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RESEARCH ARTICLE

WhatsApp: An assemblage, a mnemonic community, and a site of counter-memory

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Abstract

This article examines how WhatsApp functions as a space where people shape collective memory and challenge dominant sociopolitical narratives. Focusing on Nigeria's Obidient movement, a youth-led campaign that supported Peter Obi in the 2023 presidential election, this article seeks to understand how everyday online interactions on WhatsApp produced alternative ways of remembering and forgetting. In other words, this articles asks, How did members of an unofficial Obidient WhatsApp group enact counter-memory practices regarding Nigeria's 2023 general elections? To answer this question, this study deployed the ethnographic approach and drew from Foucault's concept of counter-memory and assemblage theory to understand how memory, technology, and social interaction converged in dynamic ways. The results indicate that members of the WhatsApp group construct and circulate alternative narratives that challenge mainstream sociopolitical accounts. These results are discussed in two central themes: 'Counter-memory and the construction of alternative narrative' and 'WhatsApp as a mnemonic community and assemblage'. Through practices of circulating first-hand experiences and lived testimonies, evidence of electoral misconducts, and memories of past elections and protests, members collectively produced what the author described as a 'mnemonic community', a space where memory is created, negotiated, and sustained through interaction. However, these practices are not independent but are shaped by the interconnectedness of human (members of the group) and non-human (WhatsApp, smartphones, or multimedia content) factors. Overall, this article argues that messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, significantly shape how people remember and interpret sociopolitical movements and participation.

Keywords: assemblage; counter-memory; mnemonic community; Nigeria; obedient movement; WhatsApp

Introduction

In this age of digital technology, digital media have continuously shaped the enactment of memory. These media are referred to as technologies of memory (Sturken 2008; Van House and Churchill 2008; Hoskins 2009a). These technologies capture, store, and retrieve information about the past. Technologies, such as social media, play a critical role in shaping both the content and the form of collective memory. They also shape how the pasts are recalled, interpreted, and represented (Neiger 2024; Joanroy *et al.* 2025). In this article, I conceptualise

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WhatsApp as a site of counter-memory and as an assemblage. By counter-memory, this article describes WhatsApp as a space where Obidients engage in practices that challenge dominant State narratives. As an assemblage, the group can be understood as a convergence of human (the Obidients: admins or ordinary members) and non-human agents/infrastructures (WhatsApp, smartphones, or multimedia content) that come together to shape counter-memory practices.

The Obidient movement is centred around Peter Obi. Mr. Obi was the Labour Party's candidate in Nigeria's 2020 presidential election. He ran against two popular and established presidential candidates. These candidates are the current president, Bola Ahmed Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress, and Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party. Consequently, this youth and grassroots-oriented movement disrupted Nigeria's two-party dominance (Aboh and Akoi 2023; Agbim *et al.* 2023). Notably, the movement is characterised by its reliance on social media for mobilisation (Benaiah and Osuntoki 2024), and its supporters are popularly referred to as the Obidients.

Despite its widespread use in the Global South (Milan and Barbosa 2020), WhatsApp remains underexplored in memory studies, particularly in relation to collective and cultural memory. While research has examined its role in working memory in educational contexts (Aharony and Zion 2019; Almarzouki *et al.* 2022), little attention has been paid to how WhatsApp functions as a site for counter-memory, which are alternative memory practices that challenge dominant narratives.

Drawing on Foucault's (1977) concept of counter-memory and assemblage theory (Deleuze and Guattari 1988; DeLanda 2006), this article explores an unofficial WhatsApp group dedicated to the Obidient movement as platform for mobilisation and counter-memory practices. In other words, I attempt to understand how the interaction of human and non-human elements, such as members in the group, their conversations, WhatsApp affordances, and affect, come together to shape the movement. Specifically, this article attempts to answer this question: How did members of the unofficial Obidient WhatsApp group enact counter-memory practices with regard to the 2023 general elections?

To answer this question, I deployed Hine's (2015) embedded and embodied internet ethnography approach. The results from the data analysis led to the construction of two themes: 'Counter-memory and the construction of alternative narrative' and 'WhatsApp as a mnemonic community and assemblage'. These themes drive my argument why the Obidient WhatsApp group can be seen as a mnemonic community – a group of people connected by shared experiences who create and maintain common memories. They also indicate how the group functions as a space for counter-memory practices. At the same time, these themes support why I contend that the group is an assemblage.

Before discussing these themes, I review the dynamics of elections and memory politics in Nigeria, followed by a discussion of the centrality of WhatsApp in sociopolitical engagements. I then examine counter-memory and technologies of memory before theorising assemblage. In the other sections of this article, I outlined the methodology before presenting the results, and finally the conclusion.

