
SOCIAL MEDIA HATE SPEECH AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING AMONG CONFLICTING COMMUNITIES IN NORTH-CENTRAL, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study analyzed the social media hate speech and peace building implications of conflicting communities in the North-Central Nigeria with emphasis on Kwara, Niger and Kogi States. The research design was qualitative descriptive with the data collection method used being a semi-structured interview with community leaders, religious leaders, youth leaders, media practitioners, civil society representatives and security personnel. The results showed that social media plays a very significant role in the propagation of hate speech through misinformation, ethnic stereotyping of individuals or groups, emotional manipulation and the quick spread of provocation. The study also revealed that online hate speech is having a negative impact on the peace-building process, which is leading to distrust, fear, communal violence, polarization of society, and reconciliation process breakdown among conflicted communities. The study found that Hate Speech (HSP) on social media carries a significant risk on sustainable peace-building in North-Central

Nigeria. It thus called for the education of digital literacy, tightened regulation of online content and interfaith dialogue and peace campaigns as measures to promote responsible use of social media and peaceful coexistence.

Keywords: Social media, Hate speech, Peace-building, Communal conflict, North-Central

Introduction

Social media has revolutionized the way the world communicates and shares information. In Nigeria, social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, X (previously known as Twitter), Instagram and TikTok are playing a significant role in the transmission of information, mobilization of support, expression of views and opinions, and communication amongst individuals. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media are "Internet-based applications that facilitate the creation and sharing of user-generated content via interactive communication technologies. With the rise in the access to smart phones and the internet, the impact of social media on citizens, particularly youth, has also grown. They have been instrumental in providing people with avenues to show civic engagement, political involvement and social interaction but they have also been a source of misinformation, inflammatory narratives and hate speech that can threaten peaceful co-existence in communities (Afolabi, 2020).

There has been a rise in the number of communal conflicts, ethno-religious tensions and farmer-herder clashes in Nigeria, especially in the North-Central region of the country, which includes states like Benue, Plateau, Nasarawa, Niger, Kwara and Kogi. These conflicts have resulted in loss of lives, destruction of property, displacement of people, and heightened insecurity within affected communities. This is not only physical dimensions of these conflicts, but social media has become one of the platforms where conflicting narratives, inciting comments and unverified information spread quickly, aggravating conflicts between conflicting groups (Okoro & Nwafor, 2019).

The use of hate speech has gained significant traction in Nigeria's cyberspace and can be defined as any form of expression that fosters hatred, discrimination, hostility or violence toward one or more individuals or groups on the basis of ethnicity, religion, political opinion, or other grounds. The anonymous and rapid nature of social media communication often leads people to share provocative material without considering consequences, or even verifying. In many cases, communication over the internet with ethnic slurs, religious intolerance and politically motivated propaganda has added to distrust and hostility among communities that are already struggling with fragile relationships (Salawu, 2017). According to the United Nations (2019), hate speech is communication that attacks or is expressed using discriminatory language towards a person or a group of persons on the basis of identity-related attributes. In recent years, the concept has been gaining traction in academic circles owing to its association with political upheavals, communal violence, terrorism and social polarization.

The North-Central region of Nigeria continues to be one of the most impacted regions by the recurrent communal conflicts and security issues in the country. These conflicts can be complex and can be related to land and resource claims, political marginalization, identity conflicts and historical grievances. But social media has added to the complexities by becoming a vehicle for rumors, fabricated photographs, and emotionally charged stories that can incite violence and counter-violence. In times of crisis, false news reports and hate speech often contribute to the spread of fear, anger and suspicion among community members, which negatively impacts the peace-building efforts and reconciliation process (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2021).

Peace-building is a conscious process to prevent violent conflict, build reconciliation, restore trust and foster sustainable coexistence between divided communities. Peace building has emerged as a critical tool in Nigeria's conflict-prone society to help to guarantee stability and national unity. Traditional leaders, religious leaders, civil society groups and community members have persisted in promoting dialogue, tolerance and conflict resolution processes in affected communities. However, hate speech on social media

continues to be a challenge to these efforts, as it continues to perpetuate negative stereotypes and further exacerbate existing divisions (Best & Igomu, 2020). Peace-building is specifically actions taken to prevent violent conflict, to help build reconciliation, trust, and sustainable peace in conflict-affected societies. Galtung (1996) described the process of peace-building as an effort to address the structural, political, social and economic conditions that sustain violence and social instability.

