

#AfricansinUkraine

An Analysis of Black Witnessing and Hashtag
Activism at the Borders of War



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About the Charlotta Bass Lab

The Charlotta Bass Journalism and Justice Lab is the University of Southern California's first Black media studies center that is dedicated to saving, studying and sharing the communication practices of prominent and hidden figures who have been central to Black social justice movements. It is led by Dr. Allissa V. Richardson, who is an associate professor of journalism and communication studies. For more information about the Bass Lab and its programs, please visit <https://basslab.usc.edu>.

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Abstract

When the war between Russia and Ukraine commenced, many Black African students in Ukraine were denied passage to escape the impending violence due to their skin color. The students, mostly Nigerians, resorted to using Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp to disseminate information about the racism they faced while fleeing the war in Ukraine. They created hashtags like #NigeriansInUkraine and #AfricansInUkraine to appeal to the public for help. This thesis explores how African students at Ukraine's borders used smartphones, Twitter, Telegram, and WhatsApp to carry out Black witnessing and hashtag activism, which attracted global attention to their plight. This international media spectacle eventually led to safe passage for the students into neighboring countries.

Keywords: #AfricansinUkraine, Black witnessing, citizen journalism, hashtag activism, smartphones, social media



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Introduction

When Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24, 2022 (Al Jazeera, 2022), thousands fled Ukraine through neighboring countries to seek refuge. Due to the absence of commercial flights (Timmins, 2022), they resorted to using cars, buses, and trains to reach their destinations. Many of those fleeing were Africans, including many Black students, and they were racially discriminated against (Ojukwu, 2022), stopped at the borders, and prevented from leaving the country (Pietromarchi, 2022).

While the mainstream media quickly showcased and celebrated acts of heroism by Ukrainians against Russians (Smith & Dorn, 2022), they largely ignored acts of racism by Ukrainian security agents against Black Africans, especially students from institutions of higher learning in the country (Dovi, 2022).

Little was known about the situation these Black Africans were facing until they took matters into their own hands. They created #AfricansInUkraine, leveraging Black witnessing and hashtag activism to raise awareness about inequalities at the border. Most of the videos they posted, especially at the railway stations and the Ukrainian– Polish border, showed how the security agents selectively allowed White people to board trains and other modes of transportation but denied Black Africans access to escape (Carrillo, 2022).

The global outcry against the actions of the security agents (Chege & Heinrich, 2022) resulted in aid for the African victims. They were given the opportunity to leave Ukraine for neighboring countries (White, 2022). From there, many African nations were able to evacuate their citizens (Abdulsemiu, 2022), with some governments providing opportunities for students to continue their education at home (Busari, 2022).

Significance of the Study

This study explores how Black Africans in Ukraine created counternarratives about their plight while escaping the war that challenged mainstream media reporting about the war itself and highlighted racism faced by Black students at the borders. These young people acted as citizen journalists and activists using the hashtag #AfricansinUkraine to push their stories into the global news cycle. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

RQ1: What inspired African students to use smartphones to broadcast their issues?

RQ2: How effective were smartphones in the dissemination of their stories?

RQ3: How did the students use Twitter and WhatsApp to spread the news?

Theoretical Framework

Two theoretical frameworks supported this inquiry: Black witnessing and hashtag activism. The theory of Black witnessing, as postulated by Allissa V. Richardson (2020, page 7), is founded upon three assumptions: it (1) assumes an investigative editorial stance to advocate for African American civil rights; (2) co-opts racialized online spaces to serve as its ad-hoc news distribution service; and (3) relies on interlocking black public spheres, which are endowed with varying levels of political agency, to engage diverse audiences.

Black witnesses double as documentarians of injustice and racialize online spaces to disseminate information that will lead to securing their civil rights and freedom. To argue this point, in the preface of her book, *Bearing Witness While Black: African Americans, Smartphones, and the New Protest #Journalism*, Richardson (2020, page xiii) states:

Black witnessing reclaims black lives and stories from the margin. Black witnessing corrects false narratives. Black witnessing gives us new data points around which we can theorize more intersectional ideas of how journalism works. Black witnessing is about seeing and being seen, about being valued and believed.

Richardson's scholarly work examines the struggles of Black Americans who adopted smartphones to decry police brutality and canvass for freedom using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter. Overall, Black witnessing (Richardson, 2020) and informational power (French & Raven, 1959) have allowed Black people to control the flow of information needed to get things done.

In their book, *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*, Sarah Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles (2020) posit that Twitter is a reliable platform for the disenfranchised, including Black Americans, women, and transgender people. Their work highlights how these marginalized groups, which the mainstream media do not cover, rely on Twitter hashtags to advance counternarratives and promote social issues that pertain to their lives.

Definition of Terms

- **Black people:** people with black or dark brown skin, especially those living in Africa or whose ancestors originally came from Africa.
- **Black witnessing:** a leveraging of the latest news production technology to document human rights injustices against black people (Richardson, 2020, page 197).

- **Citizen journalism:** defined by *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Albarado, n.d.) as journalism “conducted by people who are not professional journalists but disseminate information using websites, blogs, and social media. Citizen journalism has expanded its worldwide influence despite continuing concerns over whether citizen journalists are as reliable as trained professionals. Citizens in disaster zones have provided instant text and visual reporting from the scene.”
- **Discrimination:** defined by Cambridge Dictionary (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, n.d.) as “treating a person or particular group of people differently”, significantly worse than how you treat others, “because of their race, gender, sexuality, etc.”
- **Hashtag activism:** “the act of fighting for or supporting a cause that people advocate through social media like Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and other networking websites. This is the kind of activism that does not require any action from the person other than sharing or ‘liking’ a post or ‘retweeting’ tweets on Twitter” (Rouse, 2012).



