

**FROM HASHTAGS TO HARMONY OR DISCORD? NAVIGATING SOCIAL MEDIA  
COMMUNICATIONS FOR PEACE IN NIGERIA'S PLURAL SOCIETY**

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**ABSTRACT**

In Nigeria's deeply fragmented society, social media has emerged as both a platform for civic engagement and a fuel for increased social division. This study examined the impact of online narratives, dominant communication patterns, and digital interactions on peacebuilding and conflict dynamics in diverse Nigerian communities. The study objectives were to: i. identify patterns of dominant digital communication and narrative construction; ii. assess the influence of social media on societal polarisation in Nigeria's online spaces; and iii. explore the capacity of social media as a catalyst for digital peacebuilding. A descriptive study design was employed to elucidate the complex dynamics of online interactions. The theoretical framework leverages Networked Public Sphere Theory, defining social media as digitally mediated environments where users engage in horizontal communication that challenges narratives and forms collective identities, thereby facilitating critical examination of online discourse and social cohesiveness. Research indicated that social media platforms exhibit dual characteristics: they promote participatory involvement and collective mobilisation for peace while simultaneously intensifying identity-based polarisation through echo chambers and emotionally charged narratives. Strategic framing, inclusive messaging, and non-violent digital activism are vital methods through which social media can advance peacebuilding objectives. The research determined that user behaviour, narrative formation, and platform attributes, rather than intrinsic polarisation, influence the effects of digital environments. Recommendations include the necessity for legislative measures, digital literacy efforts, platform moderation, and civil society mobilisation to use social media as a driver for peace while mitigating its potential for societal disintegration.

**Keywords:** Communications, Hashtags, Nigeria, Peace, Plural Society, Social Media

**Introduction**

The emergence of social media has transformed global communication patterns, altering how individuals, groups, and institutions formulate narratives, mobilise identities, and negotiate power in public domains. The intricate plurality of Nigeria, marked by ethnic, religious, regional, and political diversity, renders this shift especially significant. Digital platforms like X (previously

Twitter), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram have broadened the communication landscape beyond conventional gatekeeping frameworks, facilitating participatory dialogue and instantaneous interaction across diverse online communities. Thus, social media has become a framework for peaceful advocacy while simultaneously serving as a contentious platform that exacerbates polarisation, misinformation, and identity-related conflicts.

The emergence of social media in Nigeria interconnects with the expansion of political communication and civic involvement. Empirical data demonstrates that digital platforms have altered election discourse and public engagement by enabling direct communication between political figures and citizens while simultaneously expediting the dissemination of misinformation and polarising narratives (Chukwu, 2025). This dichotomy highlights the contradiction of social media as a democratising technology that amplifies voice and visibility but simultaneously creates communicative distortions that might exacerbate societal differences. In pluralistic cultures, where identity politics and historical grievances converge, algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged content can exacerbate hostile narratives and undermine social cohesion.

Nigeria's recent socio-political developments starkly exemplify this contradiction. Hashtag-driven movements like "Bring Back Our Girls" and "End SARS" highlighted the ability of internet activism to mobilise international solidarity, attract policy attention, and highlight human security issues. Research on the #EndSARS protests reveals that social media facilitated mobilisation, accountability, and the documentation of violations, while simultaneously intensifying grievances and raising tensions that contributed to instability (Augustine, 2023; Bello et al., 2023). These dynamics illustrate the communicative potency of hashtags as symbolic constructs that can convert fragmented sentiments into unified action, thus influencing both peace-orientated advocacy and conflictual mobilisation.

Beyond protest contexts, social media increasingly influences everyday information consumption and perception formation. Research on news credibility in Nigeria highlights how digital platforms have become primary information sources while simultaneously fostering environments where fake news and unverifiable claims circulate widely (Aondover et al., 2024). Such informational vulnerabilities are consequential for peacebuilding efforts because distorted narratives and hate speech can reinforce stereotypes, legitimise hostility and trigger offline tensions. Emerging studies on online discourse, including hate speech datasets targeting different ethnic groups, further reveal

how digital communication may reproduce identity-based conflict and symbolic violence within Nigeria's online spaces (Ibebunjo, 2023).