There are various empirical studies of social media, hate speech, communal conflict and peace building in Nigeria. In a study on conflict escalation and social media in Nigeria, Okoro and Nwafor (2019) discovered that social media plays a significant role in the dissemination of misinformation and inflammatory narratives during communal crises. The study found that bogus online reports can fuel retaliatory actions and raise anxiety levels in conflicting communities. Likewise, Salawu (2017) studied hate speech in the Nigerian media landscape and revealed that online communication platforms are often seen to be sites for ethnic and religious intolerance. The researchers contended that inadequate regulation and level of digital literacy is a major factor in the prevalence of online hate speech in Nigeria.

The study is based on Karl Marx's Conflict Theory, which was developed by other conflict scholars. According to the conflict theory, society is a place of competition, inequality, struggle for power, and conflicting interests between groups (Ritzer, 2011). The relevance of the Conflict Theory to this study is that it helps to explain how the current social divisions and grievances within society can be exacerbated by activities of communication like social media interactions. In Nigeria, communal conflict is frequently linked to ethnic/religious differences, political competition, and land and resource issues. More and more, social media are becoming forums in which such tensions are articulated, amplified and maintained with hate speech and inflammatory narratives. Conflict Theory also suggests that communication can be a tool for the dominant groups to shape public opinion and help to reinforce divisions in society. Ethnic stereotyping, religious

intolerance and inciting comments spread in online messages in the context of North-Central Nigeria add to distrust and hostility between conflicting communities.

The literature available is mostly dedicated to political communication, election violence or cybercrime while fewer studies consider the impact of online hate narratives at the community level on reconciliation and peaceful living. This background is what forms the basis for this study of social media hate speech and its impact on peace building among conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria. The study aims to make a contribution to the current knowledge through its discussion of the link between online hate speech and sustainability of peace building in conflict-affected communities.

The Internet and social media platforms have increased civic engagement and public interaction, but they have also provided opportunities for the spread of hate speech and misinformation that can pose a threat to peaceful co-existence among communities. Social media platforms have become an emerging platform for dissemination of inflammatory content with a potential for spreading hostility, distrust and violence among conflicting groups (Okoro & Nwafor, 2019). Communal tension, farmer–herder conflict, ethnic clashes and religious differences have been constant in North-Central Nigeria leading to killings, property destruction, population displacement and disruption of socio-economic activities. During times of crisis, social media platforms are often used to share messages with ethnic insults, religious intolerance, fabricated reports, manipulated images, and inciting comments (Salawu, 2017). In addition, the lack of regulation of online content, lack of digital literacy and weak enforcement of the laws on hate speech have compounded the issue in Nigeria.

While there is a general interest in social media and insecurity in Nigeria, previous research has been mainly on political hate speech, election-driven violence, and cyber activism and relatively little work has been done on understanding the impact of social media hate speech on peace-building in conflicting communities in North-

Central Nigeria. Therefore, there is a lack of empirical knowledge about the implications of online hate narratives for reconciliation, social cohesion and long-term peace-building in conflict-affected communities. This lack of knowledge is what calls for the current study. The main objective of this study was to examine social media hate speech and its implications for peace-building among conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- i. examine the role of social media in the spread of hate speech among conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria;
- ii. assess the implications of social media hate speech on peace-building efforts in North-Central Nigeria; and
- iii. assess the strategies for reducing social media hate speech and promoting peaceful coexistence among conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study provided answers to the following questions:

1. What role does social media play in the spread of hate speech among conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria?
2. What are the implications of social media hate speech on peace-building efforts in North-Central Nigeria?
3. What strategies can be adopted to reduce social media hate speech and promote peaceful coexistence among conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria?

Methods

The study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design, the study was conducted in Kwara, Niger and Kogi States, North-Central, Nigeria. These states were purposively selected due to their strategic location and their experiences with varying forms of communal tensions, ethnic conflicts, political disagreements, and security-related challenges. These categories of participants were selected because they are directly involved in community relations and peace-building activities. A total sample size of 45 participants was selected for the study using purposive sampling techniques.

