

Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

**Analysing the Evolution of Online Activism in Nigeria:
Lessons from the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign**

Blessing Dachollom Datiri

Dissertation supervisor: Dr. Nóra Katalin Séllei



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

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The antecedents and objectives of the doctoral dissertation

Over the past two decades, online social movements have emerged as global rhetorical tools for political expression and/or civic engagement. Digital media platforms are leveraged to mobilise support, shape public discourse, and influence policy. These online movements reflect a shift in how activism is organised and sustained in the digital age, transcending geographical boundaries. In Sub-Saharan Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, the proliferation of mobile technology and social media in recent years has enabled citizens to bypass mainstream media that are traditional gatekeepers of information, giving rise to dynamic forms of digital activism that advocate for social justice, challenge state authority, and demand accountability.

In my dissertation, I examine the #BringBackOurGirls (#BBOG) movement that emerged in the aftermath of the 14 April 2014 abductions of 276 schoolgirls from the Government Secondary School of Chibok, Borno, Northeast Nigeria by the insurgent Islamist group Boko Haram. The campaign is one of the most prominent examples of African digital activism. The online campaign which emerged from this national tragedy was propelled by transnational solidarity. Through the use of the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls, the movement in the first 100 days of its formation rapidly garnered global attention and over 2 million tweets were shared in connection to the hashtag. The campaign initiated a novel mode of socio-political engagement in Nigeria, harnessing digital platforms, particularly Twitter (now X) to raise awareness about gender-based violence, demand governmental accountability, and mobilise both local and international communities to advocate for the abducted schoolgirls.

I ground the study in two theoretical frameworks: first, in African feminist theory, specifically in womanism, stiwanism and motherism, which frame the campaign as a collective struggle against gendered violence that emphasises the collective efforts of members of the community to advocate for their women and girls rather than antagonism between the sexes. Second, I apply Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which interrogates the motivations of, and gratifications sought for by different actors such as citizens, celebrities and institutions that adopted Twitter as a medium to participate in the online campaign to inform, mobilise and maintain long-term memory of the abductions. The research posits that while digital platforms provide affordances for mobilisation and visibility, their effectiveness in producing lasting social, structural or policy change is limited unless integrated with sustained offline activism.

Geographically, the #BringBackOurGirls campaign is situated within the Nigerian context. However, I analytically trace the campaign's amplification across transnational digital publics of celebrity activism and participation. The focus on Twitter in this research is both methodological and substantive: first, the hashtag originated on the platform, and second,

Twitter's Academic Research API facilitated access to a comprehensive historical archive of user interaction patterns and data. The temporal scope of the study spans from April 2014 to April 2021, a period that captures the campaign's trajectory from the initial protest to long-term memory activism.

By exploring the dialectical relationship between visibility and structural transformation, protest and memory, and online engagement and offline action, I argue that the events that unfolded in the aftermath of the abductions which I discuss in the thesis contributed to the broader discourse in the field of African digital feminist theory and media theory. The dissertation underscores how online campaigns can translate locally rooted feminist concerns into a global agenda, how they can evolve from episodic outrage to lasting forms of remembrance, but the dissertation also reveals an ambiguity: the potentials and, at the same time, the constraints of hashtag activism in effecting societal change.

An overview of the methods used

The research method employed in this research is based on an interdisciplinary mixed-methods approach. I use both qualitative and quantitative methods that integrate rhetorical analysis with computational analysis to investigate the online evolution of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign on Twitter. The qualitative method focuses on interpretive close readings, while the quantitative method focuses on the statistical analysis of the Twitter data. Together, these approaches offer a multidimensional perspective on the #BringBackOurGirls digital activism on Twitter.

The qualitative method is grounded in rhetorical analysis, drawing on Aristotelian concepts of ethos, pathos, and logos to examine the persuasive strategies embedded in Twitter posts in the form of tweets, protest slogans, chants, infographics, artistic expressions, and campaign imagery. This interpretive framework underscores how online movements that focus on social values and emotional narratives are strategically used to foreground collective identity and mobilise solidarity among supporters of the campaign.

