

# Stories of #EndSARS: Applying Social Network Analysis through a Postcolonial Framework

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**Abstract:** Social media has become central to contemporary activism, transforming how movements worldwide mobilise and organise around shared goals. The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria started in 2017 as a citizen-led effort that confronted police brutality, especially from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police. Facilitated primarily by social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp, data shows that more than 8 million unique authors participated in creating content that commented on or provided support to the offline protests (NENDO 2020). Much like other contemporary social media activism efforts, #EndSARS lacked established and movement-recognised spokespersons; instead, networked microcelebrities and influential voices emerged intermittently, each with varied social capital, reflecting the movement's decentralised nature. This paper presents research into the lived experiences of #EndSARS activists on Instagram, utilising a modified social network analysis to identify these individuals without relying on popularity metrics alone. Adopting a postcolonial lens, this research centred on inclusive representation to disrupt traditional hierarchies where dominant voices speak over, or on behalf of, marginalised communities. This approach was implemented through Richardson's (2000) crystallisation and by operationalising Tufekci's (2013) concept of the "networked microcelebrity". Standard social network analysis metrics were adapted to recognise diverse voices and multifaceted connections among activists. The resulting visualisation platform highlights interactions among 117 information-rich participants, offering multidirectional perspectives on the movement's narrative. This approach enhanced the visibility of less-prominent activists and provided a nuanced, visually engaging map of the networked narratives driving #EndSARS. In a broader context, this approach initiates the conversation on decolonising social network analysis to incorporate more diverse and representative voices.

**Keywords:** Social Network Analysis, Social Media Activism, Postcolonialism, #Endsars, Networked Narratives, Networked Microcelebrity

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## 1. Introduction

Social media activism has had varied and notable iterations across the world. In Nigeria, several social justice movements have engaged social media since 2012; notable examples being #OccupyNigeria, #BringBackOurGirls and more recently the #EndSARS movement (Paul 2023). In all of these instances social media served as an autonomous means of communication that democratised narrative control, scaled mobilisation and made organisation of disparate groups feasible (Castells 2015). The potential for social media to be used in ways that support activism in different contexts has been attributed to the technological affordances made available by social media platforms. Faraj and Azad (2012 p.4) define technological affordances as "action possibilities and opportunities that emerge from actors engaging with a focal technology". Therefore, social media serving as a focal point for different groups of Nigerians within and outside its borders has become a powerful tool for politically motivated individuals to bring visibility and garner support for a range of social justice issues.

Identified by Tufekci (2013) as a Networked Microcelebrity (NMC), the social media activist is a person who points attention to a social justice cause by a presentation of their political and personal selves on social media. Tufekci's typologisation underscores that within any large-scale social media movement, individuals engage and experience activism on deeply personal and varied levels. However, the narratives portrayed by traditional media outlets about these movements are often flawed and repeated single stories that essentialises the experiences and perspectives of these individuals. This phenomenon is problematised by postcolonial theorists who argue that when a specific group is spoken about in the construction of another's imagination, it reproduces a colonial dynamic that essentialises them and can constitute or encourage their oppression. Said (1985) argues that writing about a silent Other, particularly for an audience shaped by power and privilege, and with the intent to define or represent that Other, can itself constitute a form of epistemic violence. Social media affords activists tools to circumvent the hegemonic control of traditional media and assert their agency. Viewed through a postcolonial lens, the social media activist can be seen as a subaltern who challenges the erasure and marginalisation of their voices by deconstructing monolithic narratives rooted in colonial hierarchies, epistemic violence, and economic inequality (Young 2003; Castells 2015). However, this is a negotiated process that underscores the enduring legacies of colonialism.

This paper examines the process of identifying diverse social media activists involved in the #EndSARS movement, which aimed to challenge the systemic police brutality perpetrated by Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). By applying social network analysis adapted to a postcolonial framework, the varied stories shared by these activists on social media were used to create a cohesive and interactive presentation of the #EndSARS protests. The paper concludes by considering the different applications of such an artefact and discusses the implications of a postcolonial approach to social network analysis.