Nigeria's elections and memory politics

In Nigeria, elections are moments of political contestation and critical sites of memory production and negotiation (Writer 2019). The interplay between electoral processes and memory politics reflects broader struggles over historical interpretation, political legitimacy, and collective identity in postcolonial Nigeria. In this context, memory politics is the strategic mobilisation of the past (Wang 2017), particularly prior electoral outcomes (Esteve-Del-Valle and Costa López 2023; Devarayapuram Ramakrishnan *et al.* 2024) to influence sociopolitical discourses. Nigeria's election history is marked by a series of

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ruptures and continuities. These disruptions include the annulment and memorialisation of the 12 June 1993 presidential election (Ibelema 2002), transitions from military to civilian rule (Ekanade and Odoemene 2012), recurring allegations of electoral fraud, and repeated outbreaks of post-election violence (Nwolise 2007; Sambo *et al.* 2024).

These historical experiences are not merely recalled in public discourse; they are reconstructed and contested by political actors, institutions, and the electorates. They are deployed to frame contemporary democratic practices (Guest Writer 2019). Election memory, as a consequence, becomes a tool through which different groups assert claims to justice, credibility, and representation. In Nigeria, political elites frequently invoke past elections to legitimise current agendas or to delegitimise opponents. They engage in selective memory practices that privilege certain narratives while silencing others. For instance, the invocation of the 12 June 1993 election has been constantly deployed both as a symbol of democratic betrayal and as a rallying point for renewed democratic commitment (Campbell 1994; Nwosu 2017). To memorialise the June 12 election, which has been dememorialised by former presidents and heads of state (Ekanade and Odoemene 2012), former president Muhammadu Buhari designated the country's Democracy Day (return from military to democratic governance) celebration to be on June 12 of every year (State House 2018). Similarly, memories of the 2007 and 2011 elections, characterised by widespread violence and electoral irregularities (Lewis 2003; Ibrahim 2007; Bello 2015), continue to shape public scepticism toward electoral institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (Adejumobi 2010; Madueke and Enyiazu 2025).

At the same time, memory politics of election is not confined to elite discourse. Ordinary citizens also engage in memory work. Citizens invoke local, communal, and personal experiences of past elections to inform their political choices and civic actions (Speck and Cervi 2016). These memory practices often manifest through storytelling, protest, memorialisation, and, increasingly, digital platforms. The rise in the use of social media in Nigeria has enabled connective memory-making, which allows individuals to share, circulate, and contest memories of electoral injustice in real time. Hashtags, viral videos, and digital activism function as technologies of memory (Van House and Churchill 2008) that save and amplify these collective grievances and aspirations.

Moreover, election and memory politics in Nigeria intersect with broader questions of national identity, regional marginalisation, and postcolonial governance (Isiaq *et al.* 2018; Mbah *et al.* 2019). Regional and ethnic narratives often resurface in electoral contexts, for instance, historical grievances, the marginalisation of the people of Southeastern Nigeria (Mbah *et al.* 2019), and the resource control struggles in the Niger Delta (Orogun 2010). These and related issues are constantly reinscribed into contemporary political debates. These intersecting memories reinforce or challenge dominant historical narratives and expose the uneven distribution of political power across Nigeria's geopolitical zones (Nwozor 2014). In this light, elections in Nigeria are not just democratic procedures but also memory-making events that reconfigure how history is understood and deployed in politics.

WhatsApp: A crucial tool in today's contemporary sociopolitical engagements

WhatsApp has constantly expanded as an essential platform, especially in the global majority countries (Udupa and Wasserman 2025). Going by this, Di Tullio and Gómez-Cruz (2025) point to three critical attributes of WhatsApp that are worth highlighting. First, despite WhatsApp's encryption, it serves as a key business platform in the Global South, where Meta accesses and exploits data from business accounts. Second, its flexible group features enable localised uses for communication and information sharing. Finally, Meta's zero-rating agreements with ISPs reinforce WhatsApp's dominance by restricting alternatives. These features have positioned the app as a 'technology of life' (Gómez-Cruz and

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Harindranath 2020), even in Nigeria (Statista 2025), where it has penetrated domains such as banking, healthcare, politics, and activism (Udenze *et al.* 2020; Imoka 2023; Udenze 2025).

As Milan and Barbosa (2020) highlight, WhatsApp is a discursive opportunity structure, which enables activists to bypass mainstream media and state surveillance. On a regional level, in Africa and the global majority more broadly, WhatsApp's significance for political communication and activist coordination is well documented (Fisher *et al.* 2024; Udenze 2025; Udupa and Wasserman 2025). While a detailed account of WhatsApp's affordances and business model lies beyond the scope of this article, these aspects have been extensively examined by other studies such as Santos and Faure (2018), Johns *et al.* (2023), and Udenze (2017). It is pertinent that I mentioned that, in this article, the widespread use of WhatsApp is not the starting point but from how insights gained through how its group features are used to create counter memory and build a mnemonic community in the Obidient movement.