Nonetheless, the communicative capabilities of social media offer unparalleled chances for peacebuilding. Academics assert that digital platforms foster youth engagement, intercultural discourse, and inclusive nation-building by promoting mobilisation around common values and collective ambitions (Sokoga, 2024). Peace advocacy organisations and civil society entities are increasingly leveraging social media to communicate peaceful messages, counteract violent narratives, and promote discussions across divides, indicating the rise of digital peacebuilding as an auxiliary aspect of conflict transformation. Notwithstanding these potentials, the empirical literature reveals a relative scarcity of research examining how particular communicative practices, narrative framing, and algorithmic dynamics influence peace outcomes among Nigeria's diverse online communities (Monsurat & Adisa, 2025).

Empirical research indicates that social media has emerged as a principal information environment for several Nigerians, transforming political engagement and public discourse. The lack of effective gatekeeping and the algorithmic emphasis on emotionally provocative content have facilitated the spread of misinformation, incendiary discourse, and echo chambers that exacerbate identity-based polarisation (Castells, 2012). These processes are especially troublesome in conflict-prone environments, as skewed narratives can incite moral panic, exacerbate intergroup distrust, and legitimise hostile actions. Research on digital disinformation in Nigeria's farmer-herder conflict demonstrates that invented or exaggerated online narratives have heightened experiences of threat and exacerbated tensions between communities.

Simultaneously, digital channels have demonstrated their ability to galvanise collective action and enhance peaceful narratives. Hashtag activism in campaigns like "Bring Back Our Girls" and "End SARS" demonstrates how social media can cultivate solidarity, enhance global awareness, and advocate for justice. Research suggests that these communicative processes frequently produce mixed outcomes: they promote voice and visibility, yet they can also exacerbate grievance articulation, polarise discourse, and foster averse digital publics (Uwalaka, 2022). Thus, the communication methods inherent in hashtag activism can concurrently promote peace advocacy and perpetuate conflictual narratives, underscoring the complexity of digital mobilisation in many communities.

Another further aspect of the issue pertains to the rise of hate speech and identity-driven animosity in Nigeria's digital environments. Computational analyses of Nigerian social media discourse indicate enduring patterns of racially and religiously motivated hate speech that mirror offline tensions and perpetuate preconceptions. This discursive antagonism undermines societal cohesion and complicates peacebuilding endeavours by normalising exclusionary narratives and decreasing opportunities for constructive conversations. In diverse online communities, where interactions often span cultural and ideological divisions, these communicative distortions may jeopardise trust and decrease the normative basis of peaceful partnership.

Despite the growing academic focus on digital activism, misinformation, and online hate speech in Nigeria, considerable gaps persist. Current research typically analyses these issues in isolation, concentrating individually on political communication, protest mobilisation, or informational disorders. Research on how routine social media interactions in diverse online communities influence peacebuilding results, especially regarding narrative framing, communicative norms, and platform affordances, remains limited and lacks systematic investigation. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical comprehension of how users navigate conflicting narratives of peace and war throughout regular internet interactions, outside isolated protest instances.

The lack of such integrative analysis limits both theoretical and practical applications. From a theoretical standpoint, it obscures the communication mechanisms via which digital discourse shifts from connected engagement to polarising conflict. From a policy and peacebuilding standpoint, it constrains the formulation of evidence-based strategies for using social media as a positive instrument for conversation, reconciliation, and social cohesion. Thus, it is imperative to rigorously analyse the functioning of social media communications among Nigeria's diverse online groups and determine the circumstances that promote cohesion or propagate conflict.

This study examines the core issue of comprehending the contradictory function of social media communication inside Nigeria's digital public realm. This research investigates the communicative dynamics inherent in hashtags, narratives, and daily online interactions to elucidate how social media can either foster peacebuilding or exacerbate divisions. This finding is crucial to boost digital peacebuilding research and shape actions that seek to convert Nigeria's online communication environments into platforms for constructive commitment as opposed to polarisation.

## **Research Objectives**

The objectives established to address our inquiry effectively include:

- i. Analyse the prevailing communicative patterns and narrative frames in social media interactions in Nigeria's complex society.
- ii. Examine the role of social media communication in fostering social cohesiveness or polarisation, within both online and offline communities in Nigeria.
- iii. Evaluate the effectiveness of social media as an instrument for digital peacebuilding in Nigeria.