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Chapter 1

Background

On February 24, 2022, people living in Ukrainian towns close to the country's border with Russia heard loud sounds of explosions rocking their cities (Hodge et al., 2022). Among them were thousands of African students, professionals, and other foreigners. That was the day Russia started its military assaults on Ukraine (Baerendsen & Egbunike, 2022). Catherine Kirpu, a 3rd-year Nigerian medical student at V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University, Ukraine, woke up that day to loud sounds of explosions. She was confused. She initially thought it was the sound of fireworks. When she came to her senses, she remembered that New Year's Day was long gone and that it was the end of February. The first thing she did was check WhatsApp. She opened her church group, the medical students' group, and the international students' group. The stories were the same: an attack on Ukraine by Russia (C. Kirpu, personal communication, December 13, 2022).

Before the war, there were more than 80,000 international students studying in Ukraine, many of them from Africa. A breakdown of the top three African countries with students in Ukraine shows Morocco had 8,233; Nigeria had 4,379; and Egypt had 3,499 (Ukrainian State Center for International Education, 2020). The Eastern European country was attractive and a top destination for higher education for African students. This was because of its affordability compared to schools in the United Kingdom and Germany, as well as its position as a gateway to Europe. It provided better prospects for graduate students (Ali, 2022).

Once the war started, however, many people rushed to the country's few available bomb shelters. For others, the underground railway tunnel was their shelter, as advised by the Ukrainian government. Catherine Kirpu and another Nigerian, Jemimah John Nagayawa, a 4th-year medical student at Kharkiv National Medical University, were among those who took cover at the bomb shelters in their various cities (J. H. Nagayawa, personal communication, November 8, 2022).

Explaining further, Catherine Kirpu (personal communication, December 13, 2022) said:

For me, the bomb shelter close to my house was the metro station and I remember we rushed there. The scene there too was very scary because there were ammo tanks going up and down and when they were passing, it was a very loud sound, and everybody was just afraid.

She added that her classmates thought “maybe it’s the Russian army that has come into residential areas.” Catherine said the condition of the bomb shelters declined rapidly within the first few days, recalling, “We had to use the toilets, which were terrible. We couldn’t get any sleep. We couldn’t get good food.”

Catherine said she called her dad, who sent her money from Nigeria. Then, she planned for evacuation. She explained:

The first thing I could think about was to go and withdraw [cash]. Because I knew that now we probably need to use transport and pay for transport. And I [knew I] would need cash. I usually don’t even walk around with cash.

By February 27, 2022, Ukrainian airports had been shut down due to damage inflicted by Russian bombardments. The airports were among the first targets (J. H. Nagayawa, personal communication, November 8, 2022). Citizens of the United States and the United Kingdom had left the country already, following prewar advice by their governments to evacuate. But Ukrainian universities convinced international students to stay, claiming that the beating of the war drum was mere propaganda (B. A. Adam, personal communication, November 27, 2022).

As the shelling continued into the 2nd and 3rd day, the media kept reporting on the assault by Russia on Ukraine, setting the agenda for what people should pay attention to and overlooking other humanitarian issues at the borders (Ibrahim, 2022). The media had already been accused of biases in reportage of the war—showcasing Ukraine as a Western country under attack by Russia (Timofeev & Charushin, 2022). The world knew little about the situation as it pertained to Black people escaping the war.

The African students’ situation came to light when some of them decided to take matters into their own hands using their smartphones (Baerendtsen, & Egbunike, 2022). On February 26, 2022, a U.K.-based Nigerian named Damilare Arah, via his eponymous Twitter handle, used the #AfricansInUkraine hashtag and posted a video (shot by a Black witness) that went viral within hours (Arah, 2022a). The footage showed many Black people standing anxiously during a freezing night, including a woman holding an infant who breathed out puffs of warmth into the frosty air. The video has the following voiceover:

They are not allowing any Black people to enter inside the gates. We are all here, it’s only Ukrainians that they are allowing in. Even the ones with kids they’re not allowing them in. Some have been here for days, and nobody is entertaining any questions, only Ukrainian women and kids they are allowing into this gate. Because the gate is blocked.

In the text accompanying the video, Arah wrote, “The lady in the video is holding a 2-month-old and it’s 3°c outside we are in search of aid and hostels” (Arah, 2022a). Soon after, a different video posted by another Nigerian student, Nze, via his Twitter handle @Nzekiev, showed himself and other Black students having been stopped by some soldiers at the Ukrainian–Polish border, saying the military and police were threatening to shoot them (Nze, 2022b). He said some of them had been at the border for 2 days in the “scorching cold weather, while many have gone back to Lviv.”

The tweets by @DamilareArah and @Nzekiev using #AfricansinUkraine amplified the localized Black witnessing in the region to a global audience by the end of the day. Moreover, the hashtag activism (Jackson et al., 2020) by Black people and calls from around the world on Ukrainian authorities to allow Black people safe passage to neighboring countries assisted in paving their way to safety.

Arah and Nze exemplify the growing trend of Black Africans using smartphones and social media to enact change. This contingent has used these emergent technologies to build coalitions and fight social injustices, from bad governance to human rights violations (Ogone, 2020). Some of their recent, successful campaigns were aided by the following hashtags: #RhodesMustFall (South Africa), #FixTheCountry (Ghana), #ThisFlag (Zimbabwe), #BringBackMutharika (Malawi), #ShutItAllDownNamibia (Namibia), #CongoIsBleeding (Democratic Republic of the Congo), and #EndSARS (Nigeria).

