

Digital Storytelling Through #Endsars.Com as A Form of Narrative Memorial

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Abstract

Communal digital (auto) biographical is a memorial of trauma that exists in a synthetic frame referential to the memories of abuse. #Endsars.com highlights the collective narratives of netizens who are abused and subjugated by the Nigeria Police Force. Through the application of the concept of remembering, this study examines #Endsars.com as a digital memorial erected in the digital space by netizens through an autobiographical narrative method. This study employs a mixed-methods approach based on well-established social media research techniques and is founded on social media analytics and latent semantic analysis. This study observes that the Endsars.com narrative is a form of digital activism and resistance to police brutality in Nigeria. This paper submits that the (auto) biographical narrative style in Endsars.com is an expression of traumatic memories. This paper concludes that #Endsars.com amplifies the voices of those protesting against police brutality in the organic space. The study concludes that #Endsars.com is a digital Nigerian netizen memorial for victims of police brutality.

Keywords: *Digital Storytelling, #Endsars.com, Testimonies, Memorials, Victims, Police Brutality*

INTRODUCTION

(Auto) biographical storytelling in all its taxonomic forms is used to erect memorials on the psyche of the society. Ruth Finnegan's *Oral Literature in Africa* (2012) seems to highlight the earliest practice of African oral biographies which is rendered by specialised griots and poets in African traditional royal courts. However, the form of the (auto) biography that existed then was in poetic form as a result of the occasion of the event that necessitated such poetic rendition. The Panegyric form for instance, chronicles the achievement of leaders in traditional African society and these in most cases were biographical in nature (Onuoha, 2022; Sene 2022). The preceding does not dispute the fact of the use of the autobiographical narrative form for those who seek political powers as a

narrative medium to illustrate their achievements and sway the decision of the masses. In the same vein, netizens are appropriating the power of (auto) biographical narratives to make a case of their brutalization in the hands of the Nigeria Police Force. Sarah Lindsay Livesay (2016) notes that; “...literature can be framed as a memorial...” (p. vi). The preceding is implicated in Joe Ushie’s *Eclipse in Rwanda*, Chinua Achebe’s *There was a Country*, Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Akachi Ezeigbo’s *Roses and Bullets*, Sam Omatasay’s *My name is Okoro* and #EndSARS.com follows this pattern of memorial. Endsars.com follows this pattern of remembering from a communal point of view as relatives and friends of victims tell their stories on their behalf, while survivors tell their own stories of exploitation and brutalization in the hands of men of Nigeria Police Force. Eleftheria Kosmidou (2013) in writing about remembering affirms that; “Learning and memory are closely interrelated. Without remembering the past, any act of learning would be impossible” (p. 1). The earlier mentioned writers remembered the past as a medium of teaching Nigerians about their history through memorial literature. However, the same cannot be said of Nigerian Netizens because the past is constantly repeating itself in the brutalities the youth experience in the hands of the police force. Onyekachi Onuoha (2021a) refers to Netizens action as a medium of creating safe space. He notes that; “African Netizens are psychological migrants practically at the click of the button in an attempt to create safe space away from the organic...” (p. 17). Through narrative memorial Nigerian Netizens attempt to create safe space in their organic society.

#Endsars.com’s narrative memorial is like the “Living Memorial” project launched in 2006 which archives online the photographs of those who lost their lives in 9/11. The narratives in #Endsars.com portrays the damage police brutality has done to many Nigerians. This form of digital storytelling that embodies the traumatic memories of short (auto) biographical narratives keeps protests of #Endsars across Nigeria. #Endsars.com narrative is built on recollective memory and this facilitates the narrative memorial of police brutality. William F. Brewer in describing recollective memory notes that it is; “...the type of memory that occurs when an individual recalls a specific episode from their past experience” (p. 19). Endsars narrators recall their brutality in the hands of men of the Nigeria Police Force and they erect a narrative memorial as means to seek redress. In this process Netizens attempt to achieve what John Bodnar (1991) implies in the discourse of memorial that; “...the monument would promote healing and reconciliation in their discussions with government officials” (p. 4). Endsars.com (auto) biographical narrative uses their narrative monument to question police brutality in Nigeria. #ENDSARS.COM is both a title of Police brutality in Nigeria and at the same time functions as memorial and testimonies for survival and victims of police brutality in Nigeria. Digital storytelling through memory and the experiences of others gradually confront institutional brutality through portrayal of the actions of police against innocent citizens in Nigeria. Aristotle (2001) comments on the nature of memory notes, “... the object of memory is the past. All memory, therefore, implies time elapsed; consequently only those animals which perceive time remember, and the organ whereby they perceive time is also that whereby they remember” (p. 1). Through testimonies, netizens and their families have been brutalized by the Nigeria police through remembering and faced with the occurrence of such brutality in other contexts as a source of resistance against an institution of government that continuously stifles them. #EndSARS.com is a digital activism that occurs on the organic

