Semiotics Analysis of #Endsars Protests

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Abstract: *The #EndSARS movement of October 2020 constituted a watershed moment in Nigeria's socio-political landscape, propelled by mass mobilization and a sophisticated semiotic architecture of protest discourse. This study interrogates the linguistic and visual signification systems deployed during the movement through the theoretical frameworks of Saussurean and Peircean semiotics, augmented by Barthesian myth theory. The analysis examines how slogans, symbols, imagery, and digital modalities articulated resistance, constructed collective identity, and contested hegemonic state narratives. Findings reveal that protest discourse functioned simultaneously at symbolic, indexical, and mythic registers, transmuting vernacular expressions such as "Soro Soke," "End SARS Now," and "We Are Tired" into instruments of ideological insurgency. Visual signifiers including the clenched fist and the blood-stained national flag reinforced solidarity by reconfiguring national iconography through frameworks of collective trauma and aspirational futurity. These semiotic productions achieved extensive circulation via social media platforms, facilitating transnational visibility and amplifying justice claims. The study concludes that semiotic praxis proved fundamental to the movement's efficacy, enabling Nigerian youth constituencies to reconceptualise citizenship, resist institutional violence, and articulate counter-hegemonic narratives of national identity through strategic meaning-making practices.*

Keywords: #EndSARS movement; protest semiotics; resistance discourse; collective identity; youth activism

INTRODUCTION

Language and symbols have historically functioned as pivotal instruments for social transformation. From the civil rights movement to the Arab Spring, linguistic and symbolic systems have operated not merely as communicative tools but as performative acts that construct meaning, identity, and power structures (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997). The Nigerian #EndSARS movement, which garnered international attention in October 2020, originated as a protest against the brutality perpetrated by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit notorious for extrajudicial killings, torture, and extortion (Amnesty International, 2020). The movement subsequently evolved into an expansive communication network wherein slogans, chants, placards, hashtags, and graffiti functioned as signifiers of collective identity and moral legitimacy (Oyewole, 2021).

Within the #EndSARS movement, language constituted both a medium of expression and a generative force that produced sociopolitical meaning. Protesters employed phrases such as "Soro Soke," a Yoruba expression meaning "speak up," as both a rallying cry and a demand for visibility (Adekoya, 2021). This phrase transcended mere encouragement, embodying the movement's resistance to silence, repression, and erasure amid systemic violence. Barthes (1972) argues that language in political and cultural contestations often operates as myth, wherein quotidian signs acquire ideological resonance. "Soro Soke" thus emerged as a potent symbol of defiance, articulating youth voices demanding recognition within a system characterized by corruption and institutional neglect.

The hashtag #EndPoliceBrutality exemplifies the evolution of symbolic protest in the digital era. Applying Peirce's (1931-1958) triadic model of the sign—comprising the representamen (form), object (referent), and interpretant (meaning generated in the interpreter's consciousness)—the hashtag functions as a powerful semiotic instrument. It transcends mere description, indexing multiple significations related to state oppression, human rights violations, and transnational solidarity (Tufekci, 2017). Each retweet, repost, or comment contributed additional semantic layers, continuously reconfiguring its significance within a dynamic digital ecosystem. The iterative deployment of the hashtag constituted a performative act of bearing witness and enacting protest (Taylor, 2003).

Furthermore, the linguistic and symbolic practices within the #EndSARS movement illuminate their entanglement with power relations. The chants, songs, and placards not only articulated opposition to police brutality but also constructed emergent identities (Foucault, 1980). Protesters reconstituted themselves as rights-bearing citizens possessing agency and moral authority within a nation that systematically denied these attributes. The symbolic appropriation of spaces such as

Lekki Toll Gate, demarcated by inscriptions declaring "We are not criminals," "We Are Tired," and "Stop killing us," transformed physical locations into contested terrains of resistance.

Visual symbols reinforced linguistic expressions. The clenched fist motif, prominent on banners and digital platforms, evoked historical iconography from Black liberation movements, situating Nigeria's struggle within a global genealogy of resistance (Kelley, 2002). The #EndSARS movement thus synthesized indigenous expressions with universal protest symbols, demonstrating how semiotic practices traverse cultural and temporal boundaries, enabling activists to position their struggle within broader conversations concerning justice and human rights.

Historical Context of SARS and Police Brutality in Nigeria

The history of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) and police brutality in Nigeria is embedded within the broader structural dynamics of the Nigerian Police Force (NPF). Established under Section 214 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the NPF serves as the nation's primary law enforcement agency, mandated to maintain internal security and protect lives and property (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). Its operational framework derives from the Police Act, originally enacted in 1943 and subsequently codified in 1990, which delineates the organization, duties, and powers of the force (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2000; Abiodun et al., 2021). Beyond its headquarters and state commands, the NPF comprises specialized units including the Mobile Police Force (MOPOL), the Swift Operations Squad (SOS), and SARS, categorized as paramilitary-style formations.