#RhodesMustFall (South Africa)

#RhodesMustFall, which received global attention, was a protest movement that began on March 9, 2015 (Sebeelo, 2020), and called for the removal of the statue of a former British imperialist and colonial master, Cecil Rhodes, at the University of Cape Town. The concept of the protest was to “decolonize” education across South Africa and provide access to tertiary education and student accommodation.

Student protests in support of or directly inspired by the removal of the statue and the Rhodes Must Fall movement also occurred at other universities in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States to address Black alienation within higher education. These include the University of Edinburgh, Oxford University (Chaudhuri, 2016), and the University of California, Berkeley (Sosibo, 2015).

#FixTheCountry (Ghana)

#FixTheCountry (<https://fixthecountrygh.com>) was a nonpartisan and nonpolitical civic movement started by Ghanaian youths on Twitter in early May 2021 that demanded an end to bad governance. The protests evolved from online agitation into physical demonstrations on the streets of Accra and other regions (Rahman, 2021). The protesters opposed the introduction of a new tax proposal, the electronic transactions levy (e-levy), by the government. The campaign quickly went viral.

The #FixTheCountry movement ultimately forced the Ghanaian government to lower the price of fuel. The price of the fuel per liter as of December 2020 was GHC4.7 per liter, but by May 2021 it was selling for around GHC6.1 per liter (BBC News, 2021). This led to outrage among petroleum consumers, who protested the increase through social media using #FixTheCountry. They also served notice of embarking on a street protest on May 9, 2021. In response, the government announced a price cut effective May 5, 2021 (BBC News, 2021; Krippahl, 2021).

#ThisFlag (Zimbabwe)

#ThisFlag is a social and political movement originated by Pastor Evan Mawarire, who in a 2016 online video criticized President Robert Mugabe's style of leadership, stating that it had led to economic hardship in Zimbabwe (Sebeelo, 2020). Pastor Mawarire said it did not reflect the symbolism behind the flag of Zimbabwe (agriculture, mineral wealth, peace) (Government of Zimbabwe, n.d.). This led to disapproval of Zimbabwe's worsening economic conditions among the country's citizens. Many of them endorsed the video he posted on Facebook on April 19, 2016, leading thousands, especially young people, to embark on a 25-day campaign of online activism using videos.

The campaign focused on the loss of their aspirations and pointed out corruption. On July 5, 2016, Mawarire urged people to boycott work by staying home. The call to stay at home led the government to accuse Mawarire of betraying his country; it was interpreted as a criminal offense in Zimbabwe. The movement spurred citizens to buy flags and wear them around their necks—an act that the government later banned, along with selling flags.

#BringBackMutharika (Malawi)

#BringBackMutharika was started by Malawians in search of their president, Peter Mutharika, who left Malawi on September 15 to attend the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. The UN meeting in New York City ended on September 26, but Mutharika did not return to his country, leading to speculations about his health (Chutel, 2016).

Almost a month after the UN General Assembly, Malawi government spokesperson Malison Ndaui told journalists that the president was still meeting “a number of people one-by-one,” without revealing the identity of the people or where the meetings were taking place. Following pressure, on October 11, Malawi announced that the president would return on October 16, adding that, in addition to the UN summit, he had “also attended to various government businesses” (The East African, 2016).

The failure to communicate properly was worrisome to citizens of a country that had just a few years earlier lost a sitting president, Bingu wa Mutharika, who collapsed on April 5, 2012, and was rushed to hospital in South Africa. Two days later, the government announced that he had passed on. Malawian citizens later learned that the late Mutharika had died in the ambulance before even leaving Malawi but had been flown to South Africa for the hospital there to pronounce his death (The East African, 2016).

This explains their agitation to know the whereabouts of their president, especially with a repeat of poor communication lines between the presidency and citizens and the possibility of a repeat of what transpired during Bingu wa Mutharika's administration. The president did return on October 16 as announced by his administration.

#ShutItAllDown (Namibia)

The #ShutItAllDown protests were demonstrations against sexual and gender-based violence across Namibia aimed at addressing increasing cases of assault on women. The protests started on October 8, 2020, following the killing of 22-year-old Shannon Wasserfall.

The 22-year-old Shannon Wasserfall went missing on April 10, 2020 (Shikongo, 2020). Six months later, her father received an anonymous text stating that his daughter had been buried in a grave near Walvis Bay. He informed the Namibia police, who dug up her remains (Van Der Schyff, 2020). Two days later, a woman and her boyfriend were arrested in connection with Wasserfall's murder. This sparked protests, especially by young people, who mobilized, creating #ShutItAllDown on Twitter and taking to the streets to campaign against the rape and killing of women in the country.

#CongoIsBleeding (Democratic Republic of the Congo)

#CongoIsBleeding was created in mid-October 2020 to draw attention to the exploitation taking place in the mines of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Online protesters using the hashtag on social media said there had been ongoing child slavery, deadly conflicts, and corruption because of the activities of foreign companies mining minerals in the country.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo has large deposits of cobalt, a mineral used in making lithium-ion batteries, as well as magnetic steels in phones and laptops (Melville, 2020), among other minerals. The east of the country, where the mines are located, is home to about 40,000 child laborers who dig for the minerals (Ojewale, 2022). Reports indicate children are paid \$2 a day for 12 hours of work (Lawson, 2021). The #CongoIsBleeding protests attracted the attention of celebrities within and outside Africa, including NBA star Serge Ibaka, who tweeted to draw people's attention to the plight of the children.

#EndSARS (Nigeria)

This hashtag protest was held in major Nigerian cities in October 2020, leading to the disbandment of the special police unit known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which was created in 1992 under the Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department as a masked police unit to perform undercover operations to detain, investigate, and prosecute people involved in violent crimes like armed robbery and kidnapping. The unit, however, became notorious for the extrajudicial killing of citizens, especially Nigerian youths. Despite the police promises for reform, they took no action, which led to the protests.