Table 1: The distribution of participants across the selected states

State	Community Leaders	Religious Leaders	Youth leaders	Civil Society Reps	Media Practitioners	Security Personnel	Total
Kwara	3	2	2	2	3	3	15
Niger	3	2	2	2	3	3	15
Kogi	3	2	2	2	3	3	15
Total	9	6	6	6	9	9	45

The primary instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide contained open-ended questions designed in line with the objectives of the study. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the interview guide was subjected to expert review. The interviews with the participants were conducted by the researchers in the selected states. The answers of participants were recorded with their permission. Data collection involved interaction with the selected participants in the study area. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, the researcher obtained consent from participants and guaranteed confidentiality. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data obtained from the interviews. The response analysis included summarizing the responses into themes and patterns according to the objectives of the study.

Results

Research Question One: What role does social media play in the spread of hate speech among conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria?

Table 2: Perceived Roles of Social Media in the Spread of Hate Speech

Themes Identified	Participants' Views	Interpretation
Rapid dissemination of information	Participants explained that social media allows messages, videos, pictures, and comments to spread quickly across communities.	The speed of social media communication contributes significantly to the rapid circulation of hate messages and inflammatory narratives.

Themes Identified	Participants' Views	Interpretation
Spread of misinformation and fake news	Many respondents stated that unverified reports and manipulated images are frequently circulated during communal crises.	Fake news and misinformation increase fear, suspicion, and hostility among conflicting groups.
Promotion of ethnic and religious sentiments	Participants noted that users often employ ethnic slurs and religious stereotypes online.	Social media intensifies existing communal divisions by reinforcing identity-based hatred.
Mobilization for retaliation	Some participants stated that hate messages are used to mobilize youths for attacks and counterattacks.	Social media platforms can serve as tools for incitement and violent mobilization during conflicts.
Emotional influence on users	Participants revealed that emotionally charged videos and messages often provoke anger and fear among community members.	Emotional manipulation through digital content contributes to conflict escalation.

The table 2 indicates that social media is one of the important factors contributing to the proliferation of hate speech between conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria. The answers given by the respondents indicated that social media has contributed to the swift spread of inflammatory messages, fake news, ethnic stereotypes and emotionally charged narratives that can drive communal tensions and conflict higher. The results also show that this anonymity can be an incentive to post provocative material online, without facing accountability. The table also shows that in some cases, social media is employed for mobilizing during communal crises, which further fuels violence and retaliation within communities affected by the crisis.

Research Question Two: What are the implications of social media hate speech on peace-building efforts in North-Central Nigeria?

Table 3: Implications of Social Media Hate Speech on Peace-Building

Themes Identified	Participants' Views	Interpretation
Breakdown of trust among communities	Respondents stated that hate speech creates fear and suspicion among ethnic and religious groups.	Trust-building and reconciliation become difficult when communities constantly encounter hostile online narratives.
Escalation of communal violence	Participants revealed that online hate messages sometimes trigger retaliatory attacks.	Hate speech contributes to violence escalation and conflict persistence.
Weakening of reconciliation efforts	Many respondents explained that peace meetings and dialogue initiatives are often undermined by online hostility.	Social media hate speech frustrates ongoing peace-building initiatives.
Increased fear and insecurity	Participants noted that fake reports and threatening messages create panic within communities.	Fear and insecurity weaken social stability and peaceful coexistence.
Polarization of communities	Participants explained that online narratives encourage communities to isolate themselves from others.	Hate speech deepens social divisions and reduces social cohesion.

The table 3 indicates that social media hate speech has serious negative implications for peace-building efforts in North-Central Nigeria. Participants agreed that online hate narratives contribute to distrust, fear, insecurity, social polarization, and the escalation of communal violence. The findings further show that hate speech weakens reconciliation programmes and frustrates dialogue initiatives introduced by peace-building stakeholders. It also shows that young people are susceptible to online manipulation, which raises risk of violent mobilization and prolonged communal tensions.

Research Question Three: What strategies can be adopted to reduce social media hate speech and promote peaceful coexistence among

conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria?