SARS was initially established in the 1990s to address escalating armed robbery and violent crime, with a mandate emphasizing rapid response and tactical efficiency (Nolte, 2004; Lawal, 2021). However, the unit progressively became synonymous with corruption, extortion, torture, sexual violence, unlawful detention, and extrajudicial killings (Amnesty International, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2010). Investigative reports and human rights documentation characterize SARS as operating with impunity and perpetrating systemic abuses (Alfred & Oyebola, 2020). These violations eroded public confidence in policing institutions, reinforcing perceptions that the NPF had transformed from protector to predator (Olarinmoye, 2021).

According to Emoedumhe et al. (2021), the entrenchment of police brutality, particularly SARS-perpetrated violence, constituted the primary grievance catalysing the #EndSARS movement. The protests transcended opposition to a singular police unit, representing a comprehensive indictment of institutionalized brutality, corruption, and failed law enforcement reform (Ogunlesi, 2020). Demonstrators demanded not merely SARS's dissolution but systemic restructuring of Nigerian policing practices. The immediate catalyst for the 2020 #EndSARS uprising occurred on October 3, 2020, when viral video footage depicted an officer, allegedly from SARS, shooting an unarmed young man in Ughelli, Delta State, before absconding with the victim's vehicle (Onuoha & Ojo,

2021). The video's widespread circulation across Twitter and Facebook ignited national outrage, propelling the #EndSARS hashtag across digital platforms and mobilizing millions domestically and internationally (Alfred & Oyebola, 2020; Uwazuruonye, 2021). This singular incident rapidly metamorphosed into a decentralized, large-scale protest movement demanding accountability, justice, and structural police reform (Oyewole, 2021).

Semiotic Applications and Method

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols in communication, provides a framework for understanding how protesters employed linguistic and visual resources to articulate collective grievances and aspirations (Chandler, 2017). This approach facilitates deeper comprehension of how communication within protest movements transcends mere representation to function as instruments of political and cultural transformation (Barthes, 1977). This analysis examines how the verbal and visual signs of the #EndSARS movement generate meaning, construct shared identity, and sustain ideological unity within Nigeria's broader sociopolitical context (Oyewole, 2021).

This semiotic analysis reflects the interpretive nature of meaning-making in protest culture. The #EndSARS movement was not confined to physical spaces such as streets and squares; it flourished equally in digital environments like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, where participants created, disseminated, and reinterpreted signs (Tufekci, 2017). By analysing slogans such as "*Soro Soke,*" hashtags including #EndSARS and #EndPoliceBrutality, chants, and placards, alongside visual media comprising photographs, graffiti, digital art, and memes, this study seeks to reveal the multiple semiotic layers embedded within the movement's communication practices. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue, meaning derives not solely from language but from the interaction of text, images, colour, and spatial design within social contexts. This multimodal perspective proves essential for understanding #EndSARS as a multimodal discourse wherein digital and physical protest modalities converge to produce meaning (Jewitt, 2009).

From a semiotic standpoint, each linguistic and visual element constitutes a sign system bearing denotative and connotative dimensions (Barthes, 1972). For instance, the phrase "*Soro Soke*" denotes "speak up" literally, whilst connotatively representing youth empowerment, civic courage, and defiance against systemic oppression (Adekoya, 2021). Similarly, the raised fist motif, visible on murals and circulated across social media platforms, indexes resistance whilst simultaneously signifying solidarity, historical continuity, and the affirmation of Black identity within global movements against racial and institutional violence (Kelley, 2002). Semiotic analysis enables the examination of how protest symbols function as cultural texts bearing ideological significance and emotional resonance (Hall, 1997).

This study further investigates how the interrelation between verbal and visual semiotics constructs a unified ideological position. Images of candlelight vigils, torn flags, and Nigerian national colours reinterpreted through protest art illustrate how the movement mobilised emotions through symbolic transformation (Rose, 2016). These images generated what Hall (1997) characterises as shared frameworks of meaning, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds to identify with a collective struggle. By exploring how these frameworks emerged and circulated, the study foregrounds the dynamic process of collective meaning-making and ideological consolidation (Castells, 2015). Additionally, digital platforms functioned as discursive spaces wherein participants, influencers, and observers co-created meaning in real time (Jenkins, 2006). The #EndSARS movement exemplifies what Jenkins (2006) terms participatory culture, wherein audiences transition from passive consumers to active producers of cultural narratives. Through hashtag activism, user-generated content, and viral dissemination, protesters democratised symbolic production and expanded the movement's semiotic reach beyond geographical constraints (Gerbaudo, 2012).