The hashtag #EndSARS and agitation started in 2017 but gained momentum in October 2020 following more revelations on social media of abuses by squad members. Solidarity protests and demonstrations by Nigerians in the diaspora and sympathizers occurred in many major cities, with high-profile participants including former U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama and education activist Malala Yousafzai. About 28 million social media posts bearing the hashtag #EndSARS have been disseminated on Twitter alone.



Credit: [Ayoola Salako](#)

All these acts of Black witnessing, and hashtag activism, resulted in positive changes in the African countries where they were used. This indicates that Africans have mastered the art of using social media and hashtags to arrive at desired outcomes.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Social media is a catalyst for social change (Schaffer & Tamble, 2022) and has the stimulating ability to change the way social movements occur (Aguilar, 2021). More specifically, hashtag activism (Jackson et al., 2020)—sometimes used interchangeably with “online activism” or “social media activism”—is the act of fighting for or supporting a cause through Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, Telegram, and other networking websites. It is the kind of activism that does not require much action from individuals “other than sharing or ‘liking’ a post or ‘retweeting’ tweets on Twitter” (Rouse, 2012). It is characterized by interconnectivity and occupation of spaces (Mateos & Erro, 2020).

The hashtag sign (#) was first proposed for use on Twitter in 2007 by a former Google developer, Chris Messina, when he posted, “How do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?” (Panko, 2017). He suggested creating a meta tag allowing users to systematically group their work and to track dynamic content related to any event or topic. Initially, Twitter criticized the hashtag, saying “these things were for nerds” (Panko, 2017). The company changed its mind, owing to the impact of #SanDiegoFire later that year, which assisted users in providing updates on the fire and helped others track tweets related to the safety of their loved ones (Panko, 2017).

The term “hashtag activism” was first used by *The Guardian* in 2011 during one of the most popular digital activism campaigns, the #OccupyWallStreet movement (Chubb, 2021). Today, the quest for online attention and the desire to outpace competitors in bringing issues to the front burner drives individuals to adopt digital strategies like hashtag activism as critical components of social movements (Santos & Reis, 2022) and civic engagements (Hugosu, 2022).

The marginalized have over time become the set of people that use social media the most. They have mastered the use of hashtags to mobilize and to advocate for social issues often ignored by the media (Maples, 2008). They believe they must take matters into their own hands, whether as a community or as individuals, using the tools at their disposal, as otherwise these issues will not be addressed.

They are the ones always championing the cause of hashtag activism in all situations. They spearheaded the #ArabSpring, #OccupyWallStreet, #BlackLivesMatter, #EndSARS, and #CongoIsBleeding; others join them to lend their voices to the cause.

Motivation for Black Witnessing

Many young people are motivated by the opportunity for live interaction between them and their friends, as well as people they become acquainted with on social media. In that regard, social media creates the satisfaction of connection without face-to-face contact (Quiroz & Mickelson, 2021), especially for individuals who suffer from limited social resources.

Social media has the power to connect users with a large heterogeneous community across the world, defying boundaries. The technology behind social media tools like Twitter and Facebook makes it easy to disseminate information. Activists have the freedom to share content ranging from simple text messages to pictures and videos. They can galvanize support for a campaign within hours.

Internet Penetration in Nigeria

Despite ongoing efforts by various African governments, the digital gap has remained wide, especially between the wealthy and the poor. Social media use is also city-based in most African countries. However, we see high penetration of smartphones and utilization of platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp gaining ground in Nigeria, where even the elderly are beginning to use these tools. Senior citizens are engaging actively with WhatsApp in sending images or making video calls with their children who live and work in faraway lands.

Nigerian authorities report that as of August 2022 there were over 150 million active internet users and over 210 million active mobile phone users in the country (Poki, 2022). Nigeria's internet penetration rate stood at 55.4% of the total population (220 million) at the start of 2023, an increase of 2.9 million (+2.4%) between 2022 and 2023. This indicates that Nigeria is one of the fastest-growing countries in digital penetration (Kemp, 2023). In a country of over 220 million people, this implies that about 98 million people did not use the internet as of 2023, suggesting that 44.6% of the population remained offline at the beginning of the year (Kemp, 2023).

Social Media Affordances

Today, we are seeing the power of the “status update” and “group” features on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Telegram, which are also used to disseminate information at a high speed between various online connections (Sanders, 2023). They allow users to share thoughts, questions, pictures, links, videos, or anything else they would like to share (András, 2022). Additionally, the flexibility of the group feature allows members of a virtual community to interact and share or forward messages from one virtual group to another, reaching a different set of audiences (Turistiati, 2023).

Each of these platforms has specific guidelines for operation and differing limits on the number of individuals they can accommodate per group. For instance, as of the end of 2022, each WhatsApp group can register up to 1,024 members, whereas a Telegram group accommodates up to 200,000 people (Wilde et al., 2022). For Facebook, group size is limitless. All the platforms also support hashtags and mentions. These are features with which individuals can connect and mobilize (Telegram, 2015). By design, Twitter is built to create networks of ideas and topics using categorization features like hashtags (Sajjad, 2017). It does not require any form of social reciprocity between users, and it is powered by hashtags and mentions.

In contrast, Facebook and chat apps like WhatsApp and Telegram were built on the concept of friendship, where individuals first agree to connect before an online relationship is established. Facebook has given users the power to unfriend or block one another at any point they are not interested in interacting further (Facebook, n.d.). So also, in the chat groups built by WhatsApp and Telegram, users can exit groups that no longer interest them. The safe space social media provides to friends and allies also gives users the power to mobilize themselves for any purpose to attain a common goal (The Social Institute, 2021). This makes it easy for hashtags to travel quickly and powerfully. It is small wonder then, that campaigns like #BringBackOurGirls rallied the then First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama (Epstein, 2014). That same power motivated students in Ukraine to deploy Black witnessing and hashtag activism.