Notwithstanding the above, WhatsApp, a popular and vital technology in the Global South (Milan and Barbosa 2020), remains underresearched in memory scholarship, especially in collective and cultural memory studies. While attention has focused more broadly on WhatsApp's role in digital activism (Milan and Barbosa 2020; Treré 2020; Udenze 2025), there is a dearth of studies on WhatsApp through the lens of collective memory (shared ways groups remember the past) or cultural memory (how traditions, media, and symbols preserve those memories over time) or, specifically, through the framework of counter-memory, that is, the act of memorialising differently, which challenges what we usually think of as the official or common narratives.

Counter-memory in the digital age: Technologies of memory and mediations of collective and connective memory

Foucault's (1977) concept of counter-memory argues about memory practices that challenge official histories and dominant narratives. For Foucault, rather than preserving the past as told by institutions of power, counter-memory uncovers suppressed voices and marginalised experiences. In other words, counter-memory offers alternative ways of understanding history and power. Historically, the production and legitimisation of public memory, which is often hegemonic, have been controlled by elite institutions and dominant groups. These elite groups shape collective narratives through formal commemorations, ritualised practices, and curated historical artifacts (Foucault 1977; Nora 1989).

Consequently, in this article, I contextualise hegemonic memory as the dominant and elite-produced narratives of the Nigerian situation. For instance, electoral narratives sustained by state institutions and mainstream media, which normalise irregularities and present flawed electoral processes as legitimate democratic outcomes. These narratives privilege continuity, elite authority, and national stability while marginalising citizens' lived experiences of exclusion and dissent. As such, hegemonic memory or practices are reinforced through performances mediated by government media, which also function as technologies of memory. These hegemonic memories are encoded and disseminated by the dominant mnemonic order, and they are often seen permanent and unchangeable, as if they have been hardened over time (Foucault 1977).

Digital media, however, challenge and reconfigure these established memory practices by fostering participatory, interconnected, and mediatised engagements. This reconfiguration is made possible through technological affordances and shifting sociocultural dynamics (Brown and Hoskins 2010; Keightley and Schlesinger 2014; Hoskins 2017). Connecting the preceding assertion to (Erll 2009; Erll 2017) argument in the concept of mnemonic premediation, collective memory can be understood as inherently shaped by mediation processes, ranging from spoken narratives to audiovisual and digital media. Given that all

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forms of collective remembrance are mediated, anticipatory responses to events, whether present or absent, should be seen as shaped through premediation, especially through digital media in the present age. Contemporary political movements increasingly exploit the affordances of digital media to interrogate and revise dominant historical discourses, particularly those that perpetuate impunity and marginalisation (Zamponi 2018; Merrill *et al.* 2020; Gaw and Bunquin 2024). Consequently, the concept of mnemonic community and assemblage in this era of technologies of memory serves as an analytical lens for exploring contemporary memory practices, which is an understudied topic in digital activism and collective memory, particularly in the context of the Obidient movement.

Technologies of memory, defined as tools and systems that capture, archive, and retrieve information about past events, play a crucial role in shaping both the content and the form of collective memory (Sturken 2008; Van House and Churchill 2008). These technologies preserve specific narratives and representations of the past and also structure how events are recalled, interpreted, and commemorated across time (Sturken 2008; Neiger 2024). By mediating access to memory and influencing the processes of remembering and forgetting, such technologies contribute to the construction of cultural memory (Erll 2008; Hoskins 2009a, 2009b; Assmann 2011). These technologies also shape public understanding of historical events (Gaw and Bunquin 2024) and embed particular ideological and political frameworks within commemorative practices. Through their material and symbolic functions, memory technologies, from photographs and archives to digital platforms such as WhatsApp, facilitate selective recall and emphasise certain perspectives over others. Consequently, they participate in the ongoing negotiation of historical meaning and identity (Sturken 2008; Hoskins 2009a; Joanroy *et al.* 2025).

In addition, the capacity of contemporary societies to record and preserve memory has expanded dramatically. This capacity encompasses a wide range of data, from interpersonal communications, such as emails and instant messaging, to routine physical activities captured by wearable devices and ubiquitous surveillance technologies (Van House and Churchill 2008).

This proliferation of memory traces reflects the increasing integration of digital technologies into everyday life, and the growing complexity and granularity with which personal and collective experiences are archived.

However, these records are not neutral; they are continuously shaped, filtered, and governed by a series of technical, institutional, human, and political decisions (Esposito 2017; Markham 2021; Smit *et al.* 2024). Such decisions determine what is recorded, how it is stored, who has access, and under what conditions these memories are retrieved or erased. Consequently, memory-making and preservation are deeply entangled within power structures, raising critical questions about surveillance, data governance, AI, privacy, and the politics of representation (Bugajska 2024; Hoskins 2024).

Concurrently, digital media has fundamentally transformed the very nature of memory practices. These media have shifted memory from primarily personal acts to increasingly public, collaborative, and participatory processes (Merrill *et al.* 2020; Gaw and Bunquin 2024). Whereas memories were once primarily created for private reflection or familial transmission (Waterston and Rylko-Bauer 2006; Lindley 2012), they are now frequently mobilised and circulated across global digital platforms, where they acquire new meanings in diverse sociopolitical contexts.