This analysis examines how meaning emerges through the synthesis of words, images, and performative actions, and how these symbolic practices not only reflect but actively constitute collective consciousness of resistance (Taylor, 2003). This integrated framework emphasises the transformational capacity of protest discourse: its ability to reconfigure social relations, reimagine national identity, and contest hegemonic narratives through strategic deployment of linguistic and visual resources (Foucault, 1980). The data comprises a purposive sample of protest materials collected during the #EndSARS movement in October 2020. These include photographs of placards, banners, graffiti, and screenshots of social media posts from Twitter and Instagram featuring hashtags such as #EndSARS, #SoroSoke, and #EndPoliceBrutality. A total of three protest slogans and two visual artefacts were selected based on frequency of usage, symbolic impact, and thematic relevance. All materials were obtained from publicly accessible online archives and journalistic photographic documentation.

The concept of Semiotics

Semiotics, the study of signs and meaning-making processes, offers robust analytical tools for interpreting how communication operates within cultural, political, and social domains (Chandler, 2017). Ferdinand de Saussure, in his posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics*, proposed that a sign comprises two inseparable elements: the signifier (the form, whether sound, image, or mark) and the signified (the mental concept or meaning) (Saussure, 1916/1983). His fundamental insight posited that the relationship between signifier and signified is fundamentally arbitrary; no inherent or natural connection exists between them, only conventions sustained by linguistic communities (Culler, 1986). Furthermore, Saussure emphasised that signs acquire value through their differences from other signs within the system: a term's meaning emerges as much

from what it is not as from what it is (Saussure, 1916/1983). This principle of differential value underscores the structural nature of linguistic meaning.

Charles Sanders Peirce developed an alternative semiotic framework centred on a triadic model. In Peirce's formulation, a sign (or representamen) stands in relation to an object (the referent) and generates an interpretant (the understanding or effect the sign produces in an interpreter) (Peirce, 1931-1958). Peirce argued that this triadic relation is irreducible; collapsing it into merely two terms would eliminate essential dynamics of meaning-making (Atkin, 2013). The interpretant may itself become another sign, initiating an ongoing chain of interpretation; a process termed infinite semiosis or unlimited semiosis, characterised by perpetual meaning generation (Eco, 1976). Peirce further categorised signs into icons (which resemble their objects), indices (which point to their objects via factual or causal connections), and symbols (which refer by convention) (Peirce, 1931-1958). Together, Saussure's and Peirce's theories provide complementary perspectives: Saussure illuminates how meaning is structured within systems of differences and conventions, whilst Peirce emphasises how signs function dynamically, interpretively, and generatively (Nöth, 1990). These frameworks enable analysis of how signs and symbols within protest movements convey multiple layers of meaning.

In the context of Nigeria's #EndSARS movement, semiotic analysis deepens understanding of how linguistic expressions and visual symbols operate as sites of resistance, identity construction, and mobilisation (Oyewole, 2021). Consider slogans such as "We Move" and "Soro Soke" (Speak Up). From a Saussurean perspective, these phrases function as signifiers, whilst their conceptual associations—mobility, resistance, collective assertion—constitute the signifieds that communities attach to them (Adekoya, 2021). These meanings are not inherent but derive from particular conventions and contrasts within the community. The intelligibility of "We Move" emerges because it stands in opposition to alternative phrases such as "We Stay" or "We Wait," deriving vitality from its differential value within protest discourse (Barthes, 1972).

From a Peircean perspective, the utterance "We Move" functions as a representamen, indicating an object (the lived experiences of marginalisation and the imperative for movement beyond silence) whilst eliciting an interpretant (feelings of solidarity, defiance, or empowerment in listeners) (Peirce, 1931-1958). That interpretant may subsequently become a new sign in further communicative cycles—for instance, when the phrase appears on posters, circulates as a hashtag, or is chanted in subsequent protests (Jenkins, 2006). Consequently, meaning remains dynamic: the sign "We Move" proliferates and evolves in relation to new contexts, audiences, and interpretive frameworks (Eco, 1976).

Visual and symbolic signs deployed during #EndSARS—including the clenched fist, blood-stained flags, and images of raised hands—operate along similar semiotic registers (Kelley, 2002). The clenched fist functions iconically through visual resemblance to a resisting hand, whilst

simultaneously carrying symbolic force, having become culturally encoded as signifying collective strength and protest (Hall, 1997). Imagery of blood or stains serves as an index of violence, pointing to actual harm and suffering, whilst simultaneously functioning symbolically to represent sacrifice, injustice, and the cost of resistance (Rose, 2016). These signs bear both denotative weight (what they visually depict) and connotative weight (the associations, emotions, and historical meanings they evoke) (Barthes, 1977). Moreover, within the Nigerian context, such visual signs accumulate localised resonances—memories of past state violence, shared grief, and erosion of social trust (Olarinmoye, 2021).

