
- #

#thisflagcomesdowntoday

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