Within these new media environments, memory undergoes digitisation, a process that translates human experiences into binary codes and also mediates remembrance through complex, often opaque technological systems. Such systems include protocols, algorithms, and databases that shape what is remembered, how it is accessed, and by whom (Esposito 2017; Markham 2021; Joanroy *et al.* 2025). This transformation signals a profound reconfiguration of memory work, which embeds memory within networked and connective

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infrastructures (Hoskins 2011; Smit 2020), and sociotechnical assemblages that mediate both individual recollection and collective memory. This perspective recognises that memory in the digital age is no longer solely embedded within stable, institutionalised narratives but is instead produced and circulated within a dynamic and fluid 'new memory ecology' (Brown and Hoskins 2010, p. 94). In this ecology, memory is continually reconstructed through the evolving logics of digital media and the sociotechnical-cum-cultural practices of users who interact with these platforms.

The above dynamics highlights how digital infrastructures store memory and actively participate in its formation, fragmentation, and representation (Joanroy *et al.* 2025). In other words, digital platforms in contemporary memory-making make up both human and technological agencies (Hoskins 2024), which WhatsApp is a part of. By assembling dispersed individuals and their narratives, digital media, such as WhatsApp, creates participatory spaces for the collaborative construction of memory that departs from, and often contests, elite or institutionalised memories.

Furthermore, the practices of memorialisation through assemblages highlight the emancipatory potential of emerging memory technologies (Gaw and Bunquin 2024). Through the affordances of digital tools, such as the assemblage of networks and infrastructure, Gaw and Bunquin (2024) contend that through assemblages, activists mobilise memory as a means of resistance, enabling more inclusive and participatory modes that challenge dominant narratives and promote alternative historical accounts. Next, I elaborate on the theory of assemblage.

Theorising assemblage: A framework for analysing fluid and networked formations

The concept of assemblage, drawn from the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), DeLanda (2006), and Latour (2005), offers a flexible framework for analysing the dynamic configurations of heterogeneous elements. In contrast to more static or hierarchical models, assemblage refers to a contingent, emergent formation composed of diverse components or elements, both human and non-human, that come together to produce specific effects or capacities (Latour 2005; Nail 2017; Gaw and Bunquin 2024). Assemblages are characterised by their relationality, multiplicity, and processual nature (Sohn 2016). They are not unified wholes but rather open-ended constellations in constant flux. They are less defined by their internal cohesion than by the interactions and forces that hold them together at a given moment. As such, assemblages do not rely on essentialism or predetermined logics but are instead contextually situated, as in the case of the Obidient WhatsApp group. In the context of memory and digital activism research, theorising memory as an assemblage foregrounds the ways in which movement practices are shaped by the interaction of various elements, platform affordances, people, discourses, and sociopolitical conditions (Merrill *et al.* 2020; Gaw and Bunquin 2024).

In this article, assemblages are the relational configuration of human and non-human elements within the WhatsApp group that enables the circulation and contestation of dominant mnemonic narratives. As a consequence, assemblage as a theoretical lens enables researchers to trace how meaning, power, and resistance are embedded in individual elements and also emerge from their entangled relations. It offers a productive alternative to binary or linear models of causality. Instead, it emphasises the complexity, hybridity, and relational nature of sociocultural phenomena.

Furthermore, connective memory (Hoskins 2011), further elaborated by Smit (2020), expands our understanding of these assemblages in a mnemonic community (the WhatsApp group), which leverages the networked architecture and human practices on the platform. This structure facilitates the linking of personal expressions, allowing them to coalesce into loosely organised forms of connective action and mobilisation. Consequently, in this article,

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I expand the framework of assemblage, a way of understanding how different elements (the Obidients, WhatsApp, memories, emotions, and discourses) come together, to indicate that counter-memory is not just a reaction. I argue that it constitutes a significant mechanism capable of challenging hegemonic narratives and reshaping what is recognised as memory and truth within the Nigerian context.

Methodology and research design

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in interpretivist epistemology. Precisely, I deployed Hine's (2015) embedded and embodied internet ethnography. Ethnography is particularly appropriate for examining the lived experiences and social imaginaries produced in and through WhatsApp interactions (Barbosa and Milan 2019). As Bosch (2025) notes, in researching WhatsApp, this approach enables the interrogation of dominant narratives. It promotes a context-sensitive understanding of digital communication practices and amplifies the voices and experiences of marginalised communities that are often excluded from mainstream discourse.

WhatsApp was selected as the primary site of inquiry because of its widespread use in Nigeria (Statista 2025). It was also chosen because of its uniqueness as a semiprivate, encrypted space for personal and collective political engagement (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.* 2021). While other Obidient WhatsApp groups may exist, I selected this particular group because of its relative regional, ethnic, and religious heterogeneity. Furthermore, another reason for exploring the group is because it maintained sustained interaction across the pre- and post-election periods. There were over 80 members (Obidients) on the platform. I treat the group not as singular or representative but as an analytically bounded case for examining counter-memory practices within a single mnemonic community.