space which is amplified and organised through various social media platforms on a single trended hashtag #Endsars. #Endsars narrative is various testimonies and memorials on #EndSARS.com which amplifies police brutality. Digital storytelling amplifies the visibility of narrative protest. Endsars as spirit of the protest on police brutality trended under a single thread and amplified in the virtual spaces through testimonies and memorials on various shades of police brutality Nigeria. However, in view of the impermanence of social media apps, #Endsars.com was erected as a permanent memorial for victims of police brutality. For netizens digital storytelling by virtue of digital testimonies and memorial is a means for the other (the oppress) to challenge their situation in the organic space through cyber counter narratives. Storytellers of #Endsars.com uses their plights as a thematic focus. The netizens use the digital space to narrate their lived experiences and adopt the mechanics of "I" and "those" through name mentioning for those who did not survive police brutality. Through digital storytelling in #Endsars.com netizens seek an end to police brutality and exploitation in Nigeria. Digital (auto) biography uses facts through participatory storytelling in #Endsars.com in piling of images of brutalities. These images of brutalities act as memorials and testimonies which confront the Nigerian police force and the government in Nigeria. #EndSARS.com through their narratives of Endsars erodes the achievement of SARS over the years through the portrayal of various shades of abuse of members of SARS on Nigerian masses. This erected narrative testimonies and memorial for SARS survivors and casualties in the social media space. #EndSARS (auto)biographical digital storytellers through the power of media erect memorials for those killed by SARS and those brutalised by SARS. Although Endsars protesters responded to the media in their activism through trending endsars on twitter and Facebook, they built a special memorial at www.EndSARS.com. ENDSARS on twitter and other social media apps has more than six million tweets of pictures, written words and short clips of SARS brutality. What these netizens are doing with their narratives is to challenge power perception of the Nigerian government and to appropriate the "Demo" in democracy for digital activism and advocacy. #Endsars.com becomes a memorial erected on the digital space for the voiceless youths in their organic space. As a post-human medium of confrontation through multimedia presentations of short clips, pictures and written words as a means of rendering testimonies of brutalities. Most importantly, this memorial is for those casualties of SARS abuse.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach based on well-established social media research techniques and is founded on social media analytics and latent semantic analysis. Social media analytics is seen as a potent tool for not just informing but also revolutionising current practises in politics, marketing, investment, product development, entertainment, and news media. Utilizing social media analytics, Facebook and Twitter were examined in relation to the topic using two distinct social media platforms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Narrative Memorial

Digital Narrative memorial is a national symbol that commemorates the experiences of Netizens on national disaster. Police brutality in Nigeria is a national