## **Conceptual Review**

### **Hashtags**

Hashtags are a significant feature of social media communication; they serve as symbolic indicators that organise discourse, improve information retrieval, and facilitate the building of collective identity. Originally functioning as metadata identifiers for content classification, hashtags have evolved into powerful discursive tools that can shape issues, mobilise the public, and affect narrative visibility in digital environments (Bruns & Burgess, 2015). Their expressive effectiveness is in their ability to condense complex issues or aspirations into concise, memorable statements that can be easily replicated and shared across networks. In this study, hashtags serve as more than just symbolic markers for organising discourse. Any advancement or element that is used to emphasise or amplify a specific issue on any social media site is considered a hashtag. Consequently, it may pose a challenge (phrase, tune, dance step, culinary competition, language, etc.).

Consequent upon our conceptual underpinning, hashtags have a dual function of generating and amplifying hostile discourses, with competing frames or ideologies vying for supremacy. This frequently results in fractured public animosity, particularly in pluralistic cultures such as Nigeria, where hashtags associated with ethnic, religious, and political identities bolster in-group solidarity while concurrently exacerbating out-group animosity (Jackson, et al., 2020). This underscores the crucial role of hashtags as discourse platforms that contest narratives of justice, peace, and conflict, whether positive or negative.

### **Digital peacebuilding**

Digital peacebuilding has become a prominent and lasting field of inquiry and practice in contemporary peace and conflict studies. This is the result of the ongoing integration of

information and communication technologies into peace and conflict management processes. Digital peacebuilding refers to the deliberate use of digital platforms, including tools and communication networks, to promote peacebuilding objectives such as intergroup conversation, early warning systems, counter-narrative dissemination, political involvement, and inclusive participation.

Due to its prevalence and cost-effectiveness, digital peacebuilding has facilitated a significant transition in society from state-centric and elite-driven peace processes to more inclusive, participatory, and networked methodologies. Paffenholz (2010) draws attention to the importance of inclusive peacebuilding, contending that enduring peace relies on the substantive involvement of civil society and grassroots participants.

Digital technologies have broadened this participatory arena by facilitating debate, experience sharing, and contributions to peace projects among geographically separated people, all in real time and without physical limitations. In a profoundly divided nation like Nigeria, where physical, cultural, and socio-political disparities sometimes obstruct direct encounter, these digital platforms offer alternate venues for engagement and narrative exchange, often to the nation's detriment.

### **Social media communications**

Social media communications denote the mechanisms by which individuals, groups, and institutions generate, distribute, and understand information on digital platforms. Unlike traditional media, which is often unidirectional and under the control of professional gatekeepers, social media enables interactive, interconnected, and instantaneous communication. This paradigm shift significantly affects societal cohesion, political mobilisation, and peacebuilding, especially in pluralistic environments like Nigeria.

The theoretical underpinnings of social media communication are derived from network theory, participatory communication, and digital sociology. Network theory underscores the transmission of information through nodes (users) and edges (relationships), illustrating how pivotal characters and closely knit communities influence narrative propagation (Castells, 2012). Participatory communication emphasises the empowerment of ordinary users in content creation, public opinion formation, and social outcome influence (Servaes, 2008). In pluralistic societies, these interconnected and interactive aspects facilitate the engagement of diverse voices while simultaneously fostering vulnerabilities that enable the proliferation of echo chambers, identity-driven narratives, and disinformation.

### **Plural online communities**

Online communities consist of individuals engaging on digital platforms based on common interests, objectives, or identities, establishing social connections and collaborative environments that may reflect or differ from offline relationships (Rheingold, 1993; Preece, 2000). These communities are defined by continuous engagement, common norms, and a sense of belonging that facilitates knowledge exchange, action coordination, and collaborative meaning-making across various virtual environments. Communicative activities in online communities, posting, commenting, sharing, and reacting, create dynamic networks that organise the information flow and shape social behaviours.

The introduction of plurality in online communities highlights multiple, intersecting identities and opinions. Numerous online communities in Nigeria exemplify the nation's ethnic, religious, linguistic, and ideological diversity. They consist of several subgroups and clusters, each with unique experiences and communication methods, while functioning inside a common digital environment. Plural online communities can thus be defined as digital microcosms of society, where diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives converge, interact, and negotiate meaning—creating settings that can both promote cohesion and intensify conflict.

