The Weaponisation of Social Media in Ethno-Religious Conflicts in Nigeria: Implications for National Security and Peacebuilding

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of social media has transformed Nigeria's contemporary conflict environment by accelerating the production, circulation, and interpretation of conflict-related information. This study examines the weaponisation of social media in Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts, with particular emphasis on Plateau State and comparative evidence from Taraba, Benue, and Kaduna States. Adopting a comparative qualitative multi-case study design, the study draws on secondary data from scholarly literature, government and security reports, civil-society organisations, international agencies and reputable media sources. Guided by Agenda-Setting Theory, the study examines misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, propaganda, digital mobilisation and visual weaponisation as interconnected mechanisms through which social media can amplify existing grievances and intensify conflict dynamics. The findings indicate that social media does not necessarily create the structural causes of conflict but can increase their speed, scale, reach and emotional intensity, reinforcing narratives of victimhood, collective threat and identity-based polarisation. Across the four cases, digital narratives can contribute to mobilisation, retaliation and the escalation of offline violence. In contrast, physical violence can simultaneously generate new digital narratives, creating a cyclical online–offline conflict nexus. The study further demonstrates social media's dual-use character, which can support early warning, fact-checking, peace communication, dialogue, and reconciliation. It proposes the Digital–Physical Conflict Escalation Model (DPCEM). It recommends an integrated, preventive approach that combines rapid crisis communication, digital early warning, OSINT, fact-checking, responsible platform governance, community engagement, and peacebuilding to mitigate digital conflict escalation and strengthen national security.

Keywords: Social Media; Weaponisation; Ethno-Religious Conflict; National Security; Peacebuilding.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication has transformed the contemporary information environment and reshaped how individuals, communities, political actors, and non-state groups communicate, mobilise, and contest narratives. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X, TikTok, and Telegram have evolved beyond communication and networking tools to become important arenas for political participation, identity construction, mobilisation, and conflict communication. Their capacity to rapidly produce and circulate text, images, videos, and user-generated content has reduced geographical and temporal barriers to information dissemination, allowing local events to attract national and international attention within minutes (Shaholli, 2025; Clarke & Kocak, 2020). While this transformation creates opportunities for civic participation and citizen journalism, it also poses significant challenges for conflict management and national security.

The significance of social media in conflict situations lies not necessarily in its ability to create the underlying causes of violence, but in its capacity to alter the speed, scale, reach and intensity with which existing grievances are expressed and acted upon. Political exclusion, inequality, competition over land and resources, historical grievances, weak governance, and struggles over identity and belonging often underpin conflict. Social media can amplify these conditions by framing events, reinforcing group identities, disseminating emotionally charged narratives, and mobilising supporters (Mordi, 2026; Onyari & Ekevere, 2025). In societies characterised by strong ethnic and religious identities, such processes can intensify perceptions of threat, victimhood and collective insecurity. The experience of Myanmar, for example, demonstrated how online hate narratives

contributed to a wider climate of hostility against the Rohingya population (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018).

Across Africa, the increasing penetration of social media has occurred alongside persistent communal violence, political instability, insurgency and identity-based conflicts. Although digital platforms enable citizens to document violence, challenge official narratives and mobilise for peace, they also facilitate the rapid circulation of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech and inflammatory content. Research from conflict-affected African societies shows that social media can shape competing narratives and influence how conflict actors and affected populations interpret violent events (Mare, 2024; Rehman & Riaz, 2021). Evidence from Mali and the Ethiopia–Tigray conflict, for instance, shows how digital communication can simultaneously enable citizen reporting and contribute to disinformation, polarisation, and conflict escalation (de Bruijn *et al*., 2025; Orgeret, 2025). Social media should therefore increasingly be understood as part of the broader conflict environment rather than merely as a neutral communication technology.

Nigeria presents an important context within this broader African experience. The country's rapidly expanding digital environment has made social media an increasingly important source of news, political discourse, social interaction and information about security incidents. By the end of 2025, Nigeria had approximately 109 million internet users and about 47.8 million social media user identities (DataReportal, 2026). However, increased connectivity has also created vulnerabilities within the national information environment. Misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and inflammatory narratives can circulate rapidly during periods of political and communal tension, potentially influencing perceptions of security and group relations (Freedom House, 2024; Nasidi *et al*., 2025).