The quantitative method addresses both the retrieval and analysis of the data used for this study. Using Barrie and Ho's `academicwitter` package in R, I mined approximately 3.26 million tweets. The data collection strategy focused on four key queries (hashtags). The hashtags were #BringBackOurGirls, #BringBackOurDaughters, #Nigeria, and #ChibokGirls. Two primary datasets were collected. The first consisted of all tweets posted by three core convener accounts (@obyezeks, @AishaYesufu and @BukkyShonibare), along with the official account of the movement (@BBOG_Nigeria), spanning from 23 April 2014 (the date

of the first recorded tweet using the hashtag) through to 30 April 2021, which marked the campaign's seventh anniversary. The second dataset focused specifically on public discourse surrounding the campaign's anniversaries. This data was collected within a two-week timeframe for each year, capturing tweets from one week prior to the anniversary of the abduction and one week following it. This temporal focus was based on observed patterns from the convener and official accounts, which consistently showed increased interaction and hashtag activity around anniversary periods.

I used Leximancer as an Analytical technique for topic modelling, semantic mapping, sentiment analysis, frequency counts of keywords, and network mapping to visualize patterns of interaction and influence. The computational analysis was implemented via R, Python, and Power BI to aid a detailed exploration of engagement trends across temporal phases of the campaign.

Ethical considerations were also central to the research design. All data collection adhered strictly to Twitter's Developer Policy as the data mined was approved by Twitter's Development Platform for academic research on historical data in 2021. The research also adheres to the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the University of Debrecen's ethical rules on academic research. Tweets from private users were anonymised, except in cases where the commentary of public figures and key convenors of the movement was essential to the analysis. Furthermore, the study exercised caution in handling sensitive content, especially those involving portrayals of grief, violence, or trauma.

The research is structured around four guiding research questions:

1. What are the primary motivations for the use of social media platforms to advocate for social movements?
 - How does the use of Twitter influence the mobilisation of participants in social movements involving women experiences?
 - What role did the microblogging social media platform play in the coordination and organisation of the #BBOG movement?
2. What gratifications do users experience from the use of social media platforms to address issues affecting women in Nigeria?
3. How does celebrity popular culture influence the global visibility of socio-political issues affecting women in the global south?
 - What role does celebrity endorsement on social media platforms play in influencing public perception and/or mobilising support from their following?

4. How do the uses and gratifications of social media usage for social movements evolve over time?
 - What are the long-term impacts of continuous social media interaction and influence on the visibility and discourse of social issues affecting women?

These questions facilitate a thematic dialogue between feminist theoretical constructs such as agency, social justice, collective care and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), particularly in relation to the motives and gratifications derived for information-seeking, social integration, identity formation, and memory work identified in the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. In the study, I acknowledge several methodological limitations such as Twitter's demographic platformization that is designed for younger, urban, and tech-savvy users, which limits the generalization of the findings. Also, sentiment analysis tools, while robust, often struggle to detect sarcasm, irony, or culturally specific idioms prevalent in Nigerian digital discourse. Finally, Twitter API restrictions curtailed access to certain historical data, especially deleted or early-stage tweets from accounts that were either deleted or renamed. Despite these constraints, the methodological pluralism (close reading and computational analysis) employed in the study significantly enhances its analytical scope and depth. By combining close textual interpretation with scalable computational analysis, the research captures the campaign's symbolic, emotional, and temporal layers, offering a holistic understanding of how digital activism unfolds, evolves, and endures in the Nigerian sociopolitical context.