Semiotic analysis further highlights how these signs participate in identity construction and counter-discursive struggle. Protest slogans and symbols become markers of collective subjectivity—youth, marginalised voices, anti-oppression constituencies—distinguishing the movement from dominant state narratives emphasising law enforcement, order, or civic apathy (Foucault, 1980). As Uchendu (2022) observes, the movement's signs constitute not mere ornamentation but integral components of dissent's deep structure. The acronym "SARS" (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) itself transcends denotative meaning, becoming laden with connotations of brutality, impunity, and systemic abuse, ultimately transforming into a broader symbol of resistance (Uchendu, 2022).

Peirce's model, which conceptualises signs as generating further interpretants, captures how protest signs adapt, disseminate, and mutate over time (Peirce, 1931-1958). A slogan chanted on streets may evolve into a hashtag such as #EndSARS, subsequently appearing in infographics, protest art, murals, or memes (Tufekci, 2017). Each iteration invites new interpretants—global solidarity, digital activism, archival memory—thereby layering additional meaning onto the original sign (Castells, 2015). Over time, these signs constitute a symbolic archive or collective memory, anchoring past events, evoking trauma, and projecting futures of reform and accountability (Taylor, 2003). The #EndSARS protest exemplifies how social movements function as systems of signification, transforming language and imagery into powerful instruments for political transformation (Oyewole, 2021).

Barthes' *Mythologies* and the Ideology of Protest Signs

Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972) constitutes a foundational text in the study of signs, culture, and ideology. Extending Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, which conceptualised the sign as comprising signifier (form) and signified (concept), Barthes examined how cultural objects and texts communicate broader ideological meanings (Barthes, 1972). For Barthes, language and representation function not as neutral communicative tools but as instruments that shape perception, naturalise ideology, and reproduce social hierarchies (Culler, 1983). His concept of myth as a second-order semiological system proves particularly vital for understanding how

quotidian cultural signs—advertisements, fashion, political slogans—convey concealed ideological messages that appear natural, timeless, and universal (Allen, 2003).

Barthes (1972) argues that myth transforms history into nature, presenting historically and socially constructed meanings as eternal truths. This naturalisation process constitutes ideology's central operation (Hall, 1997). When myth functions effectively, it obscures its constructedness, rendering the cultural innate and the political apolitical (Chandler, 2017). Within protest culture, this framework reveals how certain images or phrases transcend immediate referential meaning to embody larger struggles (Fiske, 1989). A placard, chant, or digital image ceases functioning merely as a communicative tool, becoming a cultural artefact condensing collective identity, emotion, and ideology (Rose, 2016).

The Nigerian #EndSARS movement powerfully illustrates Barthes' semiotic insights. The phrase "Soro Soke" (Speak Up in Yoruba) initially functioned as a direct call for citizens to voice frustrations against Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) brutality (Adekoya, 2021). However, as protests escalated, "Soro Soke" transcended its denotative meaning to become a mythic signifier of generational consciousness and resistance (Oyewole, 2021). It encapsulated a broader awakening—a refusal to remain silent amid systemic corruption, injustice, and state repression—embodying collective identity rooted in courage, agency, and youth empowerment (Olarinmoye, 2021).

Barthes' framework illuminates how "Soro Soke" operates simultaneously across multiple semiotic registers: denotatively as a literal command to speak; connotatively as metaphor for civic courage, youth defiance, and political voice; and mythically as symbol of emergent generational consciousness and redefined national identity (Barthes, 1972; Hall, 1997). The mythic dimension resides precisely in its capacity to naturalise resistance as moral and historical inevitability—a defining characteristic of an awakened generation (Uchendu, 2022). It transcends protest language, entering cultural identity's realm wherein speaking up becomes not merely an act but a moral imperative and belonging marker (Adekoya, 2021).

Similarly, the slogan "We Are Tired" emerged as an emotionally charged expression encapsulating the profound psychological and social exhaustion experienced by Nigerian youth (Ogunleye, 2020). Denotatively communicating fatigue and accumulated frustration, connotatively the phrase extends beyond individual weariness to reflect generational disillusionment, systemic neglect, and the emotional burden of persistent governance failures (Uchendu, 2022). It articulates a lived reality wherein decades of corruption, insecurity, unemployment, and inadequate public services have compounded young Nigerians' everyday challenges (Olarinmoye, 2021), transforming exhaustion into a collective political statement that mythically represents a generation's breaking point with failed governance structures (Oyewole, 2021).

Semiotically, "We Are Tired" functions as a signifier of collective trauma and mobilised emotion, transforming individual exhaustion into a symbol of shared civic experience that links private sentiment to public protest (Ademoye, 2021). Such emotional expressions in social movements serve to reclaim political consciousness, giving form to grievances that might otherwise remain unarticulated (Jasper, 1997). The phrase's repetition across placards, chants, murals, and digital media amplified its symbolic weight, creating a networked chorus of frustration that signalled the depth and breadth of youth disenchantment (Tufekci, 2017).