This dual potential reflects the contradictory dynamics examined in earlier sections regarding hashtags, social media communication, and digital peacebuilding. Hashtags function as symbolic anchors within these groups, creating collective frameworks that can either unify members around shared goals or amplify conflicting narratives (Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Uwalaka, 2022). Social media communications facilitate interactions across subgroups by promoting participatory discourse and grassroots mobilisation while simultaneously subjecting communities to disinformation, hate speech, and polarising content (Gillespie, 2018).

### **Theoretical Framework: Networked public sphere theory**

The theory of the networked public sphere was proposed by Manuel Castells in his influential publication, *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012). The theory is founded on Jürgen Habermas's prior notion of the public sphere (1962/1989), which highlighted rational-critical discourse within tangible civic environments. Castells expands this framework in relation to digital communication, contending that the emergence of the internet and social media has altered public discourse into a decentralised, networked system where communication disseminates horizontally rather than hierarchically.

The theory asserts that digital platforms, especially social media, serve as interactive environments where individuals and groups collaboratively create meaning, formulate narratives, and organise collective action. In contrast to traditional media systems defined by hierarchical information distribution, the networked public sphere facilitates participatory communication, empowering users to influence agendas, elevate marginalised voices, and challenge prevailing narratives. Mechanisms like hashtags, viral content, and online campaigns act as focal points that attract attention and enable collective engagement among geographically distant groups (Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Castells, 2012).

This theory is pertinent to the current study as it explains the impact of cultural variations on communication and bargaining in digitally mediated contexts. In a varied culture such as Nigeria, networked public spaces arise from online interactions among individuals of various ethnic, religious, and ideological backgrounds. Such interactions typically mould perceptions, strengthen identities, and affect conflict dynamics in both online and offline contexts. Digital discussions on sensitive topics can either promote mutual understanding or intensify divisions, contingent upon the construction and interpretation of cultural narratives (Ibebunjo, 2023).

A significant shortcoming of the Networked Public Sphere Theory is its propensity to overstate the democratising potential of digital platforms while neglecting structural limits such as algorithmic bias, digital divisions, misinformation, and the emergence of echo chambers. These elements can disrupt public discourse and exacerbate polarisation instead of fostering inclusive conversation (Sunstein, 2018). In contexts such as Nigeria, where access to digital resources and media literacy are disparate, these constraints may profoundly impact the quality and inclusivity of online engagement, resulting in the further silencing of marginalised voices and a reduction in the potential for constructive dialogue.

Notwithstanding this limitation, the theory stays exceptionally appropriate for this inquiry. The problem is mitigated by incorporating insights from complementary viewpoints on media effects and digital inequality, thus addressing concerns related to access, representation, and power imbalances in online environments. The study offers a more sophisticated application of the networked public sphere paradigm by recognising both the liberating and restrictive aspects of digital communication. Thus, the theory is upheld as the most suitable framework owing to its robust explanatory capacity in examining how social media-mediated interactions influence communication patterns, cultural interpretations, and conflict dynamics in modern society.

## **Empirical literature review**

Empirical research on social media and peacebuilding in Nigeria demonstrates a dual nature of online interaction, underscoring both its ability to foster social cohesiveness and its tendency to intensify conflict. Uwalaka (2022) illustrates that the #EndSARS movement used social media to organise scattered youth, fostering solidarity across ethnic and religious boundaries while simultaneously revealing underlying polarisation within online networks. Augustine (2023) emphasises that online activism can influence offline civic involvement and policy discussions, strengthening the connection between digital campaigns and tangible results.

Recent researches by Ibebunjo (2023, 2025) elucidates these patterns, giving vital information about the mechanisms of digital tribalism and non-violent resistance. Ibebunjo (2025) elucidates how identity-centric clustering and algorithmic amplification in Nigeria's digital environments exacerbate ethnoreligious polarisation, highlighting the difficulties posed by echo chambers and emotionally charged exchanges. In contrast, Ibebunjo (2023) demonstrates that strategic non-violent opposition, as illustrated by the #EndSARS movement, may utilise digital channels to foster communal problem-solving, peace-orientated narratives, and inter-community cooperation. Collectively, these studies highlight the contradictory capacity of social media to serve both as a catalyst for polarisation and as an instrument for digital peacebuilding (Sokoga, 2024; Zeiger & Aly, 2015).