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Chapter 3

Methodology

For this study, I traveled to Nigeria to conduct semi-structured interviews with returnees from Ukraine. I also conducted Zoom interviews with a U.K.-based activist and several students who moved to countries other than Nigeria. I focused on three categories of individuals: (1) the first person to use the #AfricansInUkraine hashtag, (2) the individuals whose tweets were most quoted by the media, and (3) individuals who amplified the African students' messages.

Category 1: Finding the Creator of #AfricansInUkraine

To arrive at who created or first started tweeting with the hashtag #AfricansInUkraine, I searched Twitter using the string “from:hashtag since:yyyy-mm-dd until:yyyy-mm-dd” in the search box. From my findings, the first tweet that carries the hashtag #AfricansInUkraine was posted by @baybetizzy, on February 24, 2022, at 12:22 a.m. That was the first day of the Russian bombardment. The tweet read, “#africansinUkraine pray[er]s are with you all” (Tizzy is the Vibe Baybee, 2022).

Category 2: Finding Individuals Who Used the #AfricansInUkraine Hashtag

To arrive at individuals who were quoted the most, I searched the keyword “#AfricansInUkraine” on Google and focused on news platforms that reported on the hashtag within the first 5 days of the war. I limited myself to the first 10 media platforms quoting students and activists who used #AfricansInUkraine in their Twitter posts.

I found that the two most quoted individuals in the media were Nigerians, @DamilareArah and @Nzekiev. I then created a timeline of who used the hashtag as the war began. On Day 1 of the attacks in Ukraine, February 24, 2022, the second use of the hashtag was by an individual named “Juls” via the handle @Scoopatumana_ at 12:34 a.m. His tweet read, “#AfricansinUkraine Please stay safe, our pray[er]s are with you all [red heart emoji]” (Juls, 2022).

On Day 2 of the attacks, on February 25, 2022, two other Twitter users posted using #AfricansInUkraine. In their tweets, they specifically highlighted the plight of African students escaping the war in Ukraine. The first person, Atù Ndigbo, tweeted at 10:03 a.m. via the handle @Datuanya. His tweet read: “@_AfricanUnion @MBuhari @SholaMos1 @10DowningStreet @BBCAfrica @CNN @GeoffreyOnyeama @kelechnekoff.

Reports are that African/Nigerian students especially Male fleeing #UkraineWar are turned back at #Polish border! #UkraineUnderAttack #AfricansinUkraine #Ukraine” (Ndigbo, 2022). The second person to tweet on Day 2 of the attacks was @unitedinminds, who tweeted:

Please, I urge everyone to raise awareness on the #Africans stuck in #Ukraine due to #Russia’s attacks & #Poland’s unwillingness to let them in. #AfricansInUkraine #NoMore #KnowMore #Refugees @Refugees @RefugeesMedia @RESCUEorg @antonioguterres @DaugEmbassyTV, @campaigner71 (United in Mind, 2022).

On Day 3 of the Russian attacks, African students in Ukraine began documenting their plight with tweets containing videos. One of the earliest videos was from @DamilareArah, at 11:12 a.m., who wrote “The official visuals of Ukrainians blocking Africans from getting on trains. #AfricansinUkraine” (Arah, 2022b). The tweet garnered more than 40,000 retweets. Arah followed it with another video on the same day at 2:33 p.m. The accompanying text read:

#AfricansinUkraine the community of Africans in Ukraine stranded at the boarder [*sic*] much of them women and children. This is happening now. The lady in the video is holding a 2 month old and it’s 3° outside we are in search of aid and hostels. (Arah, 2022a)

On February 27, 2022, at 12:44 a.m., @DamilareArah posted another video of African students being held at gunpoint by Polish border patrol officials. In it, the young people screamed fearfully, “We are students! We don’t have [fire]arms!” (Arah, 2022c).

Another Nigerian whose tweets trended is Nze, with the handle @nzekiev. One of his most read tweets from February 26, 2022, at 6:23 p.m. reported:

Been at the Poland-Ukraine border for the past 5 hours & they’re segregating. Ukrainians the other side, Africans & other foreigners on the other side. Like 100 Ukrainians first, then two Africans & other foreigners. Well, if their citizens leave, who will fight for them? We? (Nze, 2022a)

Later that evening, at 9:25 p.m., Nze posted a video via his handle. The tweet read:

Watch how they are threatening to shoot us! We are currently at the Ukraine-Poland border. Their Police and Army refused to let Africans cross they only allow Ukrainian. Some have slept here for 2 days under this scorching cold weather, while many have gone back to Lviv. (Nze, 2022b)

Category 3: Finding Individuals Who Amplified Students' Messages

Chibuzor Rosemary Onwugbonu (@ChyLady) was the first to provide the names, phone numbers, and other identifying details of Nigerians who were waiting at neighboring borders to offer help. She also provided contact information for Nigerian embassies in neighboring countries. Other Twitter users retweeted what she posted. Onwugbonu also created a Telegram group and led Twitter Space discussions that assisted students with useful information. Another person that played a big role is Bayero Abduljaleel Adam (@jaleelbayero), one of the Nigerian students in Ukraine. He also hosted a Twitter Space to discuss destination country options for escaping students. Both Onwugbonu and Adam agreed to be interviewed for this study.