Synopsis of Chapters

The thesis is organised into five main chapters, each contributing to a layered understanding of the #BringBackOurGirls Twitter campaign. Embedding the research in a historical context and applying theoretical framing, empirical analysis, and memory studies the structure reflects the campaign's evolution from urgent mobilisation to sustained online memory activism. The Introduction establishes the historical and socio-political background against which the campaign emerged. The first chapter, "Feminism in Nigeria: The Interplay of African Feminism and Uses and Gratification Theory in Social Media Campaigns", traces the evolution of Nigerian feminism, beginning with its pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era, and evolving into contemporary digital networked campaigns. I position the #BBOG campaign within this continuum as a pivotal moment in feminist digital activism. The movement, shaped by global solidarity and mediated through social media platforms, provides a lens through which I apply a theoretical framework combining African feminist theories with Uses and Gratifications (UGT) media theory. I introduce variants of African feminism such as

Chikwenye Ogunyemi's womanism, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's stiwanism, and Catherine Acholonu's motherism and situate them within the discourse and visual culture of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. UGT is extended to include both online activism and its variant, memory activism as gratifications derived from using social media for civic engagement, highlighting how participation in online campaigns satisfies users' needs for identity, agency, and collective belonging. I argue that platforms like Twitter serve as sites of both empowerment and erasure, amplifying advocacy campaigns for social justice while also being shaped by algorithmic constraints and socio-political silences that can obscure online activism.

Chapter Two, "Methodological Approaches to Studying the Interactive Network Communities of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign on Twitter", details the methodological framework I employ for this research, emphasizing its mixed-methods approach as I mentioned above in the overview of the methods used.

Chapter Three, "Voices and Visuals of Protest: The Multimodal Expressions of the #BBOG Campaign in the First 100 Days", focuses on data retrieved in the first 100 days of the campaign. I do a close reading by analysing multimodal protest strategies such as hashtags, protest songs, chants, and visual imagery used as mobilisation and advocacy tools used in the campaign. The chapter underscores how informational, emotional, and participatory gratifications came together to turn outrage into an ongoing, widespread network of transnational activism. It illustrates how digital tools amplified traditional protest elements of persuasion, enabling the campaign to transcend geographical boundaries.

In Chapter Four, "From Visibility to Virality: The Influence of Celebrity Participation in Amplifying Online Activism", I examine the role of celebrity culture in enhancing the campaign's visibility. Endorsements from global figures like Malala Yousafzai, Emma Watson, and Jaden Smith, as well as Nigerian artists and celebrities reshaped the online narrative, increasing the hashtag's algorithmic reach based on their large following and high engagement metrics on the platform. While celebrity engagement enhanced the visibility of the campaign and lent it legitimacy, it also raised concerns about symbolic commodification and the potential dilution of grassroots messaging and activism. The chapter critiques this dual dynamic, using UGT to explain the appeal of celebrity backed activism and its rhetorical resonance with digital audiences.

The fifth and final analytical chapter, "Beyond a Hashtag: From Protest to Memory Activism", traces the campaign's transformation from initial protest to memory activism. Over the years, as media attention around the campaign faded, conveners of the movement turned to

commemoration and remembrance strategies to preserve the memory of the abducted Chibok girls. Digital memorials such as hashtags #NeverToBeForgotten, #FiveYearsToolong, #HopeEndures, symbolic rituals such as tree-planting and empty desk installations at anniversary gatherings, and visual storytelling through infographics and artistic expressions became tools to contest state-sanctioned forgetting and to sustain the discourse in public consciousness. The chapter also explores how these symbolic practices that are digitally mediated construct a decentralised form of memory activism that resists temporal erasure and anchors the campaign within broader socio-cultural struggles against prolonged insurgency and gender-based violence.

Finally, the Conclusion synthesises the findings of the thesis. I emphasise the importance of hybrid strategies that combine digital visibility with offline pressure to bring about social justice and change. I argue that effective social movements in the Global South must leverage both affective rhetorical narratives and policy-focused engagement. In the chapter I also offer recommendations for future study.

The new academic results of the dissertation

This study yields several original contributions to the intersecting fields of feminist digital activism, media theory, and social media analytics. It also provides empirical insights into the affordances and constraints of digital protest in the Global South, using the #BringBackOurGirls campaign as a case study.