Research supports the efficacy of hashtags in catalysing collective action and enhancing social movements. Uwalaka (2022) performed a content analysis of the #EndSARS movement, revealing that hashtags enabled cross-community mobilisation, coordinated offline protests, and garnered international attention. Augustine (2023) analysed the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, emphasising how digital symbols facilitated the convergence of disparate actors around a common purpose, promoting unity, and worldwide campaigning. These studies demonstrate that hashtags serve as instruments for narrative framing and the formation of digital communities, rendering them essential for comprehending online peace-orientated mobilisation. Nevertheless, the literature also underscores concerns. Bruns and Burgess (2015) observe that hashtags can establish echo chambers, where polarised societies perpetuate existing biases. Ibebunjo (2023) discovered that in Nigeria, hate speech is frequently spread using identity-based hashtags, illustrating social media's dual capacity for mobilisation and hostility.

Sokoga (2024) examined Facebook and WhatsApp groups involving Nigerian adolescents in civic education and peace-orientated initiatives, demonstrating that online interactions enhanced offline peacebuilding efforts. These digital channels facilitated instantaneous contact, collaborative problem-solving, and interethnic discourse, indicating that social media can function as an effective instrument for fostering inclusive civic engagement.

There have been attempts at assessing digital peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria, such as the work of Zeiger and Aly (2015), who examined counter-violent extremism programmes, highlighting that peer-to-peer storytelling and participatory messaging can diminish vulnerability to radicalisation. Empirical research on diverse online communities underscores both advantages and limitations. Ibebunjo (2025) illustrated that algorithmically enhanced identification clusters might exacerbate animosity and hate speech. Chukwu (2025) analysed online political communication during the Nigerian elections, revealing that diverse online groups serve as digital platforms for contestation, mirroring offline divisions while facilitating conversation and advocacy.

Despite these insights, empirical research frequently concentrates on discrete campaigns or particular interventions, and few studies link hashtags, social media interactions, digital peacebuilding, and diverse online communities within a cohesive analytical framework. This gap points to the value of the present study, which investigates the interplay of these aspects in shaping peace and strife within Nigeria's online environments.

### **Methodology**

This study utilised a descriptive research approach to investigate the impact of social media communications on peace and discord within Nigeria's diverse online communities. The descriptive technique is appropriate since it facilitates systematic observation and documentation of behaviours, patterns, and interactions in their natural states without variable manipulation (Kothari, 2004). Social media interactions are intricate, fluid, and context-dependent; employing a descriptive design allows the researcher to document the variety of hashtags, posts, comments, and engagement patterns, while concurrently examining the perceptions, motivations, and interpretations of users within these communities (Best & Kahn, 2016).

The descriptive design is implemented via a mixed-methods approach, integrating content analysis of social media data, surveys, and interviews with participants from chosen, diverse online communities. This allows the study to record both quantitative metrics, such as the frequency and reach of hashtags, and qualitative subtleties, such as the framing of messages and the influence of

online interactions on perceptions of peace and war (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

### **Patterns of Dominant Digital Communication and Narrative Framing**

Digital communication in Nigeria's different online communities is marked by dynamic, multi-faceted interactions that mirror the nation's varied socio-political, ethnic, and religious landscape. Studies reveal that prevailing communication patterns encompass broadcasting, participatory engagement, hashtag mobilisation, and reactive commentary, all of which influence the circulation of information and the negotiation of meaning (Castells, 2012; Bruns & Burgess, 2015). Broadcasting enables prominent figures, including activists, opinion leaders, and civil society organisations, to swiftly convey messages to extensive audiences, frequently constructing narratives centred on justice, human rights, or peace-orientated advocacy. Participatory engagement, via likes, shares, retweets, and threaded discussions, cultivates interactive dialogue that allows users to challenge, affirm, or reinterpret narratives in real time, thereby generating networked public spheres where social meanings are collectively constructed (Gillespie, 2018; Olasupo, et. al, 2025; Uwalaka, 2022).