disaster. David Rosenthal (2022) implicates this narrative as; “...geotag stories of lived experience to established “heritage” to largely ignored places at times to radically transform sites’ (p. 23). Police brutality in Nigeria is a heritage of hurt and it seems the government has ignored these “sites” that bear symbols of Netizens brutalizations in the organic space. Endsars.com is bringing visibility to the pains of these individuals and it erects a memorial for those killed by the Nigeria police force. The use of smartphones enables Netizens to collectively erect this memorial as a national symbol of their operation. Jo Morrison (2022) notes that; “...mobile technologies play a key mediating role in shaping people’s modes of action and engagement with the city, new construction of space are being conceptualised to reframe the traditional borders between physical and virtual spaces” (p. 41). The virtue provides a “safe” space for netizens, the ills of the city which is watched by exploitative police force. The foregoing affirms Adriana de Souza e Silva (2006) concept of hybrid space. Endsars.com is a living memorial which the Nigerian government attempts to prevent people from getting to this historical site of police brutality. However, the Netizens through their narratives continued its building. De Souza in defining hybrid spaces affirms that; “Hybrid spaces are mobile spaces, created by the constant movement of users who carry portable devices continuously connected to the Internet, and to other users...” (p. 4). Endsars writers on Endsars.com are netizens who are troubled by nuisance of the Nigeria police force and their mobile they tell collective stories as a medium of questioning their abusers. Erika Doss corroborates the foregoing; “Memorials of all kinds is an obsession with issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contests” (p. 2). The (auto) biographical narratives of Endars.com affirm this urgency and the need to press it to public notice.

EndSARS.COM is a narrative (auto) biographical memorial that archives the wounded deaths of innocent Nigerians killed by Nigeria Police Force. Endsars.com affirms Doss's submission that; “...memorials represent heightened anxieties about who and what should be remembered...” (p. 2). Nigerian netizens remember their fellow netizens who are killed constantly and brutalised by the Nigeria Police force. It is the coming together of brutal masses to erect a symbol of abuse. It brings about the visibility of those wounded and killed by the Nigeria police force. John B. Thompson in accounting for the role of the media submits that; “...the visibility of individual actions and events is served from the sharing of a common locale: one no longer has to be present in the same spatial-temporal setting in order to see the other or to witness an action or event. The rise of this new form of mediated visibility has transformed the relations between visibility and power” (p. 31). Through this mediated space, Netizens across Nigeria connect into a common locale of brutality perpetrated by the Nigeria police force.

www.EndSARS.Com is a memorial site that contains the relics of (auto) biographical narratives of police brutality in Nigeria. Like other memorials #Endsars.com contains only victims of police brutality. The same reports are told by victims of police brutality, while some are more by friends and relatives of police brutality who did live to tell their own story. In accounting for “(auto)biography” Onyekachi Peter Onuoha (2019) notes that; “...the highlighted word can be biographical or autobiographical in nature” (p. 1073). The foregoing is implicated in the narratives of Endsars.com. Digital narrative of lived experience combines auto-biographical narratives in an attempt to paint the reality of

the society. The definition of Twitter (auto) biography narrative provides a form work for the definition of #Endsars.com (auto) biography. Onuoha (2021b) defines (auto) biography thus; “Twitter (auto) biography are non-fictional narratives trended by a community in the digital space...” (p. 1074). In an extended frame, Endsars.com is a site for the collective (auto) biographical non-fictional narratives trended by a community of brutalized Netizens in the digital space. Through various thematic frame Endsars.com (auto) biographical writers erect permanent site for their abuse and as witness against the Nigeria Police Force. Victims of police brutality in Nigeria through narrative (auto) biographical corroboration tell stories of exploitation, victimization and even murder perpetrated by the Nigeria police force. In this way, #Endsars.com becomes a site for identity creation, which houses the temperament of anguish, pain, trauma. In accounting for the nature of social media narratives, Onuoha (2020) submits that; “Akachi’s Facebook page becomes an extension of imagined self as identity creation of depression and trauma” (p. 18). The (auto) biographical narratives of Endsars.com become an extension of conceptualising pain in digital communal records. It is the process of preserving memories of trauma. Kathrenre Bluck affirms the preceding thus; “...the function of the self stories is related to the social and cultural milieu within which they are situated...” (Gunn 2015, p. 19).