Selection of Interview Participants from Twitter

After finding the above exemplars from each of my three categories, I used a snowball sampling technique, both here in the United States and in Nigeria, to identify Nigerian students in Ukraine who escaped the war to any other country or returned to Nigeria. Most commonly, I sent direct messages to these students and activists via Twitter, requesting interviews on the topic of #AfricansinUkraine and their roles in the campaign. I sought out @baybetizzy, @Damilola, @Nzekiev, @ChyLady, and @JaleelBayero especially, since they used the hashtag most prolifically. @ChyLady and @JaleelBayero agreed to grant me interviews.

The Interview Process

Prior to each interview, I introduced myself as both a journalist and a researcher on the #AfricansinUkraine campaign. I stated that I would use the interview material to write this paper and to produce works of journalism, such as podcasts and feature stories. I also sought their permission to record the process, which they all granted. I used a Zoom H6 Handy Recorder to document their interviews.

With the students, I began by asking the student their name, where they studied, and what year of their studies they were in. I then asked them to share how they heard about the war and how they escaped. I also asked about their experiences with discrimination in Ukraine and if they knew anyone else who had shared experiences of racism at the borders. I interviewed a total of 15 individuals between October and December 2022. Ten among the respondents were students, out of which eight returned to Nigeria, while two stayed abroad. Among the five nonstudents, two were Nigerian government officials, one a volunteer who tweeted, one a parent, and one a university staff member. Eleven of the interviews were conducted in person, whereas the other four took place via Zoom conferencing software. The average interview duration was 32 minutes.

Table 1

Profile of Students Interviewed

Name of student	Ukrainian School	Course	Year in School When War Began	Posted on Social Media?
Bayero Abduljaleel Adam	Ternopil National Medical University	Medicine	3rd year	Twitter, WhatsApp status
Marie Akpor	Vinnysia National Medical University	Medicine	2nd year	No
Precius Keltume Buba	Vinnysia National Pirogov Medical University	Medicine	2nd year	No
Ekundayo Daniel	Sumy State University	Medicine	3rd year	No
Catherine Kirpu	V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University	Medicine	3rd year	WhatsApp status
Meshack Musa	International European University, Kyiv	Medicine	2nd year	No
Jemimah John Nagayawa	Kharkiv National Medical University	Medicine	4th year	WhatsApp status
Oladejo Olakunle	Sumy State University	Medicine	3rd year	No
Ebere Oluwaseun	V. N. Karazin Kharkiv National University	Medicine	1st year	No
Olamide Oyefeso	Kharkiv National Medical University	Medicine	6th year	WhatsApp status

Table 2

Profile of Nonstudents Interviewed

Name of respondent	Place of work	Position	Role in #AfricansinUkraine
Bolaji Akinremi	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Former director, Consular and Legal Services	Evacuation of students back to Nigeria
Monica Alexander Ankeli	Bingham University	Director, Linkages and Transnational Education	Provision of admission space and absorption of 48 returnee students into Bingham University
Simon Bognet	Farmer/retiree lecturer	Parent of student	Parental guidance to student
Chibuzor Rosemary Onwugbonu	Information technology/fintech	Product manager, and Welfare Officer of Nigerians in Diaspora Organization (Europe)	Hashtag activism
Abdulrahman Terab	Nigerians in Diaspora Commission	Director, Technology Transfer, Investment, and Housing	Flagging the incident to the Nigerian government for action

Chapter 4

Findings

This study interrogated three research questions, which focused on the Africans' lived experiences of Black witnessing, the effectiveness of their campaigns, and the technological affordances that made their political communication possible. This section outlines the myriad findings from the semi-structured interviews.

RQ1: What Inspired African Students to Use Smartphones to Broadcast Their Issues?

FQ1: Key drivers of the #AfricansInUkraine campaign were Nigerians in the global diaspora, who longed to help fellow Black Africans trapped in Ukraine, of which the majority were Nigerian nationals. They used text, pictures, and videos to disseminate information across various social media platforms, which assisted in reaching different target audiences, thereby getting their message to millions across the globe.

The combined efforts of students and activists involved in the #AfricansinUkraine campaign persuaded mainstream media (Broersma & Graham, 2012) to report on the plight of Black African students in Ukraine who were initially denied passage to leave the country—something the media had so far failed to do (Xiaoyi, 2022). In an interview with *Amsterdam News*, a weekly Black-owned newspaper in the United States, one of the activists, Damilare Arah, a U.K.-based tech designer, said:

I'm a volunteer from London. So, on Thursday and Friday, I tried my best to understand the situation fully and to see how best I fit into all of this. ...I was just trying to get to grips with understanding how all of this would affect Africa and the businesses and the economies and other things, because I was hearing reports that there's massive oil wells that Putin might want underneath Ukraine, in the area of Donbass. But that's when one of my mentors told me that there's Africans in Ukraine. I heard that Africans were being racially profiled, abused and being pushed back in queues for the sake of other Europeans. So, from then I kicked into a crisis management mode. I know that many people didn't know that there were Africans in Ukraine so the first thing I had to do was get everybody to know and understand their situation. (Carrillo, 2022)

Similarly, Chibuzor Rosemary Onwugbonu (@ChyLady)—a U.K.-based product manager in technology and current welfare officer of Nigerians in Diaspora Organization (NIDO) Europe—told me in the interview that she got involved because “...there were just a lot of cries for help. So, the [NIDO] chapter in Poland, the Hungary chapter, we all got on Twitter Space to speak to people.”

Onwugbonu added: “In the end, we just had to create Telegram groups ... because there was really so much that we could do on the Twitter Space. But the great thing was there was a sense of community that came together just by us being able to have these conversations. It was a rescue mission in the end. (C. R. Onwugbonu, personal communication, November 27, 2022)

The drive to save African students and professionals was the motivating factor here. By extension, all Nigerians in Ukraine are by default classified as Nigerians in diaspora, whether or not they are registered members of NIDO. Thus, the steps taken by both students and volunteers led to a positive outcome.