In these digital environments, hashtag mobilisation serves as both a symbolic and functional instrument. Hashtags such as #EndSARS, #BringBackOurGirls, and #YouthForPeace unify scattered discussions under a singular, recognisable digital identifier, enabling users to organise actions, express solidarity, and engage in campaigns that exceed geographical limitations (Augustine, 2023). Nonetheless, hashtags lack neutrality. Framing theory illustrates that the contextualisation, amplification, or interpretation of a hashtag can create certain narratives, accentuate certain events or grievances while conceal others (Entman, 1993). As an example, hashtags can highlight justice and accountability, cultivate empathy, and mobilise support; they may also serve as identity identifiers that exacerbate intergroup tensions and cement societal divisions (Ibebunjo, 2023).

Reactive commentary, encompassing answers, memes, emoticons, and threaded debates, represents another prevalent theme. These interactions exemplify micro-level negotiations of meaning, demonstrating how users interpret, challenge, and reconstruct narratives. In multiple online groups, such reaction patterns frequently expose fundamental socio-cultural tensions, humour, dissent, or attempts at mediation (Sokoga, 2024). Empirical studies indicate that in Nigeria, reactive commentary can enhance peace-orientated discourse by offering

counternarratives to misinformation while also intensifying discord, especially when participants utilise stereotypical or inflammatory framing associated with ethnic, religious, or political identities (Zeiger & Aly, 2015).

These prevailing communication patterns and narrative frameworks demonstrate the dual possibilities of social media within Nigeria's diverse online environments. Interactive, participatory, and hashtag-driven communication can promote solidarity, empathy, and digital peacebuilding by facilitating cross-community discourse and transnational advocacy (Castells, 2012). Conversely, algorithmic amplification, selective exposure, and identity-based framing can strengthen echo chambers, exacerbate grievances, and disseminate misinformation, thus fostering disagreement and escalating violence (Gillespie, 2018). The interaction of platform architecture, user agency, and socio-political context highlights the necessity of analysing communication patterns as socially rooted practices that both mirror and affect offline dynamics of peace and conflict rather than merely as technological occurrences.

An examination of Nigeria's online communities uncovers certain patterns of digital communication and story construction that affect the dissemination of information and the dynamics of social unity. Prevalent modalities encompass broadcasting, interactive engagement, and hashtag mobilisation, each of which facilitates the development of community-specific narratives (Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Castells, 2012). Uwalaka (2022) emphasises that participatory involvement in the #EndSARS movement enables collective meaning-making and enhances the articulation of common complaints among diverse participants.

Ibebunjo (2025) explicates identity-driven story framing, demonstrating how ethno-religious clustering on social media generates echo chambers that exacerbate polarisation. His 2023 study corroborates this by illustrating that the use of strategic framing, especially via non-violent resistance and inclusive messaging, allows these platforms to mediate conflict and facilitate collaborative problem-solving. The findings demonstrate that narrative framing is neither intrinsically divisive nor unifying; its impact is contingent upon the interplay of user agency, platform dynamics, and contextual elements within Nigeria's diverse online communities (Gillespie, 2018).

Comprehending these patterns yields essential information for peacebuilding initiatives in digital environments. By analysing the framing, dissemination, and interpretation of messages, policymakers, civil society representatives, and social media moderators can formulate methods

that foster constructive involvement, counteract divisive narratives, and enhance peace-orientated debate. This comprehension further fortifies the theoretical connections among networked public spheres, social identity, and framing theory, illustrating that online communication within diverse communities serves as both a reflection of social identities and a catalyst for social change (Entman, 1993; Bruns & Burgess, 2015).

### **Social Media Communication Dynamics and the Amplification of Societal Polarisation in Nigerian Online Communities**

Social media in Nigeria functions as a multifaceted public space where communication dynamics both mirror and shape societal divisions. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp facilitate swift information distribution, participatory engagement, and collective mobilisation. Nevertheless, the characteristics that facilitate connectedness, such as algorithmically filtered feeds, trending hashtags, and interactive comments, can also exacerbate polarisation by favouring information that is emotionally charged, identity-driven, or sensational. Empirical studies demonstrate that online communities in Nigeria frequently reflect offline divisions, especially along ethnic, religious, and political dimensions, with digital interactions exacerbating complaints rather than alleviating them (Ibebunjo, 2023, 2025).