Data collection

I adopted an immersive engagement with the Obidient WhatsApp group. Over a 10-month period (October 2022 to July 2023), I maintained a semi-active and sustained presence in the group. The 10-month period covers the pre-election period, leading up to the 2023 general elections, and the post-election period. This ethnographic embeddedness enabled me to observe the practices and interactions within the group from an insider perspective while remaining reflexively aware of their interpretive positioning. The embodied dimension of the research was central to understanding how political discourse, counter-memory, and mobilisation unfolded in this digitally mediated community.

As a Nigerian and a participant-observer embedded in the group, I occupied an insider position that facilitated access and contextual understanding. However, this embeddedness also required reflexive engagement with my own political assumptions. My position allowed me to collect nuanced, contextualised data. My positionality also fostered a grounded understanding of the group's affective dynamics, political language, and digital vernaculars. By being embedded within the WhatsApp group's communicative ecology, I was able to trace how counter-memory, mnemonic community, and assemblage were co-constructed through text, voice notes, emojis, memes, and shared media.

To mitigate bias, I maintained a reflexive ethnographic journal, which I documented on a Google Doc. In addition, I treated conversations as situated narratives rather than representative truths. This methodological approach provided a valuable lens for me to comprehend how digital platforms like WhatsApp are a site of memory-making, resistance, and political community-making. Ethical approval was secured, and informed consent was obtained from the group administrators who debrief members about the study.

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Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 purposively sampled members from the group. These interviewees include group admins and active contributors (members of the group). Separate from the in-group participant observation, these 10 interlocutors voluntarily consented to partake in the interview. These interviewees are among the pioneers and people who joined the group in its early days. Although Guest *et al.* (2006) argue that qualitative interviewing reaches saturation at 12 interviews, I employed Malterud *et al.*'s (2016) concept of information power to argue that these 10 interlocutors, given their experiences, possess in-depth knowledge and rich information about the research. Specifically, these 10 interlocutors were among the early mobilisers and supporters of the movement during its formative phase in early 2022.

The interviewees are between the ages of 21 and 38. This is to say that most of the interviewees are categorised as youth in the Nigerian context, that is, ages 18–35 (National Youth Policy 2019). The interviewees were predominantly from Southern Nigeria and represented a range of ethnic backgrounds, including Yoruba, Igbo, Gbagyi, Efik, Urhobo, and Idoma, among others. At the convenience of the interlocutors, the interviews were conducted through digital platforms, such as WhatsApp and Zoom calls. The interviews lasted an average of 58 minutes. The interview questions revolved around their experience of the Obidient movement, the role of shared history in the group's political identity, and how the group fostered a sense of collective memory and mobilisation.

Data analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative, reflexive, and inductive–deductive thematic approach informed by Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach to reflexive thematic analysis. Rather than imposing predefined themes from the literature, I began the analytical process with close, repeated engagement with the data. This approach allowed me to identify patterns from the data while remaining sensitised to key theoretical concepts such as counter-memory and assemblage. The dataset comprised two distinct but complementary components. Part A consisted of ethnographic data generated through embedded and embodied participation in the WhatsApp group. This included naturally occurring group interactions, such as text messages, voice notes, emojis, memes, shared images and videos, and screenshots of polling-unit incidents. It also includes my reflexive fieldnotes, which document affective atmospheres, interactional dynamics, moments of contestation, and shifts in group discourse across the pre- and post-election phases. Part B consisted of the 10 semi-structured interviews, which provided retrospective and interpretive accounts of my interlocutors' experiences, motivations, and reflections on memory, mobilisation, and WhatsApp use.

I commenced the analysis with a familiarisation phase, during which I read all interview transcripts and fieldnotes, while also revisiting key group interactions iteratively. I documented initial observations as analytic memos. At this stage, no formal coding categories were imposed. Instead, I paid attention to recurrent practices (e.g., sharing electoral evidence, invoking past protests, or affirming collective identity), discursive patterns (e.g., framing elections as 'stolen' or 'normalised fraud'), and affective expressions (e.g., anger, hope, or solidarity). Following familiarisation, I uploaded all the materials to Taguette for systematic coding. I should mention that Taguette is a free and open-source platform for analysing qualitative data. I constructed initial codes inductively from the data, and they were descriptive rather than theoretical (e.g., *sharing polling-unit videos*, *recalling EndSARS*, *first-time voter narratives*, *screenshots as proof*, and *emotional affirmation through emojis*). As coding progressed, I refined these data-driven codes, which were iteratively refined and clustered through constant comparison across data. At this stage, I used theoretically informed concepts such as *counter-memory, assemblage*, and *mnemonic community* as analytical tools to interpret patterns already identified in the data.