RQ2: How Effective Were Smartphones in the Dissemination of Their Stories?

FQ2: The #AfricansinUkraine campaign was so effective that the Western news media, which had initially ignored the stories, started broadcasting them. Ten select news outlets that carried stories using the hashtag are presented in Table 3. The stories ran within the first 7 days of the war. The first stories carrying the hashtag came out on February 27, 2022, and were mainly by the media in Africa and India, countries whose students in Ukraine were experiencing discrimination. Western media started their coverage of the hashtag story on Day 4.

Table 3

News Reports Carrying #AfricansinUkraine in Response to Black Witnessing

Outlet	Headline	URL	Publication date	Twitter handle(s) quoted	Reach on Twitter
Revolt TV	#AfricansinUkraine sheds light on mistreatment of Africans in Ukraine	https://www.revolt.tv/article/2022-02-27/154519/africansinukraine-sheds-light-on-mistreatment-of-africans-in-ukraine	February 27, 2022	@DamilareArah @stephhegarty	344.3K followers
Opindia	After Indian students, Africans face racial discrimination in Ukraine, allege that they are not being allowed to cross the borders	https://www.opindia.com/2022/02/africans-say-they-are-facing-racial-discrimination-in-ukraine	February 27, 2022	@Nzekiev @DamilareArah	625.7K followers

Table 3 (Continued)

News Reports Carrying #AfricansinUkraine in Response to Black Witnessing

Outlet	Headline	URL	Publication date	Twitter handle(s) quoted	Reach on Twitter
BET	Thousands of African students trapped in Ukraine	https://www.bet.com/article/e7175o/african-students-trapped-ukraine	February 27, 2022	@DamilareArah	2.7M followers
Newsweek	Black immigrants report racist treatment as they try to flee Ukraine	https://www.newsweek.com/black-immigrants-report-racist-treatment-flee-ukraine-1683216	February 28, 2022	@Nzekiev @Brayson53233089 @DamilareArah	3.5M followers
BBC News	Ukraine conflict: Nigeria condemns treatment of Africans	https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60555650	February 28, 2022	@DamilareArah	39.6M followers
Quartz	Africans in Ukraine say they're stranded	https://qz.com/africa/2134765/africans-in-ukraine-say-theyre-stranded	February 28, 2022	@DamilareArah @Nzekiev	374.7K followers
Nigerian Eye	Russia-Ukraine war: We're not turning Africans away from our borders, says Poland	https://www.nigerianeye.com/2022/02/russia-ukraine-war-were-not-turning.html	February 28, 2022	@Nzekiev	8.7K followers
Africa News	Russia-Ukraine conflict: Africans face racial discrimination in Ukraine	https://www.africanews.com/2022/02/28/russia-ukraine-conflict-africans-face-racial-discrimination-in-ukraine	February 28, 2022	@DamilareArah	69K followers
KNX News 97.1 FM	'Blacks were not allowed': Nigeria condemns reports of Africans left stranded fleeing Ukraine	https://www.audacy.com/knxnews/news/world/nigeria-condemns-reports-of-africans-stranded-in-ukraine	February 28, 2022	@abel_amene @isidney75 @DamilareArah	65.8K followers
Morocco World News	AU calls out racist treatment of Africans fleeing Ukraine	https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2022/03/347355/au-calls-out-racist-treatment-of-africans-fleeing-ukraine	March 1, 2022	@DamilareArah	26.6K followers

Official Reactions to #AfricansinUkraine

Beyond resetting the global news agenda, the African students' and volunteers' tweets attracted the attention of notable people around the world. Just like the #BringBackOurGirls and #EndSARS campaigns before it, the #AfricansinUkraine hashtag and accompanying media stories attracted worldwide criticism of the discrimination. Once the Black witnesses' footage from Ukraine went viral, African governments condemned their mistreatment (Ly & Princewill, 2022). They also acted by issuing specific information and instructions to their citizens on where to find assistance ahead of evacuation home (Onukwue, 2022).

One of the early responses was by President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria, who said, "All who flee a conflict situation have the same right to safe passage under the UN convention and the color of their passport or their skin should make no difference" (Akinwotu & Strzyżyńska, 2022).

Nigeria also took diplomatic steps to address the discrimination against its citizens by engaging countries neighboring Ukraine. The then director of the Consular and Legal Department of Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Akinremi Bolaji, explained the steps taken (personal communication, December 15, 2022):

We vowed to intervene with the Polish government when we heard of discrimination about those that were allowed to come in into Poland. ... Their response was that they were not the ones stopping people, but the Ukrainian soldiers ... who didn't want people to leave, or they tried to allow women first. ... We got assurances from the Polish authority. Of course, you know, they will deny it, but the truth here is that you have sounded a note of warning. And because of that, I think they cooperated. ... You've seen that the president of Poland has been here. He was supposed to be here when that war broke out. ... Just 15 days to his coming, was when the war broke out. And we have to put that off, particularly because of what was trending at that time. But eventually, when the coast became clear, the state visit took place.

In Nigeria, there was a coordination mechanism for parents too. Director of Technology Transfer, Investment and Housing of the Nigerians in Diaspora Commission, Abdulrahman Terab says the Nigerian government created a WhatsApp group in which they provided parents with a daily briefing about their children's welfare:

We have very active social media platforms and networks, specifically, Twitter, and WhatsApp. And of course, we have a very active website that is always ready to get complaints and other things. ... The Nigerians in Diaspora Commission has always been an SOS platform for all Nigerians who find themselves in situations outside the country. (personal communication, December 14, 2022).