The Narrative Form Of #Endsars.Com

The #EndSARS narrative trended massively as a result of concerns that citizens had with regard to personal experiences with the Nigerian law enforcement agencies. Endsars from the premise of various acts of remembering. Annie E. Wilson and Michael Poss (2003) affirm that remembering serves interpersonal functions. This interpersonal function is illustrated in the escalation of the security concerns, especially with those who were meant to serve and protect the citizens of the country. The abuse of human rights by Nigeria police force led to nationwide protests, with victims coming out to narrate their experiences in the hands of the supposed law enforcement agents. Ogaga Ayemo Obaro (2014) corroborates the foregoing thus; “Decades of police and official corruption...extrajudicial killing...” (p. 424). These are some of the factors that lead to the protest. The inaccessibility and insecurity that comes with publicly voicing out their experiences, many netizens employed the use of social media as a collective voice under the thematic preoccupation of the #EndPoliceBrutality narrative. Osaheni Oni et al (2021) further emphasize the point that; “...”Endsars” protest due to the breach of human rights by Nigeria police force” (p. 154). This reaction to the abuse of human rights was revealed through (auto) biographical narratives on the digital space. There is a stylish use of elegiac narrative as a means of recording memories as well as praising those who stood against the system and became a source of re-awakening the consciousness of the narrative. While it may not have been in its natural and precise sense, it gave netizens an opportunity to tell their experiences through social media and Endsars.com. Endsars.com became a memorial ground for reminiscing the sad tales of the time as well as using the hashtag as a protest against the narrative of police brutality.

The occasionality of the experiences that the victims experience and their families give room for their families to use Endsars.com, under the thematic preoccupation #Endsars, to tell the sad stories of these victims. Annie E. Wilson and Michael Poss affirming the foregoing as remembering notes that; “Remembering is often a social art” (p.

50). Nigerian Netizens remember their brutalization in the hands of members of the Nigeria police force adopting various narratives styles to pass their message across. For instance, there is the use of the elegiac method. While organic elegiac poetry is sung around the corpse or round the house in which the corpse is lying in state, the digital platform serves to account for the narratives either behind the demise of the deceased or a praiseworthiness of the victim. In order to protect the identity of these individuals in an organo-digital society, where being opinionated can be considered a public felony, the digital space also aids in ensuring the anonymous identities of the families of the deceased. Endsars.com through (auto) biographical narrative tells the stories of the victims. Endsars.com becomes the epithet upon which they get to tell tales. It also serves as a means of voicing out the present concerns that the society faces in terms of insecurity, especially from the set of people meant to protect them.

Endsars.com becomes the digital elegies meant to commemorate with the heroics of the #EndPoliceBrutality names places and identities of the oppressors to serve as a socio-political statement that the concerns of the oppressed are not limited to a particular location. Some of the tributes are not very expressive in narrating how the deceased become heroes but the style of narration on the digital space elicits pity and allows other netizens on the space see the victim (deceased) from a different angle. One netizen narrates;

On 27th August 2014, Bunwa Samuel Gowon lost his life in the hands of a police officer guarding Senate G. NS Pwajok's house in Rayfield, Jos. He shot my brother in the head, a fatal shot. He was later accused to have been an armed robber who engaged the police officer in a gun battle. No weapon was found on him. His body was deposited in a morgue without our knowledge. The police officers asked for 80 thousand naira to release the corpse...Do not lose focus, my fellow youths. We got the power. End Sars (My Only Brother Died) (Personal interview).

The netizen uses this narrative on Endsars.com to call out individuals who may not have directly have had a hand in the death of his brother but uses it as a medium to call out a society that is known as corrupt and inconsiderate of the feelings of the people it is meant to serve and protect. The narrator further includes place of occurrence as a means of challenging the system. The narrative becomes a political voice for the youths against a movement meant to snuff out the lives of the innocent Nigerians who become casualties of the #EndPoliceBrutality movement. In eliciting empathy from other netizens, the narrator subtly paints the killers bad as they deprive the family of the corpse. They further accuse the deceased of being an armed robber, a message that is most likely to spiral a mass protest on the part of the oppressed.