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Interestingly, I observed some differences between the two data sources. The embedded ethnographic data highlighted how memory-making occurs in real time. It indicates how counter-memories are collaboratively produced through digital content, affective exchanges, and the platform affordances. In contrast, the interviews provided reflective narratives that helped explain why participants interpreted these practices as politically meaningful and how they situated them within longer trajectories of Nigerian electoral history and youth activism.

Rather than treating one dataset as primary, insights from each were used to interrogate and deepen the other. Through the iterative process of coding, comparison, and theoretical abstraction, I initially constructed three provisional thematic categories. These were subsequently refined, collapsed, and rearticulated through further engagement with the data and analytic memos, which resulted in two definite themes: 'Counter-memory and the construction of alternative narratives' and 'WhatsApp as a mnemonic community and assemblage'. These themes are therefore not treated as static outcomes but as analytically constructed interpretations grounded in sustained engagement with empirical data.

Given the sensitive nature of political discourse and the semiprivate feature of WhatsApp communications, I followed the Association of Internet Researchers (2019) ethical guidelines for internet research. Pseudonyms were used for the participants, and identifiable information such as images from the group was minimally used. In the next section, I discuss the two themes.

Counter-memory and the construction of alternative narratives

As mentioned earlier, the concept of counter-memory (Foucault 1977) is central to understanding the political stakes embedded in mnemonic communities. As we will see in this theme, counter-memory practices contested hegemonic discourses that normalise electoral irregularities, legitimise elite political dominance, and marginalise youth-led political dissent. For instance, through the circulation first-hand testimonies, visual evidence of electoral malpractices, and memories of past elections and protests such as the #EndSARS, the participants rearticulate electoral history through lived experience. With this practice, members positioned the WhatsApp group as a site of counter-hegemonic memory-making rather than elite mediation.

In Nigerian electoral politics, religion and ethnicity operate as hegemonic frames shaping political legitimacy and voter alignment. It is often mobilised to portray elections as ethno-religious contests. During the 2023 elections, the Obidient movement was frequently framed in mainstream discourse as an ethnically Southern and Christian project, a narrative that sought to undermine its national credibility. Against this backdrop, exchanges within the WhatsApp group highlight counter-mnemonic practices that explicitly resisted these dominant narratives. For example, when one member stated that 'your religion does not matter here', others responded by affirming cross-cutting identities: 'I am Edo and a Muslim, and my very good friend G is here and she is a Christian'. Other responses followed, such as 'A better Nigeria does not know tribe or religion' and 'Our gathering here is far more important than Igbo, Hausa, any tribe or religion'.

These responses express individual tolerance and collectively work to contest the hegemonic assumption that political belonging in Nigeria must be organised along ethno-religious lines. By foregrounding plural identities and shared political aspirations, group members reconstructed electoral memory around inclusivity and national unity rather than sectarian difference. Such interactions function as counter-memory by challenging how Nigerian elections are conventionally remembered and narrated, as inevitable contests between religious and ethnic blocs. Through everyday digital exchanges, the group

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produces an alternative mnemonic narrative in which political mobilisation is grounded in civic ideals rather than inherited identity categories.

Similarly, there were counter-mnemonic practices that resist the tendency of hegemonic narratives to marginalise or erase oppositional narratives in terms of elections in the country. For instance, during the 2023 electoral cycle, several state media downplayed voter suppression, electoral violence, and institutional bias. During an interview with one of my interlocutors, a 29-year-old man, he narrated:

> On TV they kept saying the election was peaceful and credible, but what we experienced was completely different. In the WhatsApp group, people were sharing videos and voice notes from polling units, and you could see it was not just one place. It made it clear that what they were calling 'normal' was actually systematic.

In addition, members of the group shared personal accounts of disenfranchisement and violence during the election and from past elections, for instance, videos and still images of local polling incidents. These images generate and stand as an alternative record and memory. In other words, members re-enact and reinterpret historical narrative to challenge prevailing power structures. Similarly, members engaged in memory work by recalling ideas and demands from the EndSARS movement to address current electoral grievances. This practice created a sense of continuity in collective memory. For instance, Drag, an Uber driver in the city of Abuja, narrated in the interview: '... We all want better leadership in Nigeria... it is the same as the EndSARS movement'. Another interviewee, Kems, a civil servant in her mid-thirties remarked, 'Most of us on WhatsApp are youths, it is almost a similar thing we clamored for in 2020 during EndSARS protest'.

In the group, there were memes that satirised colonial legacies. For instance, there was a meme of Lord Lugard, former colonial Governor-General of Nigeria, with the inscription: Na me put una here oo (In standard English: I am the one that put you people in this situation). Furthermore, in the group, there were comments on the domineering political dynasty of Northern Nigeria. For instance, a comment says: 'One tribe has dominated top political positions since independence...the south and particularly a candidate from the Eastern region should be the next president'. Furthermore, there was an image (Figure 1) detailing how the naira, Nigeria's currency, kept depreciating under the watch of different presidents and heads of states from the late 1970s to 2025.