In solidarity, celebrities worldwide also used their social media handles to post about the predicament of the Black students attempting to flee the war in Ukraine. Among them were Formula One star Lewis Hamilton, the BeyGOOD charity run by American singer Beyoncé, Hollywood film director Ava DuVernay, and civil rights pioneer Jesse Jackson.

RQ3: How Did the Students Use Twitter and WhatsApp to Spread the News?

FQ3: The activists and students used Twitter to send out messages in the form of text, pictures, and videos, and to host Twitter Spaces. Damilare Arah (@Damilare), Nze (@Nzekiev), Chibuzor Rosemary Onwugbonu (@ChyLady), and Bayero Abduljaleel Adam (@jaleelbayero) were the most active participants in the #AfricansinUkraine campaign.

Bayero Abduljaleel Adam (@jaleelbayero), a 3rd-year medical student at Ternopil National Medical University, was a representative of both Nigerian and other African students studying in Ukraine. He told me in an interview that he started a daily Twitter Space where he met other students for up to an hour to follow up on individual developments. He recalled: “You’d have students basically from every [neighboring] country tell us about the experience there, what is going on in the country, and the process [of entry] there” (B. A. Adam, personal communication, November 27, 2022). Adam added:

We basically had to be sorting ourselves out. Some students went to Hungary. Hungary was a bit more lenient, compared to Poland, [where] students who went there were given, I think, 3 months permit instantly. Some of them were admitted as guest students in some universities for a period of time. For instance, those who moved to Germany said the country has a lot of bureaucracy. You have cities that do accept our students, but some do not.

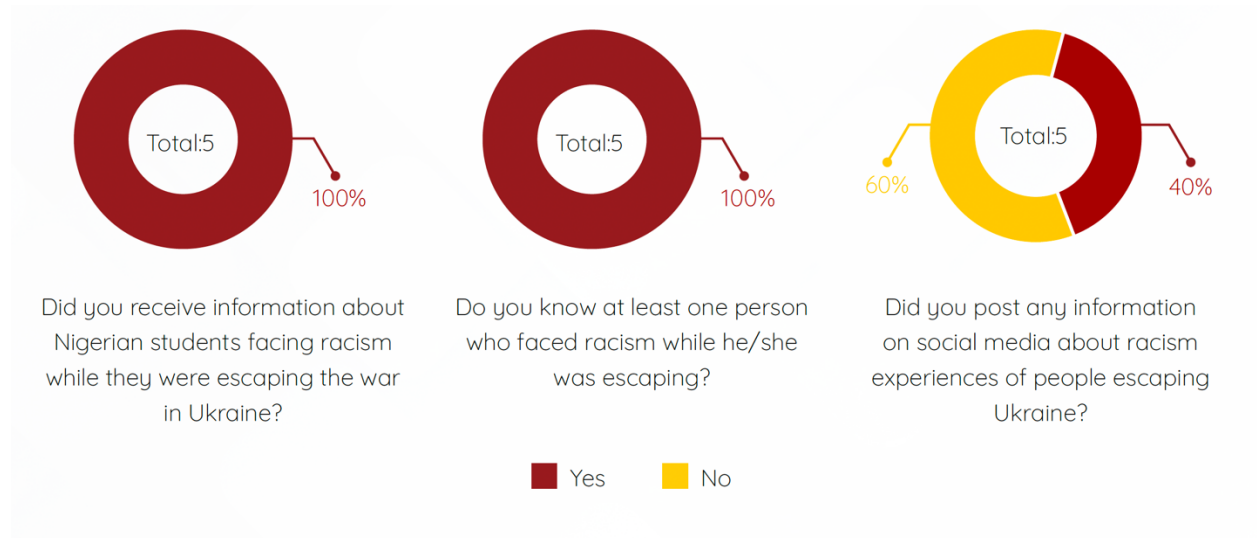
Chart 1

Responses from 10 Nigerian Students Who Escaped the War in Ukraine



Chart 2

Responses from Five Nonstudent Nigerians Interviewed about #AfricansinUkraine



Conclusion

The story behind the #AfricansinUkraine campaign is an unfortunate contemporary wartime case study of Black people being discriminated against because of their skin color. It brought home the fact that even during a national crisis, discrimination would still be seen. The sustained efforts of the students and activists in bearing witness and undertaking hashtag activism using #AfricansinUkraine assisted in reaching global audiences, including the mainstream media, which initially did not report on the plight of Black students at the Ukrainian border. Consistency in sending out the #AfricansinUkraine messages by students, activists, and the mainstream media forced Ukrainian authorities and their security agents to open the borders for Black students to leave the country. It also sped up the clearing process at borders where Black students were unnecessarily being delayed.

Shortcomings of the Study

The goal of this study is to make sense of the experiences of African students and volunteers involved in Black witnessing and hashtag activism in Ukraine. But during this study, I focused on Nigerians, bearing in mind the size of the student body from that country, as well as the fact that they dominated Twitter activity and media coverage. Other Black Africans affected who experienced the same discrimination were kept out of this study. Another shortcoming of this study were the occasional internet connectivity issues I experienced while in Nigeria, which hampered my ability to reach some of the student returnees who lived in rural areas.

Suggested Areas of Future Study

Further study on #AfricansinUkraine is needed to shed more light on Black witnessing and hashtag activism that occurred during the war in Ukraine. Researchers could further look at various elements including videos, audio, pictures, Twitter Space sessions, or memes posted on Twitter by Black witnesses stretching beyond the first 7 days covered in this study. Researchers could also study other social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Telegram, used by the Black witnesses in sharing information about the racism they faced with the hashtag.

Another area of study to explore is the experience of students who have had to go back to Ukraine to continue their studies even though the war is still ongoing because Ukrainian universities have not issued them transcripts to enable them to transfer to other institutions.

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