At the mythic level, the slogan constructs Nigeria as a space of enduring suffering where promises remain perpetually unfulfilled and systemic neglect becomes normalised (Barthes, 1972). However, the protest re-signified this tiredness as a catalyst for action rather than passivity. Fatigue becomes a source of moral and political authority: the more youth express weariness, the more urgent and legitimate their demand for structural change appears (Obieshi, 2021). The slogan thus bridges personal emotion and collective identity, transforming vulnerability into agency and solidarity (Oyewole, 2021).

The phrase operated within digital semiotic networks, paired with images, videos, and testimonies of police brutality. Tweets accompanying #WeAreTired often displayed placards, street protest imagery, or videos documenting abuse, visually reinforcing the slogan's emotional and symbolic weight (Castells, 2015). This multimedia circulation enabled the slogan to transcend geographic boundaries, inviting solidarity from the Nigerian diaspora and global audiences, thereby amplifying its ideological impact (Tufekci, 2017).

Barthes' framework also illuminates one of the movement's most haunting images: the Nigerian flag stained with blood following the October 20, 2020 Lekki Toll Gate massacre. This image circulated widely, acquiring powerful symbolic significance (Olarinmoye, 2021). Denotatively, it depicted violence and national tragedy; connotatively, it expressed grief, outrage, and betrayal. At the mythic level, however, the blood-soaked flag became a potent symbol of sacrifice and moral purification—a reimagining of the nation's moral core through youth suffering (Barthes, 1972). In Barthes' terms, the flag was loaded with second-order meaning that converted a political event into a timeless narrative of martyrdom and rebirth. This mythic transformation illustrates how protest movements produce new national symbols that challenge and redefine official state narratives (Hall, 1997).

Barthes' semiotic theory bridges cultural studies and literary analysis by demonstrating how protest discourse functions through metaphor, allegory, and symbolism (Culler, 1983). Protest slogans, chants, and visual motifs operate as rhetorical figures carrying condensed ideological messages. The mythic operation Barthes describes parallels what literary critics identify as symbolic meaning creation in poetry and fiction—uniting the concrete with the abstract, the visible with the invisible (Fiske, 1989).

Furthermore, *Mythologies* offers insight into how protest communication interacts with media and representation. Whilst Barthes observed that myths perpetuate through mass media as vehicles for dominant ideologies (Barthes, 1972), in the digital era this process can work in reverse: media platforms become tools for subverting hegemonic myths (Jenkins, 2006). In #EndSARS, activists used social media to deconstruct official state narratives, challenging governmental benevolence myths and replacing them with counter-myths of collective resistance and truth-telling (Oyewole, 2021). Through viral imagery, hashtags, and protest art, they redefined citizenship, transforming myth-making into democratic participation (Castells, 2015).

Peirce's Semiotics and Multimodality

Barthes' semiotic theory establishes a crucial bridge between cultural studies and literary analysis by demonstrating how protest discourse operates through metaphor, allegory, and symbolism (Culler, 1983). Protest slogans, chants, and visual motifs function as rhetorical figures that carry condensed ideological messages, compressing complex political critiques into accessible, emotionally resonant forms (Fiske, 1989). The mythic operation Barthes describes parallels what literary critics identify as symbolic meaning creation in poetry and fiction—a process that unites the concrete with the abstract, the visible with the invisible, and the particular with the universal (Barthes, 1972). Just as a literary symbol in canonical texts operates on multiple interpretive levels simultaneously, protest signs function as layered texts that invite readings beyond their surface meanings (Eco, 1976).

This parallel between literary and protest semiotics reveals how social movements engage in cultural production that rivals traditional artistic practices in sophistication and impact (Hall, 1997). When protesters deploy phrases like "Soro Soke" or "We Are Tired," they are not merely communicating demands but engaging in symbolic world-making—constructing alternative narratives of national identity, citizenship, and moral authority (Oyewole, 2021). These linguistic performances transform protest spaces into sites of cultural creativity where meaning is actively negotiated, contested, and collectively produced (Taylor, 2003). The protesters become authors of their own political narratives, challenging the state's monopoly on defining legitimate discourse and reimagining the boundaries of civic participation (Castells, 2015).

Furthermore, *Mythologies* offers profound insight into how protest communication interacts with media and representation in contemporary contexts (Barthes, 1972). Barthes observed that myths perpetuate through mass media, which function as vehicles for circulating and naturalising dominant ideologies (Hall, 1997). Traditional media institutions such as newspapers, television, radio, have historically served as gatekeepers that determine which narratives achieve visibility and which remain marginalised (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). These institutions often reproduce state-sanctioned myths that legitimise existing power structures whilst delegitimising dissent

(Foucault, 1980). However, in the digital era, this process can work in reverse: media platforms become tools for subverting hegemonic myths and constructing counter-hegemonic narratives (Jenkins, 2006).