These narratives encode historical critique into digital forms, enabling broader participation in political discourse. As such, counter-memory narrative in the group operates across registers of texts and images. These mediated fragments served as evidence and counter-memory practices in digital mobilisation and solidarity. Essentially, counter-memory in the context of the WhatsApp engagement is what I may call a temporary archive. As Assmann (1999, 2008) suggests, it is essential to note that I did not consider archive in this context as the polar opposite of memory. Instead, it constitutes a liminal space situated between forgetting and remembering, where its contents are preserved in a latent state within an intermediary zone of deferred activation. Similarly, it embodies a dialectical engagement within a continuous dynamic, in which acts of storage and processes of interpretation operate in alternating tension and interplay (Assmann 1999, 2008).

Despite this spectrum of archive, the sustained production and dissemination of counter-memory remain vital to the identity and legitimacy of the Obidient movement. In a context where official histories are often weaponised against dissent, constructing alternative narratives becomes a political act that shapes public memory. Counter-memory practices in the WhatsApp group enable members to locate themselves within a trajectory of struggle, which offers affective dimensions and strategic direction. It affirms the moral authority of

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NIGERIAN PRESIDENTS & VALUE OF NAIRA TO $1				
President	Start Rate (N/$)	End Rate (N/$)	% Change	Months in Service
Shagari	0.75	0.75	0%	52 months
Buhari	0.75	0.90	20%	20 months
Babangida	0.90	21.89	2,332.22%	96 months
Shonekan	21.89	21.89	0%	3 months
Abacha	21.89	21.89	0%	54 months
Abdulsalami	21.89	94.88	333.18%	11 months
Obasanjo	94.88	127.55	34.43%	96 months
Yar'Adua	127.56	150.31	17.84%	36 months
Jonathan	150.31	197.00	31.06%	63 months
Buhari	197.00	461.60	134.33%	96 months
Tinubu	461.60	1,575.69	241.43%	15 months

Figure 1. The depreciating naira under different presidents/heads of states.

the movement by foregrounding the voices and experiences that hegemonic accounts seek to marginalise.

Moreover, counter-memory is not solely backward-looking. It projects alternative thinking and futures. By recalling past betrayals and articulating present injustices, the Obidient WhatsApp community envisioned new political possibilities rooted in accountability, equity, and youth agency. This temporal orientation, the oscillation between memory and aspiration, fuels continued engagement and sustains hope within a framework of assemblage. Building on the discussion on this theme and additional data, in the next theme, I discussed the theoretical implications of the practices in the group through the theoretical lens of assemblage.

WhatsApp as a mnemonic community and assemblage

Collective memory, as Halbwachs (1925) and subsequent theorists argue, is a repository of the past and a dynamic, socially embedded process through which the past is continuously reconstructed in light of present concerns. In the digital age, these processes unfold through new media infrastructures or technologies of memory that shape how memory is produced, circulated, and retained. In the context of this article, WhatsApp, with its affordance, represents an example of such memory technology. It operates as a mnemonic community and a charged social space where counter-memory is curated through mediated engagement, symbolic exchange, and participatory negotiation.

The Obidient movement's WhatsApp groups exemplify a digital mnemonic community in action and expand Brown and Hoskins's (2010, p. 94) argument of a 'new memory ecology'. Based on my ethnographic and interview data, it becomes evident that memory-making is not confined to institutional channels. It is embedded in the group members' routine, everyday interactions. For instance, I observed how first-time voters recounted their political awakening and disenchantment in voice notes or text messages. Similarly,

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interview data revealed the same. Jids, who identified as a postgraduate student, asserted during the interview: 'Seriously, being in that group inspired me to vote... before now I have never voted'. These personal testimonies are rarely left unacknowledged. Instead, they are responded to and emotionally affirmed, especially through emojis such as the trophy, fire, and clapping hands emojis. One interlocutor, a 27-year-old indigene of Enugu state, described how sharing her experience of voter suppression on the group during the February 2023 elections led to supportive responses, including voice notes of similar experiences. The 27-year-old said, 'When I wrote about my experience in our group, if you search, you will see other people's stories. I am not the only person who witnessed voter intimidation'. Relatedly, there were memes invoking historical patterns of electoral manipulation. Such examples illustrate that these narratives are not isolated anecdotes but dynamic catalysts for memory activation and group mobilisation.

A significant dimension of mnemonic work was the appropriation and remixing of cultural artefacts, often in hybrid and affective forms. Protest songs from the #EndSARS movements were recontextualised with updated lyrics, remixed beats, and paired with viral memes referencing recent electoral injustice. This cultural remix strengthens the affective angle of collective memory. It also renders it adaptable to the shifting political moment. Consequently, WhatsApp becomes a site where history is remembered and reperformed through affective soundscapes, visual memes, and emoji-driven affirmations. These practices expand the theory of assemblage (Latour 2005; DeLanda 2006; Gaw and Bunquin 2024). The WhatsApp mnemonic community is not a fixed entity but an emergent assemblage of human (the Obidients: admins or ordinary members) and non-human agents/infrastructures (WhatsApp, smartphones, or multimedia content). In addition, memory work in this context is not linear or top-down. It is relational, multi-scalar, and contingent. It is shaped by the interplay of technological affordances, emotional intensities, and sociopolitical contexts.