The mechanics of amplification are intricately linked to narrative framing and network dynamics. Hashtags, hot topics, and viral messages frequently contain implicit identification indicators, denoting group affiliation and common concerns. Justice, accountability, and solidarity were the focal points of movements like #EndSARS and #BringBackOurGirls, which effectively engaged both domestic and transnational audiences (Augustine, 2023; Ibebunjo, 2013). Nonetheless, these techniques can exacerbate in-group/out-group tensions, especially when hashtags are appropriated for political, ethnic, or religious purposes. As Gillespie (2018) rightly noted, reactive digital activities, such as memes, threaded comments, and emoji-filled responses, exacerbate polarisation by enhancing emotional impact, frequently undermining rational discourse.

Social media serves as both a stimulant for involvement and a conduit for polarisation among Nigeria's diverse online groups. Although platforms like Twitter and Facebook enable civic discourse, they also promote the swift dissemination of misinformation, identity-driven narratives, and emotionally charged material. Ibebunjo (2025) characterises this situation as digital tribalism, in which algorithmic curation and socially clustered networks exacerbate ethno-religious differences, fostering environments susceptible to antagonism and conflict escalation.

Nonetheless, empirical evidence underscores the peacebuilding potential of these platforms when narratives are meticulously constructed. Ibebunjo (2023) illustrates that non-violent digital activism, exemplified by the #EndSARS movement, empowered online users to contest divisive discourse, cultivate unity among communities, and convert digital involvement into offline advocacy. This dichotomy underscores that social polarisation in online environments is not predetermined; it depends on the interplay of platform capabilities, user conduct, and intentional peace-orientated measures (Zeiger & Aly, 2015). Consequently, comprehending these dynamics is essential for formulating effective digital peacebuilding tactics that utilise social media while mitigating their polarising effects.

Studies indicate that network homophily and selective exposure are crucial for comprehending polarisation within Nigerian online environments. Individuals often congregate with peers who share similar ideologies or ethnic backgrounds, so reinforcing echo chambers and diminishing exposure to opposing narratives (Sokoga, 2024). These patterns are exacerbated by platform algorithms that favour interaction over diversity of viewpoints, resulting in extreme or sensational content being more likely to reach broader audiences. As a result, online communities in Nigeria can swiftly polarise around certain causes, turning digital interactions into war zones that exacerbate offline tensions.

The escalation of societal division is not an unavoidable consequence. Evidence from digital peacebuilding projects in Nigeria indicates that the influence of social media on social cohesion is contingent upon the framing, moderation, and contextualisation of narratives (Zeiger & Aly, 2015). Communities that participate in cross-cutting dialogue, moderated facilitation, and awareness campaigns typically generate more equitable discourse, reducing the intensity of polarisation.

The dynamics of social media communication in Nigeria reveal a paradox: Although digital platforms can facilitate mobilisation, advocacy, and solidarity, they concurrently exhibit structural and behavioural factors that exacerbate societal division. Comprehending these processes is essential for peace and conflict studies, as it underscores the interaction between user agency, network structures, story framing, and platform affordances in influencing digital public discourse. This highlights the necessity for context-sensitive tactics that improve cross-community participation, counteract divisive narratives, and foster digital peacebuilding within Nigeria's diverse online communities for scholars and practitioners.

## **Social Media as a Catalyst for Digital Peacebuilding in Nigerian Plural Society**

Social media has become a vital instrument for digital peacebuilding, offering platforms for individuals and groups to engage in discourse, disseminate information, and collectively resolve social conflicts. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp enable swift communication, allowing users to garner support, enhance awareness, and organise actions that transition to offline environments (Castells, 2012; Uwalaka, 2022). These digital environments serve as microcosms of Nigeria's diverse population, mirroring its ethnic, religious, and political plurality while providing a venue to contest stereotypes, disinformation, and divisive narratives.

Empirical research highlights the tangible influence of social media for peace-orientated projects. The #EndSARS movement exemplifies how digital platforms may facilitate online advocacy and offline mobilisation, including protests, community involvement, and discussions with policymakers. Hashtags and trending issues functioned as focal points, linking dispersed individuals around common grievances, enhancing accountability, and cultivating solidarity. Youth-led online initiatives fostering interfaith and intercultural dialogue have utilised WhatsApp and Facebook to dispel misinformation, counteract hate speech, and coordinate offline workshops, illustrating that digital engagement can significantly aid in conflict prevention and reconciliation (Zeiger & Aly, 2015).