The #EndSARS movement exemplifies this reversal of mythic production. Activists strategically employed social media platforms—Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok—to deconstruct official state narratives that portrayed the Nigerian government as benevolent, the police as protectors, and protesters as disruptive elements threatening national stability (Oyewole, 2021). Through systematic documentation of police brutality, circulation of eyewitness testimonies, and amplification of marginalised voices, activists challenged governmental benevolence myths and replaced them with counter-myths of collective resistance, youth agency, and truth-telling (Olarinmoye, 2021). This process of digital myth-making enabled protesters to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and speak directly to domestic and international audiences (Tufekci, 2017).

Through viral imagery, hashtags, and protest art, #EndSARS participants redefined citizenship itself, transforming it from a passive legal status into an active practice of political engagement and moral witnessing (Castells, 2015). The movement's visual and linguistic productions like blood-stained flags, clenched fists, candlelight vigils, and protest chants, circulated as cultural texts that articulated new imaginaries of national belonging (Rose, 2016). These symbolic productions operated simultaneously as critiques of existing power relations and as blueprints for alternative social arrangements (Hall, 1997). In this way, myth-making transformed into a form of democratic participation, wherein ordinary citizens claimed authority to define collective identity, historical memory, and national aspirations (Jenkins, 2006).

The digital circulation of protest symbols also enabled what Castells (2015) terms "mass self-communication," wherein individuals simultaneously produce content, select recipients, and define messages independently of traditional media institutions. This decentralisation of symbolic production democratised the capacity to shape public discourse, allowing marginalised voices to achieve unprecedented visibility (Tufekci, 2017). The #EndSARS movement thus exemplifies how digital technologies enable protesters to engage in what might be termed "insurgent myth-making"—the strategic production and circulation of counter-narratives that challenge state legitimacy and reimagine political possibility (Oyewole, 2021).

Barthes' insistence that no sign is ever innocent invites critical interrogation of how language and imagery encode power relations (Barthes, 1972). In this light, "Soro Soke," the bloodied flag, and other protest symbols function not as spontaneous emotional expressions but as textual sites of ideological contestation (Culler, 1983). They operate like recurring motifs in literature that condense historical memory and ethical struggle into symbolic form, creating what might be understood as a collective protest literature that documents and theorises resistance (Fiske, 1989).

Repetition and Ideological Solidarity

Repetition constituted a defining rhetorical strategy of the #EndSARS discourse. On placards, graffiti walls, and social media posts, the hashtags #EndSARS, #SoroSoke, and #EndPoliceBrutality appeared in countless iterations, functioning as linguistic and visual anchors of collective resistance (Oyewole, 2021). Linguistically, repetition performs several semiotic functions: it creates rhythm, emphasises urgency, and builds cohesion across multimodal platforms (Tannen, 1989). Each recurrence not only reinforces message clarity but also generates affective intensity, transforming linguistic units into rallying cries that mobilise participants (Ahmed, 2004). From a Peircean perspective, repetition converts the sign from a transient communicative act into a habitual symbol—one that accrues associative meaning through continuous usage (Peirce, 1931-1958). Over time, #EndSARS ceased to function as a mere demand to end police brutality; it evolved into a broader critique of governance, corruption, and generational injustice (Olarinmoye, 2021).

Barthes' notion of myth illuminates this transformative process, as repetition enables the conversion of an ordinary phrase into a mythic sign that condenses complex political desires into a simple, emotionally charged emblem of liberation (Barthes, 1972). The iterative deployment of protest language produces what Hall (1997) describes as ideological condensation, wherein multifaceted political critiques become compressed into accessible symbolic forms that circulate efficiently across diverse audiences. Through repeated invocation, these signs acquire what Silverstein (2003) terms "indexical bleaching"—losing specificity whilst gaining broader symbolic resonance. #EndSARS thus transcended its initial referent (the Special Anti-Robbery Squad) to signify comprehensive systemic transformation, encompassing demands for police reform, governmental accountability, economic justice, and youth empowerment (Uchendu, 2022).

Moreover, repetition across digital platforms cultivated what Castells (2015) characterises as networked solidarity—an ideological community sustained not by physical proximity but by shared semiotic participation and affective exchange. Digital platforms enabled the rapid circulation and recirculation of protest signs, creating feedback loops that amplified their symbolic power (Tufekci, 2017). Each retweet, repost, or reproduction of #EndSARS hashtags functioned simultaneously as political endorsement, emotional expression, and identity performance (Papacharissi, 2015). This participatory repetition transformed individual speech acts into collective enunciation, wherein thousands of voices speaking the same words created what Bakhtin (1981) might term a "unified heteroglossia"—simultaneous diversity and coherence.

Through such linguistic recurrence, protesters collectively imagined themselves as part of a coherent moral community, united by language that both expressed and enacted resistance (Anderson, 1983). The performative dimension of repetition proves crucial here: each utterance of

"Soro Soke" or display of #EndSARS did not merely describe resistance but constituted it, transforming language from representation into action (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997). This performative repetition established what Turner (1969) identifies as communitas—a sense of immediate community transcending ordinary social structures. Protesters became bound not through institutional affiliations but through shared symbolic practices that generated feelings of solidarity, belonging, and collective purpose (Jasper, 1997).