Furthermore, the interviews revealed how users reflect on the materiality and temporality of their mnemonic practices. One respondent, a 31-year-old apprentice, noted that voice notes are 'more real than texts' because 'you can hear the pain'. This suggests that sound as a medium carries mnemonic weight differently than text. In the group, members described the storing of screenshots and chat histories as 'keeping receipts', which signals an anticipatory dimension of memory tied to possible future legal, moral, or social reckonings. Members' participation in the circulation of these memory artefacts is more than expressive. It is constitutive of the group identity. These practices suggest how WhatsApp functions as a mnemonic community and as a distributed memory assemblage, one that is affectively charged, socially negotiated, and technologically mediated.

In addition, the dialogic nature of memory in the WhatsApp group cannot be overstated. Memory is not imposed but constantly contested, reframed, and debated. As I mentioned earlier, group members challenge dominant historical interpretations, sometimes sparking emotionally charged exchanges over political truth, legacy, and justice. This type of engagement distinguishes the WhatsApp mnemonic community from traditional memory institutions. This community is participatory and affective and shaped by internal dynamics. Overall, the mnemonic practices in the Obidient WhatsApp group exemplifies the reconfiguration of collective memory in digital spaces and the emergence of memory as an assemblage, distributed across media, bodies, and infrastructures.

While the WhatsApp group as a mnemonic community provides a relatively secure and intimate space for mnemonic practices, it is not immune to infiltration or manipulation. For instance, as I observed, the admins do not have clear strategies to ascertain who is a genuine Obidient. Consequently, state actors may partake in this assemblage. They may monitor WhatsApp groups by planting spies to track the dissemination of contentious content or co-opt symbolic materials to discredit oppositional narratives. This underscores the ambivalent nature of this type of digital mobilisation and engagement.

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Conclusion

This article has attempted to understand how members of an Obidient WhatsApp group enacted counter-memory in relation to Nigeria's 2023 general elections. It also explored how the group functioned as a mnemonic community and an assemblage. Drawing on embedded and embodied internet ethnography, Foucault's counter-memory, and an assemblage-informed analytical framework, this article demonstrates that the WhatsApp group is a conduit for political communication and a socio-technical environment in which memory, identity, and mobilisation are co-produced through everyday digital practices. The results indicate that counter-memory within the group operated across multiple registers: discursive, affective, visual, and infrastructural. These practices challenged dominant narratives that normalise electoral irregularities, ethnicise political dissent, and marginalise youth-led mobilisation. By foregrounding lived experience, plural identities, and civic ideals, members rearticulated Nigerian electoral memory in ways that emphasised accountability, inclusion, and political agency. Importantly, these counter-mnemonic practices were sustained through WhatsApp's group affordances. These affordances enabled circulation, dialogic engagement, and the accumulation of a temporal and socially negotiated archive of dissent.

Conceptually, this article advances scholarship in memory studies and digital activism by theorising WhatsApp as an assemblage composed of human and non-human agents actors. This relational perspective suggests that counter-memory does not reside in content alone but emerges from the interaction between platform structures, communicative practices, and broader sociopolitical contexts. In extending the notion of mnemonic communities to encrypted, semiprivate messaging apps, such as WhatsApp, I highlight how counter-memory in the digital age is collaboratively produced, continuously contested, and periodically reactivated through networked participation. In this sense, the WhatsApp group operates simultaneously as a site of memory, a space of political sense-making, and an infrastructure for connective action.

The implications of this study extend beyond the Nigerian context. In politically constrained or distrustful environments, encrypted messaging platforms such as WhatsApp can function as critical infrastructures for counter-memory. At the same time, I underscore the ambivalence of such platforms. While WhatsApp affords relatively intimate and secure spaces for memory-making and mobilisation, these same assemblages remain vulnerable to surveillance, infiltration, and co-optation. Consequently, digital counter-memory therefore appears not as a definite achievement but as an ongoing process shaped by shifting technological, political, and social conditions.

Notwithstanding the substantial contribution of this work, it is limited in some aspects. It focuses on a single WhatsApp group and does not claim representativeness of the broader Obidient movement. Future research could adopt comparative approaches across platforms, movements, or national contexts, as well as longitudinal designs to examine the durability of mnemonic communities beyond electoral moments. Nonetheless, by centring WhatsApp as a technology of counter-memory and theorising its role through assemblage, this article contributes to a nuanced understanding of how digital platforms reshape the politics of memory, resistance, and democratic imagination in contemporary networked societies.

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