Table 4: Strategies for Reducing Social Media Hate Speech and Promoting Peaceful Coexistence

Suggested Strategies	Participants' Opinions	Interpretation
Digital literacy education	Participants recommended educating citizens on responsible social media use and information verification.	Increased digital literacy can reduce the spread of fake news and hate speech.
Stronger regulation of online content	Respondents suggested stricter monitoring and enforcement against inciting content.	Effective regulation can discourage online hate speech.
Community peace campaigns	Participants emphasized the need for regular peace awareness programmes.	Peace campaigns can strengthen tolerance and coexistence.
Interfaith and interethnic dialogue	Respondents proposed regular dialogue among community groups and religious leaders.	Dialogue promotes understanding and reduces hostility.
Youth empowerment programmes	Participants recommended employment and skill acquisition initiatives for youths.	Economic empowerment reduces youth vulnerability to violent mobilization.
Promotion of positive online narratives	Participants advocated the sharing of peace-oriented messages and community success stories.	Positive digital communication can strengthen peace-building efforts.

The table 4 presents the strategies identified by participants for reducing social media hate speech and promoting peaceful coexistence among conflicting communities in North-Central Nigeria. It was deduced from the findings that tackling online hate speech requires digital literacy training, stricter regulation of online content, peace-building campaign, religion dialogue, vocational skills programmes and positive online messaging. It can also be deduced that lasting peace-building is anchored on cooperation between government, religious leaders, non-governmental agencies, media professionals and media outlets.

Discussions

The results of the research indicated a significant influence of social media among the conflicting communities in the dissemination of hate speech in North-Central Nigeria. All participants remained firm on the view that social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, X (previously known as Twitter), Instagram and TikTok can spread inflammatory information, fake news, manipulated images and polarizing messages that can escalate communal tensions. The discovery supports the argument of Okoro and Nwafor (2019) which stated that social media plays a significant role in escalating conflicts during communal crisis by disseminating misinformation and arousing emotions. Likewise, Salawu (2017) noted that online communication platforms are now being used to spread ethnic and religious intolerance in Nigeria.

The research results also confirmed that hate speech on social media has a negative impact on peace-building in conflict-prone communities. Participants shared that hate-filled narratives undermine trust, foster fear, and deepen suspicion and block reconciliation processes between divided groups. This discovery is in line with Ibrahim and Adamu (2021), who found that fake news and inciting comments online undermines peace building programmes and causes social instability in Northern Nigeria. Best and Igomu (2020) also agreed that online hate narratives are an impediment to dialogue and peaceful co-existence in conflict affected communities.

The study also highlighted some strategies that can help mitigate the hate speech in the social media and promote peaceful coexistence. The participants highlighted the need to promote digital literacy education, peace campaigns, tighter regulation of online content, empower youth, and foster interfaith dialogue. This finding aligns with the study of Arthur and Pukallus (2024) on digital peace building that suggests responsible use of social media, peace education and community engagement can contribute to the reduction of on-line hostility and increase social harmony.

The results also indicated that social media hate speech and peaceful

sustainability efforts in North-Central Nigeria are closely related. Participants shared consensus that the chronic exposure to online negative narratives are linked to violence, mistrust, retaliation, social polarization and all have an impact on the longer term peace building outcomes. This finding supports the theory of conflict, which states that communication systems can perpetuate social divisions and heighten competition between groups.

Conclusion

The study found social media hate speech to be a significant problem for Peace building in North-Central Nigeria, between conflicting communities. Although while social media platforms have improved communications and how people engage with the public, they have also become distributors of misinformation, ethnic hostility, religious intolerance and inflammatory narratives that can exacerbate communal violence. The results confirmed that the negative effects of online hate speech include a lack of trust, fear, difficulties in reconciliation processes and a reduction of Coexistence in impacted communities. The study further concluded that sustainable peace-building efforts on a collaborative basis between government institutions, security agencies and others.

Recommendations

Digital literacy, fact-checking and social media ethics should be reinforced by government, school, civil society and advocacy organization to combat misinformation and hate speech. In addition to addressing the root causes of hate and violent online behavior, these entities should encourages peace-building efforts and interfaith dialogue. Sustainable social stabilization and national growth should be the end result of the implementation of safe digital communication and youth employment programs.

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