## **2. Studying The #EndSARS Protests**

The #EndSARS movement started gaining traction on Twitter in 2017 through the efforts of Nigerians from the middle and lower classes who were adversely affected by the activities of SARS (Omeni 2022). The movement gained global momentum after a tweet reporting the shooting of a young boy by agents of SARS was posted on the @AfricaOfficial handle and went viral on 3 October 2020. Widespread physical protests started on 8 October and lasted until 20 October 2020 (Abimbade, Philip & Herro 2022). These physical protests were widely shared with a global audience on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, and 2go (Uwalaka 2022). Social media was used to circumvent the problem of subverted voice and to gain enough traction to challenge the discourse behind a culture of brutality and excessive force (Abimbade, Philip & Herro 2022; Couldry 2008).

Although there are no conclusive data counts as to the online participation #EndSARS garnered, NENDO (2020) recorded 8.45 million unique authors that posted on Twitter between 5 and 22 October 2020. Initial attempts to study the population as it appeared on social media platforms revealed the necessity of scaling down due to problems such as noise (irrelevant posts that used the hashtag as a marketing tool) and platform restrictions on using publicly accessible data. Furthermore, the volume of data available from such a vast population necessitated streamlining the selection process to create a manageable and information-rich dataset for analysis. To this end, a representative set had to be created from the population to serve as "a scaled-down version of the entire population, where all different characteristics of the population are present" (Grafström & Schelin 2014 p.279). Therefore, the criteria developed for selection had to take into consideration verifiable proof of engagement, authentic participation and diversity of voices from as many positions within the population as possible.

A postcolonial approach to creating a representative selection acknowledges that including only popular voices risks recreating colonial-like power imbalances, similar to the dynamics between elites and subalterns of any society. However, completely excluding these popular voices still creates monolithic narratives that feed into misrepresentations in the story of the movement (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1998; Said 1985). Tufekci's (2013) definition of a Networked Microcelebrity (NMC) activist served as an efficient way of identifying individuals who had potential to offer useful insight. They are identified by their use of social media, their inclination to share citizen journalism efforts albeit with an established personal bias, and the intentional use of these skills to gain attention for a movement they are aligned to. Much like spokespersons, mass media outlets may sometimes bring attention to NMC activists, but the selection is not because of any movement-designated relevance or responsibility. Rather, where it happens, the relationship is built on mutually beneficial opportunities: the mass media gains closer access to the story through the NMC activist, while the activist increases their potential for drawing attention to their cause and sometimes themselves. Without the de facto responsibility of leadership, NMC activists often express independent perspectives, although they remain accountable to the internal publics of the movement. As a result, NMC activists within the same movement can have diverse lived experiences and differing viewpoints on both the movement's progress and its overall success. In light of this, the first criterion for selection were NMC activists, popular and otherwise, who showed identifiable and varied participation with the #EndSARS movement through their activity on social media.

To streamline the selection process even further, NMC activists who had published #EndSARS visual material online were prioritised. Visual materials such as videos, images, and infographics have played significant roles in some of the most prominent protests globally (Castells 2015; Lageman 2020; Tufekci 2013). On social media, visual materials serve as succinct storytelling tools that transmit complex ideas and emotions to audiences, transcending geographical and language barriers (Jurgenson 2019; Lievrouw 2011). In Nigeria, the spark that stimulated the #EndSARS nationwide protests was the viral video of a Nigerian being killed by the Police. Abimbade et al. (2022 p.7) write that Nigerians employed the use of "personal stories, and media production (videos, pictures, and others) to create a community with #ENDSARS as the rallying point that defied the infiltration of the government". Furthermore, a unique situation with the #EndSARS protests is that the beginning of the end of the protests which occurred on 20 October 2020 featured a livestream video of Nigerian

Army officials shooting at unarmed protesters. This video went viral as the #LekkiTollgateMassacre and has become a lifeline for conversation on the protests, which continues years after any major protest was held (Adebajo 2022). This significance of video and images shared on social media establishes the relevance of visual artefacts in recounting the experiences and stories of any given movement.