The rhythmic quality of repeated chants and hashtags also produced embodied solidarity. As protesters physically chanted "Soro Soke" in unison or digitally reproduced #EndSARS, they synchronised their voices and actions, creating what Durkheim (1912/1995) termed "collective effervescence"—heightened emotional states generated through shared ritual participation. This synchronisation reinforced group cohesion whilst intensifying individual commitment to collective goals (Collins, 2004). Repetition thus functioned simultaneously as cognitive reinforcement, emotional amplification, and social bonding, transforming dispersed individuals into a unified movement capable of challenging state power (Castells, 2015).

Visual Semiotics: The Flag, Color, and the Image of Blood

Among the most powerful semiotic artefacts of the movement was the blood-stained Nigerian flag, circulated widely following the Lekki Toll Gate shootings on 20 October 2020. As a visual text, the flag encapsulates the tragedy and resilience of the protest (Olarinmoye, 2021).

In Peircean terms, the blood-stained Nigerian flag operates simultaneously as icon, index, and symbol (Peirce, 1931-1958). It functions iconically because the red stains visually resemble blood; indexically because the image derives from scenes of violence, directly linking the sign to its referent event; and symbolically because the national flag conventionally represents the nation and its collective identity (Chandler, 2017). When the flag's white portion turns red, a semiotic inversion occurs: purity transforms into sacrifice, and patriotism becomes protest (Rose, 2016). This transformation exemplifies Barthes' (1972) theory of mythic signification, wherein the flag transcends its denotative meaning to become a myth of national martyrdom, encoding citizens' suffering into shared cultural narrative.

Circulating widely on social media, this image recontextualised the national emblem as a site of moral indictment, converting visual trauma into communal discourse of resistance (Tufekci, 2017). The state's narrative of order and authority is thus contested by protesters' counter-narrative of suffering and truth (Hall, 1997). The blood-stained flag functions as visual discourse redistributing symbolic power from state to people, transforming a national symbol into an emblem of collective moral resistance (Oyewole, 2021). This visual sign demonstrates how protest movements engage in what Mitchell (1994) terms "iconoclash"—the strategic reconfiguration of established symbols

to challenge dominant ideologies. The flag's transformation from patriotic emblem to protest icon illustrates the contested nature of national symbols, wherein meaning remains perpetually negotiable and subject to reappropriation by those contesting state power (Foucault, 1980).

Multimodal Resistance: Hashtags, Memes, and Digital Discourse

Digital platforms played a crucial role in amplifying protest semiotics during the #EndSARS movement. Hashtags such as #EndSARS and #SoroSoke functioned as linguistic hyperlinks, connecting dispersed digital texts and transforming individual utterances into a collective discursive field (Tufekci, 2017). This phenomenon aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) concept of multimodal cohesion, which posits that meaning emerges through the interaction of verbal, visual, and spatial semiotic resources within communicative contexts. Semiotically, the hashtag operates dually: as an index, tracing participation and signalling engagement, and as a symbol, signifying communal belonging and ideological alignment (Peirce, 1931-1958). Each post tagged with #EndSARS thus became a micro-text contributing to a broader macro-discourse of resistance (Papacharissi, 2015). The global circulation of these hashtags—adopted by international celebrities, activists, and solidarity movements—transformed the Nigerian youth protest into a transnational semiotic event (Castells, 2015).

Barthes' (1972) myth theory illuminates this process: the hashtag #SoroSoke evolved from a Yoruba imperative meaning "Speak Up" into a myth of voice, signifying not merely the literal act of speaking but the ideological awakening of a silenced generation (Adekoya, 2021). Peirce's (1931-1958) concept of the interpretant stage becomes visible here, as meanings multiply whilst audiences reinterpret the sign in new contexts. The digital sphere thus becomes a space of semiosis, where meaning continually unfolds through interpretive chains (Eco, 1976).

Memes constituted another vital component of multimodal resistance, functioning as culturally resonant units that blend humour, critique, and visual symbolism (Shifman, 2014). #EndSARS memes circulated widely, employing irony and satire to delegitimise state narratives whilst reinforcing protester solidarity (Jenkins, 2006). These digital artefacts operated as what Dawkins (1976) originally conceptualised as cultural replicators—ideas that spread through imitation—but with explicitly political dimensions. Memes transformed complex political critiques into accessible, shareable formats that transcended linguistic and geographical barriers (Gerbaudo, 2012).

The multimodal nature of digital protest discourse—combining text, images, videos, and audio—created what Jewitt (2009) terms "modal density," wherein multiple semiotic modes interact to produce layered meanings. Protest videos showing police brutality, paired with hashtags and testimonial captions, generated affective-cognitive responses that single-mode communication

could not achieve (Ahmed, 2004). This multimodality enhanced emotional engagement whilst providing evidential documentation that challenged official narratives (Tufekci, 2017).