One of the key conceptual contributions is the combination of African feminist theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, a framework that explains both the ideological content and media behaviours underpinning the campaign. This interdisciplinary synthesis in a field where theoretical frameworks often remain siloed between media studies and feminist thought allows for a culturally specific understanding of how digital platforms mediate and remediate empowerment, emotional engagement, and community driven activism in a Nigerian context. By bridging these different disciplinary theories, the study offers a culturally nuanced lens for examining how digital platforms not only enable the dissemination of online discourse but also shape the modalities through which users of the platform engage with each other and sustain activism. The fusion of African feminist theory with UGT thus underscores a multi-dimensional reading of digital activism. It captures not only the objectives of the campaign that was communicated online but also explores why and how audiences engaged with the information they received. It reveals that participation in the online campaign was motivated by the desire to gratify the needs of information-seeking, trend-following, shared cultural

values, emotional resonance, and the gratification derived from contributing to a collective cause. This illustrates how digital platforms are not ideologically neutral spaces but mediating environments that structure the visibility, affective intensity, and social reach of activist content. By applying this hybrid framework to a longitudinal data set (from 2014 to 2021), the study further demonstrates how these gratifications evolved over time, from immediate outrage and solidarity to more reflective acts of memory, remembrance and sustained digital ritual.

Methodologically, the thesis presents a mixed-methods model that combines close rhetorical analysis with large-scale computational techniques. This hybrid approach captures both the symbolic resonance and statistical patterns of high volume (over 3 million tweets), multimodal data, offering a comprehensive view of the campaign's rhetorical narrative and structural dynamics. The methodological design does not only strengthen my research but also sets a precedent for future studies on digital protest in similarly complex contexts.

Empirically, the study draws on longitudinal data spanning seven years of Twitter activity, revealing a clear trajectory in the campaign's evolution right from its inception in 2014. Initially characterised by rapid, emotionally charged mobilisation, the movement gradually shifted into a phase of memory activism, sustained through annual commemorations and ritual hashtags. This temporal arc challenges the assumption that online activism is inherently ephemeral or reactive. Instead, the data reveal how digital platforms like Twitter can be repurposed to facilitate the sustained construction of public memory, even after mainstream media attention has receded. The persistence of engagement, though reduced in volume as the years progressed, remained symbolically strong. This underscores that digital activism can evolve from immediate protest into a mode of remembrance that continues to assert moral and socio-political agency over time. The findings illustrate that such memory work is not passive but performative and strategic. Annual commemorations, online hashtags, and multimedia content are deliberately crafted to reinsert the campaign into the public consciousness. In this context, digital platforms become evolving archives and spaces where social movements that mostly reflect historical injustice are continually mediated, remediating, narrated, visualised, and contested. It also highlights the importance of temporal documentation and archiving in activist movements, whereby short-term mobilisation and long-term memory work are not discrete phases but interconnected strategies that involve the documentation of memory. By documenting this transition, the study contributes to scholarship on the temporality of digital activism, through practices of digital ritual, collective memory, and symbolic continuity. It further suggests that endurance and resilience, rather than volume alone, can also be attested

as a metric for assessing the impact of activist campaigns, particularly those rooted in contexts of social injustice and/or gender-based violence.