Following the emphasis on visual artefacts, Instagram was selected as a highly visual social media platform engaged with during the #EndSARS movement (Uwalaka 2022). Instagram is one of the most important social networking sites globally and, in Nigeria, it is the third most-used platform after WhatsApp and Facebook (Caliandro & Graham 2020; Sasu 2023). Its infrastructure favours searchability, privacy, and datafication which, when coupled with visual affordance, aids the efficient identification of viable actors (Bossetta 2018). However, the lack of features like Facebook groups and subreddits makes it difficult to identify communities. Rather, Instagram communities are identified by hashtags, comments and follower networks (Bossetta 2018; Gomes Ferreira, Murai, Couto da Silva, et al. 2020). For this research, the hashtag and follower networks were used to identify the latent community of NMC activists. This established active engagement because it represents intentional participation in the movement that prompts ties (following/being followed) among other actors within the movement. Furthermore, Instagram’s privacy features made it possible to identify individuals who wanted to remain associated with the movement years afterwards. Following the contentious nature of the movement, some activists had chosen to archive the posts that they made, or keep their entire profile private, for a variety of reasons. By avoiding such profiles, the stories collected are verifiably made for public consumption and do not violate the creator’s rights to privacy (Instagram 2023; Intellectual Property Office 2014). Consequently, Instagram facilitated the clear identification of diverse activists who leveraged visual content as a central element of their online activism while engaging with the movement’s community, all without infringing on the privacy of those who preferred to remain anonymous in their activism.

Finally, the whole population was crystallised into five categories, each representing distinct types of individuals based on how they presented themselves on Instagram. Richardson (2000) proposes crystallisation as a way of making sure a sample set is representative of the diversity resident in the population. The crystallisation approach acknowledges that activists who participated in this movement created and were part of a multiplicity of lived experiences depending on their activism experience, social status, perceived impact of their activism, and movement support. Crystallisation recognises both the shared characteristics and unique differences within the population, highlighting recurring patterns of individual participation. These patterns help to illuminate how each category contributes to the co-construction of a nuanced account of the lived experiences of social media activists in Nigeria. This aligns with the postcolonial ideology of establishing the diversity in any group of people by encouraging their agency. It is important to acknowledge that this can only ever be a partial account as there is always a perspective that may not be considered (Stewart, Gapp & Harwood 2021).

**Table 1:** Crystallisation parameters for profiles of activists involved in the #EndSARS movement

| Category Type            | Description   | Profile Identifiers  | Colour Code |
|--------------------------|---|--|-------------|
| Established Activists    | Known activists whose prominence aligned with the NMC description but was not solely derived from their involvement in the #EndSARS movement.                                   | Posts about previous and current social justice causes and movements.                            | Green       |
| Circumstantial Activists | Activists whose involvement in the movement was linked primarily to the personal and public effects that police brutality had in their lives.                                   | Viral videos featuring them or loved ones. Posts about personal experiences of police brutality. | Red         |
| Celebrity Activists      | Activists in this group possessed existing social status, which they utilised to draw attention to the movement by sharing content about their involvement in the protests.     | High follower count. Verified badge on status.   | Blue        |
| Low-profile Activists    | Individuals whose involvement in activism is primarily tied to this movement; may become microcelebrities regardless of any inherent social capital.                            | Activism posts are limited to the #EndSARS movement.   | Purple      |
| Activists in Diaspora    | Individuals who participated in the movement from countries outside Nigeria. They shared visual material from local sources and original content of their participation abroad. | Locations on posts are outside Nigeria. Posts of diasporan activism.                             | Yellow      |

The selection of social media activists to create a representative sample of the population of #EndSARS sets the stage for a postcolonial application of social network analysis. The selection criteria took into consideration the versatility of the platform, the limitations of access that might be experienced with forms of communication or platform affordances, the capacity to search for and identify users who fit different positions within the population. Notably, the initial effort to gather these stories focused on YouTube for its visually driven content format. However, the prioritisation of content production over the portrayal of personal perspectives rendered YouTube less suited to capturing the lived experiences and nuanced narratives central to a postcolonial lens. Also, attempting to build the network directly from the Instagram population proved ineffective due to volume, especially as it relates to verifiable participation. Here, the initial condition of using the profiles of NMC activists proved valuable, leading to the selection of users based on their activities beyond social media. These included news interviews, blog references, and offline connections, thus achieving some degree of public/external knowledge of their involvement with the movement. The final step of the selection process involved confirming their participation by reviewing public posts related to #EndSARS on their profiles.