Outside the digital space, it becomes a challenge for people to publicly challenge a system that abuses their rights instead of protecting them. However, on the digital space and specifically on Endsars.com, the netizens have a common voice through which they exclaim to the world the challenges they face. Endsars.com, under the #EndPoliceBrutality becomes the voice the netizens need to be heard and to challenge the system that has failed in its attempt to protect them. A netizen narrates from Calabar of her late sister's ordeal;

Precisely on the 11th of April, 2020, when my sister gave up at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital, Calabar, we have to take her to University of Calabar Anatomy Department to embalm her there because she was a staff of Unical. On our way from the hospital, we meet with Sars. I, my dad and the nurse who was with us to ease the embalment, wore our nose mask. It was only my dead sister who was not with her nose mask. They apprehended us and asked why. We told them she was dead and we are going to the mortuary inside the school. They refused, that we were violating government law and threatened to take us all to cell if we don't pay N50,000. Despite the pleas from my dad and I, they still had the nerves to collect N20,000 from us before letting us go.

The above narrative shows the inhuman nature of the law enforcement agents, even to families that are bereaved. The questioning nature of the members of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and the decision to extort money from the family who are on their way to bury the deceased, shows how unconscious these people are to the needs of the people, even in trying situations. The victims of such unscrupulous acts are left with no choice, irrespective of the time of the event, to employ the platform #EndPoliceBrutality to narrate their experiences as they feel it is relatively safer to do so there.

Uniquely, there is the use of anonymity in the narratives. The said platform #Endsars.com, allows digital netizen victims to narrate their experiences without revealing names, locations or identities. This ensures the safety of the victims and their correspondents in the investigation. However, the authenticity of the narratives is based on (auto) biographical narratives that reveal the circumstances as well as setting of the incidents these victims may have experienced brutality and exploitation from the Nigeria police.

With endsars.com as a form of investigative plaque and testimonial protest, victims came out, assured somewhat of their safety, to tell their sad tales and to agitate against a system that has failed them in almost all ramifications, security being the most dominant of all. The voices spoke out, using the digital platform, to challenge the system over infringements on the fundamental human rights of the average Nigerian- Right to Life and Freedom of Speech. An anonymous narrator on the platform tells her story:

It was December 2018. I and my husband were going to the club to have fun, been the festive period. We stay in Ogba but we were going to club on the island. The day was still young so we thought to chill at Rhapsody to while away time, but on getting to Ikeja Shopping Mall entrance, we were stopped by 3-5 armed men in SARS uniform. We were asked where we were going. We told them. They asked for our car particulars. We showed them. They asked us what we did for a living. We told them and even brought out our ID cards and complimentary cards. They searched our car and found nothing. One of them just said: “you will need to follow us to the station”. I tried as much as possible to be calm but got pissed when I heard the above statement. So I asked what our offense was that warranted that we followed them to the station. They got angry and cocked their guns, saying: “Look at this Ashewo, asking us stupid question. I will hit you with

this gun now.” One of them was so close to me that he wanted to hit me with the gun when my husband calmly asked what they wanted so we could go in peace and have our fun (Mind you, they were very aggressive when asking us questions), but immediately my husband said “what do you want?”, they smiled and started making unnecessary gestures of gentlemen. They requested for 100k from my husband which he declined but they later agreed to collect 40k from him. They followed him to the ATM and collected the money (Personal interview).

Morality is brought into question as to how these “law-enforcement agents” exercise their powers in molesting and harassing the citizens they swore to protect. The derogatory nature of these men in uniform, even towards women, shows the diversity in which this injustice takes a sad turn. They undermine the authority of the man by calling his wife “ashawo” and even go as far as collecting what they want from the man. They display violent tendencies by telling the unarmed citizen that they would hit her with a gun and end up exploiting them of money, offering to take them to the Automated Teller Machine (ATM) to rip these innocent citizens of their hard earned money. Some have come out to argue that the co-operative nature of the narrator’s husband might imply some form of foul play. However, it is more in fear, especially when an armed military man would demean a civilian’s wife that becomes a cause for concern. Also, it becomes vital that in order to fight this scourge that is insecurity, especially from security agents, the #EndPoliceBrutality platform showcases that these unfortunate incidents show how demoralising the protectors of civilians are in watching over harmless and helpless victims, victimizing and exploiting them.