Another empirical contribution of this study is identifying a method to measure the extent to which celebrity involvement increased the visibility and reach of the campaign on social media. Through network analysis and retweet cascade modelling, the study demonstrates that tweets originating from celebrity figures, whether international celebrities like Emma Watson, Nigerian celebrities and musicians like Makinwa and Akinkugbe, international human rights advocates, or global public figures such as Malala Yousafzai and Michelle Obama, produced statistically significant amplification effects. These endorsements served as influential nodes within the Twitter network, triggering spikes in engagement mostly around anniversaries, expanding the movement's audience beyond its original geography, and securing attention from mainstream media and policy elites. In the case of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, such celebrity-driven amplification was instrumental in achieving global awareness and framing the crisis as a matter of international human rights concern. However, the findings also reveal limitations associated with celebrity involvement in international celebrity advocacy in the global south. While it can lend legitimacy and widen reach, it also introduces the potential for symbolic displacement, where the campaign's original message rooted in the specific socio-political conditions of Northern Nigeria becomes diluted or co-opted by narratives that align more closely with global humanitarian discourse than with local socio-political demands. Also, the aesthetic and/or affective appeal of celebrity activism may encourage performative engagement like "slacktivism" or "clicktivism," wherein audiences are more likely to share content due to the celebrity figure involved rather than a genuine connection to the underlying cause. This raises critical concerns about the sustainability and depth of such participation, especially when celebrity attention is transient and unaccompanied by continued solidarity or material support.

In conclusion, my research offers a nuanced account of the #BringBackOurGirls campaign as a landmark in African digital activism. It demonstrates the evolving role of social media use for online protest, memory-making, and global solidarity. By tracing the Bring Back Our Girls campaign's temporal trajectory on Twitter, from the rapid mobilisation advocacy trends in the first year to enduring memory activism as the years progressed, the study reveals how digital platforms do not only facilitate immediate protest but also serve as long-term spaces for collective remembrance as they produce digital archives of online resistance and collective commemoration.

Conference Papers

Datiri Blessing “Echoes of Activism: From hashtags to slogans of memory in the #BringBackOurGirls online campaign on Twitter” at the “Memory and Trauma” International Conference, organised by the London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and held at Birkbeck, University of London on 7-8 December 2024 and online.

Datiri Blessing “Hashtag Activism: Social Media and Rape Culture in Nigeria” at the “Fifty Shades of Language” International Conference on Language, Media and Creativity, organised by the London Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on 27-28 November 2021.

Datiri Blessing “Gender Hashtag Activism on Twitter: Connotations of the #BringabackOurGirls campaign” BAS Conference, University of Timisoara, Romania, 16-18 May 2019.

Datiri Blessing “A Semiotic Analysis of the Prominent Pictures of the #BringBackOurGirls Gender Activism Campaign” at the 6th International Conference Organised by the Department of English Language and Literature Faculty of Letters, University of Oradea, Romania, 22-23 March 2019.

Datiri Blessing “Social Media Activism in Nigeria: Lessons from the #BringBackOurGirls” at the 4th Biannual Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English (HUSSE 4), Veszprém, Hungary on 31 January-2 February 2019.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Foreign language international book chapters (1)

1. **Datiri, B.:** A Semiotic Analysis of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign on Social Media.
In: Cultural Texts and Contexts in the English Speaking World. Ed.: Mateoc Teodor, Editura
Universităţii din Oradea, Oradea, 156-170, 2019. ISBN: 9786061020720

Foreign language scientific articles in Hungarian journals (1)

2. **Datiri, B.:** An Insight into the Dynamics of Digital Media Research: Review on Lewis Levenberg,
Tai Neilson and David Rheams, Research Methods for the Digital Humanities (Switzerland:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
Pro&Contra. 3 (1), 73-78, 2019. EISSN: 2630-8916.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.33033/pc.2019.1.73>

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (2)

3. **Datiri, B.:** From Activism to Collective Remembrance: The Transforming Rhetoric of Campaign
Slogans in the #BringBackOurGirls Online Movement on Twitter.
Int. J. Sci., Techno. Society. 12 (6), 196-208, 2024. ISSN: 2330-7412.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11648/j.ijsts.20241206.14>
4. **Datiri, B.:** Online Activism Against Gender-Based Violence: How African Feminism is Using Twitter
for Progress.
Debats. 5, 271-286, 2020. ISSN: 0212-0585.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.28939/iam.debats-en.2020-16>

Foreign language abstracts (1)

5. **Datiri, B.:** Social Media Gender Activism in Nigeria: Lessons from #BringBackOurGirls.
Topos. 2019, 44, 2019. ISSN: 2063-8086.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the
basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

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