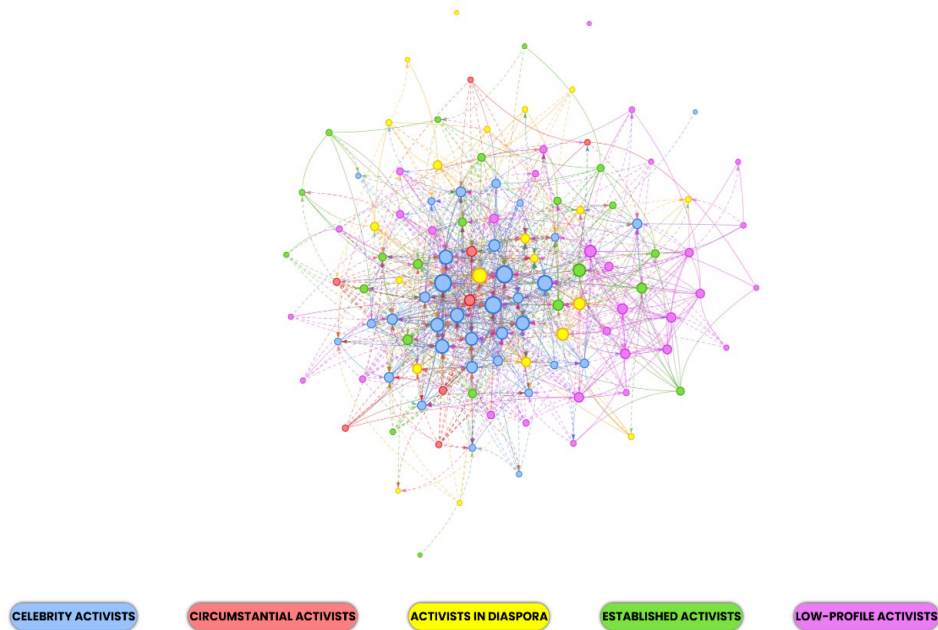
A total of 117 profiles were selected using these criteria, forming the foundation for a social network analysis and data visualisation. The initial search was carried out from 1/02/2023 till 07/02/2023. This population was categorised and resulted in 22 established activists, 8 circumstantial activists, 35 celebrity activists, 31 low-profile activists, and 21 activists in diaspora.

### **3. Social Network Analysis**

Marin and Wellman (2011 p.3) note that social networks represent a “set of socially relevant nodes connected by one or more relations”. Therefore, social network analysis (SNA) provides ways to understand each node in relation to other nodes and the network as a whole. Qualitatively, social network visualisation serves the purpose of observing the network as a collective producer of narrative and the ways in which these narratives flow within the network (Williamson & Ruming 2016). Quantitatively, SNA serves to understand the nodes that play key roles towards the flow of information using density, centralisation, or composition metrics (Marin & Wellman 2011). In this project, SNA served a dual purpose of presenting the narrative around the movement as a nuanced mix of distinct perspectives as well as a probability sampling step that helps to identify prominent individuals in each of the distinct categories based on the relations that emerge within the network.

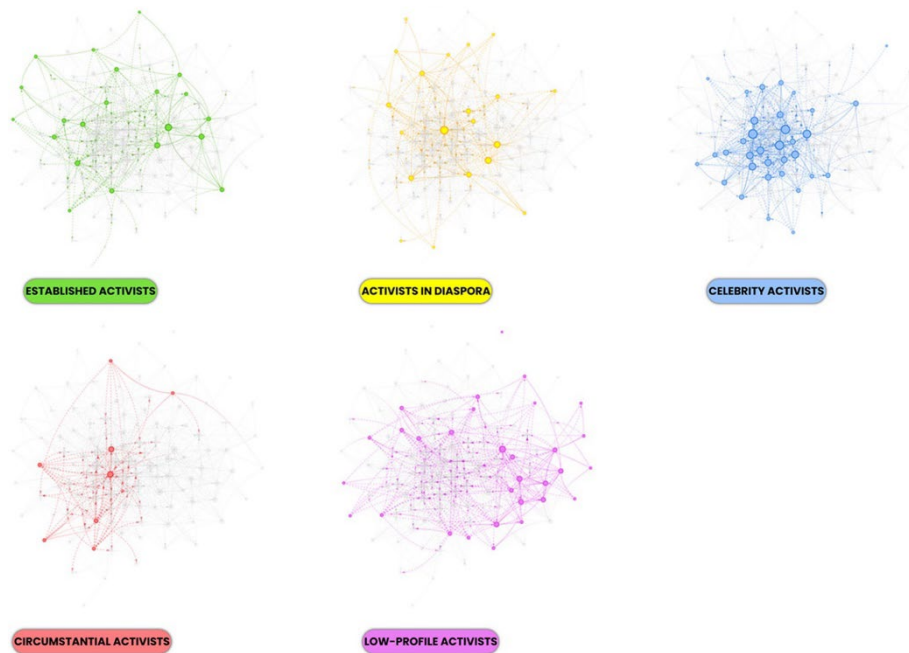
The relations identified between individual nodes are constructed based on similarities, social relations, interactions, and flows (Marin & Wellman 2011). For this project, social media relations that reflect the ties shared by disparate individuals were visualised and measured by assessing the number of in-degree connections (followers) and out-degree connections (followees) to form the network (Disney 2020; Yuen & Tang 2021). Diani (2016 p.12) writes that “movement networks emerge from discrete choices that independent actors make regarding their partners in alliances, their privileged sources of information, or, in the case of individuals, the organisations to join and the groups to be part of”. Therefore, to establish the social-relational ties among the actors, data on whom they follow is collected and visually represented to illustrate the nature of the movement’s network across the selected individuals.