Some victims of police brutality have also had near death encounters by the same people who are meant to serve and protect them. Another narrator tells his story:

I was standing in front of my compound, videoing the policemen of the A Division, Asaba chase away protesters and shooting at them straight and not in the air. One of the policemen suddenly shouted out to me to give him my phone and rushed me. I tried showing him my ID card that I was a Corper but he snatched my iPhone from me and slapped me. That was when my family rushed out to intervene and to my greatest shock, one of the policemen slapped my mum and stripped her naked on the road and used teargas on me and my sister. This just happened less than an hour ago just by Union Bank along Nnebisi road. The DPO was in their midst (Personal Interview).

These acts by the members of the Police Force shows how they do not consider the post traumatic effect their actions have on the individual. They are worried that the clip, which may have been recorded without the intent to tarnish their image, may expose them in an outlook that will destroy what they might have worked hard for. They discard regard for the identity of the Nigerian citizen even when he indicates that he is a corps member and even go as far as stripping his mother on the road. The mention of the DPO in the narrative is to showcase that an authority figure that would have done anything to salvage the situation, stood there and did nothing. In all their efforts to salvage an already dastardly

situation, in trying to prevent the victims from having video evidences, depriving them from saying anything, they employ the “freedom after speech” act. This is reminiscent of the October 20th, 2020 peaceful protest when innocent civilians were put in the line of fire by the military personnel and only a few told what truly happened at the toll gate. These victims are, by way of prosecuting these agencies, given the opportunity to tell the world what happened, when and where it happened without necessarily giving away their identities. The #Endsars.com becomes a record book for these victims to exercise their freedom of speech and still stay protected. It also allows the prosecutors to get all the hard facts with regard to the inhuman treatments these law enforcement agents met out on harmless and innocent victims.

The tales of victims numbered in their hundreds, irrespective of location of incident or time period of the incident. People are pained that these law enforcement agents judge individuals based on how they look and they get to play judge, jury and executioner on these victims. They deprive people of their livelihood as well as loved ones. They maim, extort and even kill these victims because they know the level of fear they have put in the mindset of these victims. Just as another narrates;

I lost my cousin to SARS about two years ago. He was arrested. No trial. No nothing. He simply vanished from our lives. We weren't necessarily close but he was still family. The possibility of our ever having a candid conversation forever erased. If we take time to look carefully, some of us have probably lost someone to police brutality. This system cannot continue (Personal Interview).

The sadness that comes with losing a family member to the justice system without being able to identify why the person died is a traumatizing experience to different families. Not every family who have suffered police brutality or lost a loved one has been able to come out to tell their experiences. This may be due to inaccessibility to the internet, unavailability of platforms like #Endsars.com highlights the traumatizing psychological effects of reliving these terrible incidents again in their subconscious. One narrator tells how he had to sell this things after he was extorted by these men;

I was going to the bank to send my brother his final year school fees when they stopped me around Trem, Gbagada and the rest is history. I had N163,000 on me. They took N160,000 after dislocating my shoulder with the head of their gun and said I was a thief. They left me with 3k for me to use as transport back home. I had to sell my laptop to raise my brother's school fees (Personal Interview).

Ten years ago, it would have been relatively easy to sweep this records under the carpet as Nigerians who have been victims of these devious acts would have cowered in fear, fear of what would happen to them if they came out to speak their mind. Today, technology serves as the voice of justice, in helping to vindicate these victims. Just as it was easy to record the officer who knelt down on the neck of George Floyd for 8 minutes, with the video evidence being the most solid of evidence and the scale of justice, these platforms have improved the justice system by helping to gather enough evidences without disclosing the locations of the victims as well as their names.

CONCLUSION

#Endsarts.com encourages activism in organic space by virtue of digital storytelling. #Endsars.com is a narrative memorial that archives the memories of those wounded and killed by Nigeria police force. It highlights various dimensions of brutality in various parts of Nigeria experienced by Netizens in their organic spaces and how they use #Endsars.com to amplify their voices in seeking for police reform. The study affirms that art participates in memorials and art keeps the memories of those who have been slain by the Nigeria police force. #Endsars.com becomes a digital memorial erected through (auto) biographical narratives as a medium of resistance to police brutality.

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