Communication dynamics and story construction intricately link the effectiveness of social media in digital peacebuilding. Hashtags and viral campaigns function as symbolic indicators and instruments for collective action, allowing people to unite around shared ideals and goals. Participatory engagement, encompassing comments, reactions, shares, and multimedia content, promotes interactive discourse and collaborative meaning-making, hence augmenting inclusivity and inter-community comprehension. Effective utilisation of these tools can dismantle polarising narratives, enhance peaceful dialogue, and establish thought forums that transcend offline divisions.

User behaviour, platform design, and moderation systems significantly shape the dual potential of social media as a peacebuilding instrument. Social media can enhance positive engagement, but it may also intensify societal polarisation when echo chambers, misinformation, or identity-based framing prevail. Effective digital peacebuilding thus necessitates deliberate design and governance, encompassing content filtering, the promotion of overarching narratives, and digital literacy efforts that empower people to critically engage with online information.

In addition to individual and community efforts, institutional and civil society entities are vital when utilising social media to promote peace. Non-governmental organisations, media entities, and educational institutions have progressively adopted online campaigns and digital interventions to mediate disputes, deliver conflict-sensitive reporting, and promote participatory discourse. Coordinated online efforts aimed at youth have fostered tolerance, mutual understanding, and civic responsibility, connecting digital involvement to comprehensive peacebuilding frameworks (Castells, 2012). These approaches demonstrate that social media can serve as a conduit between micro-level interactions and macro-level societal cohesion, facilitating avenues for enduring peacebuilding.

Ultimately, social media's promise as a catalyst for peacebuilding resides in its ability to connect online and physical communities, facilitating feedback loops between digital interaction and tangible action. Social media facilitates the collaboration of varied stakeholders, enhances positive narratives, and enables swift mobilisation, fostering the co-creation of resilient and inclusive communities equipped to tackle conflict and advance social peace. For Nigerian online communities, comprehending these dynamics is essential, as it uncovers both the benefits and problems of using digital platforms for sustained peace and social cohesion (Castells, 2012; Augustine, 2023; Sokoga, 2024).

## **Conclusion**

Digital communication patterns, such as broadcasting, participatory engagement, hashtag mobilisation, and reactive commentary, influence the framing and interpretation of narratives, frequently mirroring established socio-political, ethnic, and religious divisions. Hashtags and trending topics serve as potent instruments for social mobilisation, facilitating both peace-orientated campaigning and the exacerbation of polarisation, contingent upon framing, user behaviour, and network structures.

Notwithstanding these challenges, the literature indicates substantial prospects for digital peacebuilding within Nigerian online and offline communities. The strategic application of social media, including narrative framing, moderation, cross-community involvement, and digital literacy efforts, can enhance social cohesion, reduce polarisation, and convert online advocacy into concrete peace outcomes. This review integrates conceptual, theoretical, and empirical approaches to offer a basis for analysing how social media communications might be utilised to foster harmony in Nigeria's diverse culture.

## Recommendations

- i. Policymakers and government agencies should develop and implement digital governance frameworks that encourage responsible social media use while protecting freedom of expression. In line with this, policies should support the monitoring of online polarising content, counter hate speech, and promote peace-orientated narratives.
- ii. Social media platforms and technology providers should implement algorithmic moderation and transparency measures to reduce the amplitude of polarising or harmful content while promoting constructive discussions that encourage cross-community dialogue.
- iii. Stakeholders must support digital literacy initiatives that equip users, particularly youth, with skills to critically engage with content, recognise misinformation, and participate in online peacebuilding campaigns.
- iv. Civil society organisations, NGOs, and community groups need to harness hashtags, viral campaigns, and participatory engagement strategically to mobilise support for peace initiatives, promote intergroup understanding, and provide counternarratives to divisive content.
- v. Educational institutions must integrate media and digital literacy into curricula at the secondary and tertiary levels to cultivate awareness of social media's influence on societal polarisation and equip students with tools for responsible online communication.
- vi. For individual users and online community members, there is a need to engage critically with online content, fact-check information, and participate in cross-community dialogues to reduce echo chambers and mitigate polarisation.

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