Digital platforms also enabled what Castells (2015) identifies as "mass self-communication," wherein users simultaneously produce content, select audiences, and self-distribute messages. This democratisation of symbolic production allowed ordinary citizens to become cultural producers, generating protest narratives independent of traditional media gatekeepers (Jenkins, 2006). The viral circulation of #EndSARS content through networks of sharing and re-sharing created what boyd (2010) terms "context collapse," wherein diverse audiences—local, national, international— engaged simultaneously with protest signs, amplifying their reach and impact.

The digital archive of #EndSARS protest materials—tweets, images, videos, memes—constitutes what Taylor (2003) describes as a "repertoire" of embodied cultural memory, preserving protest practices for future interpretation and mobilisation. This digital repertoire functions both as historical documentation and as resource for ongoing resistance, demonstrating how contemporary social movements create enduring symbolic legacies through multimodal digital practices (Oyewole, 2021).

Summary of Analytical Insights

The semiotic analysis of #EndSARS protest materials reveals critical insights into the linguistic, visual, and ideological construction of resistance within post-colonial Nigeria. Linguistic signs such as hashtags, slogans, and social media messages functioned not merely as communicative tools but as vehicles forging collective identity (Alugbin & Iyoha, 2021). The hashtag #EndSARS and its associated discursive practices coordinated protest across physical and digital spaces, blending anger, grief, hope, and resilience into a unified voice (Castells, 2015).

Visual signs—the blood-stained Nigerian flag, clenched fist, protest placards—played vital roles in mobilising meaning and emotional effect (Oduola & Odebunmi, 2021). Images on social media carried both denotative content and connotative weight, signalling state violence, youth agency, national crisis, and hopeful resistance simultaneously (Rose, 2016). These visual signs functioned as both index and symbol: indexing lived violence whilst symbolising broader collective aspirations for justice and reform (Peirce, 1931-1958).

The interplay between verbal and visual signs underscores how meaning-making proved dynamic, multimodal, and iterative. The slogan "Soro Soke" moved from placard to chant to hashtag to meme, generating new interpretants at each stage, exemplifying Peirce's (1931-1958) notion of semiosis wherein signs give rise to interpretants that become new signs (Eco, 1976). This

continuous chain allowed protest signs to adapt, evolve, and resonate across contexts, time, and media (Jenkins, 2006).

Ideologically, semiotic resources challenged dominant state narratives through strategies including blame attribution, victim positioning, and recontextualisation (Dalamu & Yang, 2021). Signs did not merely reflect police brutality realities but produced collective subjectivity: "we are victims, we are moving, we will not be silent" (Oyewole, 2021). The linguistic and visual repertoire thus became a site of ideological contestation (Foucault, 1980).

Repetition emerged as an instrument of ideological solidarity. The continuous recurrence of hashtags and slogans produced a rhythm of resistance strengthening collective emotion and determination (Ahmed, 2004). Through Peirce's lens, these repetitions transitioned from simple symbols into habitual signs accruing emotional and historical resonance with each reiteration (Peirce, 1931-1958). This mirrors Barthes' (1972) notion of mythic condensation, wherein complex political realities distil into transmissible cultural codes.

Digital semiotics extended protest discourse beyond physical arenas. The multimodal nature of hashtags, memes, and user-generated visuals enabled the movement to evolve into a transnational discourse network (Tufekci, 2017), demonstrating Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) concept of multimodal cohesion. Global visibility reconstituted local protest as a transnational moral event, amplifying Nigeria's youth struggle within global justice narratives (Castells, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study looked at the signs and communication methods used by the #EndSARS movement to express resistance, solidarity, and identity. By combining Ferdinard De Saussure and Peircean semiotics, with Barthe's myth theory, the research showed that the language and imagery of protest serve not just as communication tools but also as ways to create meaning that change social reality. The analysis revealed that choices in language, especially pronoun usage, repetition, and intertextual irony, are strong strategies for building a collective identity. Visual symbols like the blood-stained national flag and the raised fist strengthened these identities by turning everyday objects into powerful signs of sacrifice and defiance. Through sharing across social media platforms, these signs reached a global audience, showing how digital spaces enhance semiotic struggles in modern political movements. A key insight from this study is that protest language works on three levels: the symbolic, where traditional meanings are used and challenged; the indexical, where signs connect to shared experiences of suffering and solidarity; and the mythic, where everyday signs gain moral and ideological meaning. In this process, protesters demonstrated their ability to shape meaning as a source of power, challenging state control by reinterpreting official symbols and rewriting the rules of citizenship. The #EndSARS movement shows that sign

is a way to create meaning. By reimagining signs of oppression as symbols of unity and hope, Nigerian youths protested against brutality and crafted a new narrative of national identity. Their speech, both verbal and visual, shows the lasting power of language to identify injustice, reclaim identity, and inspire a shared vision.

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