Conducting research on such a scale to identify relationships and influences required an automated solution. Python programming language was used to implement various automation and machine learning algorithms. Selenium (2023), an open-source browser automation framework was used to develop a Python program to autonomously browse Instagram for publicly available information. Once all the data was acquired, Pyvis, a Python visualisation library was used to visualise the data as a directed graph showing the follower-followee relationship between the selected accounts (West Health Institute 2018). The accounts were represented as nodes in the networks and the directed edges represented the relationship. The nodes were given different colours based on the category assigned to the profile and the size of a specific node depends on the number of followers it has among the selected accounts. The nodes in the network were then made to self-organise based on a physics simulation, wherein every node experiences a repulsion from every other node while the edges act as a spring of zero length, creating an attraction between connected nodes. This creates a visualisation where accounts gravitate to the centre based on the present followers they have, reflecting their role within the network rather than their broader social media influence.



**Figure 1: Social network created among 117 #EndSARS social media activists**

The conditions applied to the sample selection process demonstrate how incorporating postcolonial considerations enhances the likelihood of identifying individuals who, despite lacking established social capital, make significant contributions to narrative flows through their participation in the movement. Diani (2003) uses the ‘social broker’ concept to explain how activists can serve as crucial communication links by connecting social movement actors or organisations who are not in direct relation due to political or sociological barriers. He writes that “by creating new bridges through their multiple personal involvements, either directly or indirectly, movement activists facilitate the spread of solidarity (and, plausibly, mutual trust) among different groups and organisations” (Diani, 2003, p. 118). Consequently, circumventing predictable approaches which study popular contributors and/or viral content creates opportunity to include integrated voices who might be overshadowed otherwise. A visualisation of the distribution of individuals based on their categories reveals how all categories feature on every side of the movement participation spectrum.



**Figure 2: Distribution of individuals based on their categories**

The role of the NMC activist shines in a network primed to include subaltern and dominant voices alike. Subsequently a multiplicity of narratives also becomes apparent. Castells (2015 p.9) writes that “by engaging in the production of mass media messages, and by developing autonomous networks of horizontal communication, citizens of the Information Age become able to invent new programs for their lives with the material of their suffering, fears, dreams and hopes”. NMC activists are, then, consistently constructing different and networked narratives of the movement from their experiences and those of others within it (Abimbade, Philip & Herro 2022; Davidjants & Tiidenberg 2022; Tufekci 2013). Activists’ Instagram posts can then serve as repositories of their personal experiences communicated within a community of other experiences to provide a network of narratives representative of the whole movement (Li 2022). Following the purposive sample selection of actors to include in the network, the Instagram profiles of selected accounts were searched for posts in the date range 1/10/2020 to 31/12/2020. The captions of posts were searched for the following terms: #EndSARS, #EndSARNow, #EndSWAT, #EndPoliceBrutality, and #lekkitollgate – all of which were popular hashtags used during the movement. Every qualifying post was downloaded using an application program interface (API) called Instaloader and catalogued as a representation of the participant’s narrative of the movement (Graf & Koch-Kramer 2023). Furthermore, because these terms sometimes appear in the posted image, Tesseract (2023), an optical character recognition (OCR) framework, was used to identify text within the images and search for the relevant terms.

To illustrate the flow of narratives across the movement network, the content shared on Instagram is displayed in an Instagram-like format. This includes the images, accompanying captions, and like counts at the time of download, which are all shown side-by-side with the network visualisation. The username of each actor was however anonymised and replaced with their assigned category. Integrating the posts with the network, can produce insights into the role of individuals and the movement of stories across the wider network. The resulting webpage can then display posts collated from an actor’s account in an Instagram-style viewer when their node is selected, alongside their connections within the network. This setup allows the flow of narratives to be traced by following the paths taken by repeated or reposted content within the network.



Figure 3: Screenshot of a post alongside the actor’s connections within the network.

#### 4. Discussion

The use of SNA adapted to a postcolonial framework facilitated the creation of a webpage where many and diverse voices could be heard. Although not exhaustive, the multiplicity of lived experiences curated from social media provides sufficient context to deconstruct monolithic narratives and amplify subaltern voices. As part of a larger project collecting and contextualising the stories of social media activists in Nigeria, this webpage facilitated an inclusive selection of 12-20 participants to engage in a participatory video research process (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006). SNA metrics like betweenness and closeness centrality, which prioritise linkages over

popularity, helped identify key players while resisting the marginalisation of any perspective (Nouh & Nurse 2015). By combining inclusive selection criteria with probability measures that highlight connections, this approach ensured a representative analysis of the #EndSARS movement, reducing bias while resisting the dominance of any single narrative (Williamson & Ruming 2016).

This collation of voices reflects African epistemologies, where knowledge is shared, preserved, and reinterpreted through communal networks (Hamminga 2005). By highlighting participants who articulated their lived experiences directly through social media, this approach mirrors oral storytelling traditions, where no single individual speaks for the group, rather the collective stories reveal the community's shared realities. Martindale et al. (2018), note that both social media and oral traditions foster participatory networks, bringing together memories and new ideas to create cultural meaning. In adapting SNA through a postcolonial lens, this research not only challenges dominant frameworks but also reaffirms decentralised, participatory networks as central to African ways of creating and sustaining collective meaning. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the social media platforms underpinning this work originate in predominantly Western contexts, often embedded with colonial constructs. While these platforms provide a space for subaltern voices, their design risks privileging metrics that can impact on data curated from them.

The use of an adapted SNA to the study of social media activism offers significant research potential, particularly in understanding movements characterised by leaderless, horizontal, and decentralised structures. Without any recognised centre, narratives are unevenly distributed across various parts of the movement (Mundt, Ross & Burnett 2018; Tufekci 2013). The inclusivity and probabilistic insights offered by this method allow researchers to uncover the roles of NMCs and the flows of information they facilitate (Diani 2003; Nouh & Nurse 2015). Furthermore, by keeping posts in their original form, this approach resists erasing individual agency and instead amplifies authentic voices, challenging the dominance of homogenising narratives.

Beyond its research significance, an artefact like this holds broader applications, including use in digital art exhibitions, educational resources, and historical archiving. As an educational resource, it introduces Western audiences to the nuances of activism in the Global South, which are often overlooked by traditional media organisations. Through the webpage, students gain insight into activists' motivations, connections, and the frames they adopt to express their discontent and lived experiences. As an interactive art installation, audiences have noted its ability to offer accessible and nuanced understandings of the movement.

This paper explores the potential of adapting social network analysis to a postcolonial framework. Using #EndSARS as a case study, it demonstrates how data visualisation amplifies diverse, decentralised voices. By integrating lived experiences and leveraging visual storytelling, it challenges dominant methodologies and underscores the importance of inclusive representation in social media analytics. While limitations such as API restrictions and dynamic media persist, this approach offers a nuanced, interactive lens for understanding social movements. Future work could extend these methods to non-social-media participants, enriching insights and advancing the field of qualitative data visualisation and visual analytics.

## Acknowledgement

The authors wish to acknowledge the voluntary support of Ayomide Adeleke in the data curation process.

**Note:** The digital artefact can be accessed at [storiesofendsars.postdigitalcultures.org](https://storiesofendsars.postdigitalcultures.org)

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