This situation is particularly serious given Nigeria's complex ethno-religious conflict environment. Ethnic and religious identities often intersect with disputes over land, resources, political representation, indigeneity, migration and access to state protection. Social media adds another dimension by providing spaces where competing communities construct narratives about conflict events, identify alleged perpetrators, assign collective blame, and mobilise support. Unverified claims about attacks, casualties, and perpetrators may spread before authorities or professional media organisations can verify them. Similarly, people may take photographs and videos out of context, recycle them from previous incidents, or manipulate them. Mercy Corps (2024) identifies misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and hate speech as significant digital harms that can contribute to conflict both online and offline in Nigeria.

The interaction between online narratives and physical violence creates an online–offline conflict nexus, whereby developments in one environment influence the other. Violent incidents generate digital narratives that can shape perceptions, emotions, and behaviour in affected communities. In highly polarised settings, repeated exposure to inflammatory information may generate fear, anger and perceptions of collective victimisation, potentially encouraging mobilisation and retaliation. Social media weaponisation can therefore be understood as the deliberate, strategic, or opportunistic exploitation of digital platforms to manipulate information, intensify group-based narratives, shape perceptions, and facilitate mobilisation in ways that may contribute to conflict escalation.

This dynamic is particularly relevant to Plateau State, the principal case examined in this study. Plateau has experienced recurrent communal violence involving complex interactions among ethnicity, religion, land ownership, indigeneity, political representation, migration and resource competition. These longstanding conditions cannot be attributed to social media. Instead, the critical issue is how digital platforms interact with existing grievances and historical memories to shape how people interpret and escalate conflict. The digital dimension of Plateau's conflicts has become increasingly visible through the circulation of eyewitness accounts, photographs, videos, casualty figures, allegations concerning perpetrators and claims about threats to particular communities. While some information may raise awareness and provide early warnings, inaccurate or manipulated content can deepen mistrust. For example, Freedom House (2024) documented the circulation of false information linked to violence in Plateau State, including unrelated photographs and videos used in conflict narratives.

Comparable dynamics also appear in other conflict-affected states, including Kaduna, Benue, and Taraba, although their historical and socio-political circumstances differ. Digital narratives may cast conflicts involving farmer–herder relations, land, political competition, and communal grievances in ethnic or religious terms. A comparative examination is therefore necessary to determine whether the patterns observed in Plateau reflect a broader Nigerian phenomenon or are shaped primarily by its specific historical context. Despite growing scholarship on social media, misinformation and conflict remain under-researched. Existing studies have examined the structural causes of ethno-religious conflict and the role of social media in misinformation and political communication. Still, they have paid comparatively less attention to how these processes interact across conflict-affected Nigerian communities. In particular, scholars have paid limited attention to how digital narratives move between online and offline spaces, reinforce ethnic and religious identities, shape perceptions of threat and victimhood, and facilitate mobilisation or retaliation. There is also insufficient comparative analysis linking Plateau State with other Nigerian conflict settings within a common framework of social media weaponisation.

Against this background, this study examines the weaponisation of social media in ethno-religious conflicts in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on Plateau State and selected conflict-affected states. It examines how social media is weaponised during ethno-religious conflicts; analyses the roles of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, inflammatory narratives and graphic content in conflict escalation; assesses their implications for national security, inter-community relations and peacebuilding; and examines the potential of social media for early warning, counter-narratives, peace communication and conflict de-escalation. The study is guided by the proposition that social media does not necessarily create the underlying causes of ethno-religious conflict but can amplify existing grievances by increasing the speed, scale, reach and emotional intensity of conflict narratives. By examining this online–offline relationship, the study seeks to contribute to debates on digital conflict, national security, and peacebuilding, and to identify conflict-sensitive approaches to mitigate the harmful effects of social media while strengthening its potential as an instrument of peace.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a comparative qualitative multi-case study design to examine how social media is weaponised in Nigeria's ethno-religious conflicts and its implications for national security and peacebuilding. Plateau State serves as the principal case because of its history of recurrent communal and ethno-religious conflicts involving complex interactions among ethnicity, religion, land, indigeneity, political representation and resource competition. The study purposively selects three additional conflict environments, Taraba, Benue, and Kaduna States, for comparative analysis. Taraba provides evidence from Jukun–Tiv tensions; Benue from farmer–herder and community conflicts; and Kaduna from communal and religious tensions, as well as other forms of insecurity. The selection aims to identify similarities and differences in how social media interacts with existing grievances across different conflict settings, rather than to provide statistical generalisation to all Nigerian conflicts.

The study relies primarily on secondary qualitative data from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, government and security reports, international organisations, civil society and peacebuilding organisations, and reputable media sources. Where relevant, the study also examines publicly available social media posts, photographs, videos, and digital narratives documented by credible sources. The analysis examines data thematically around misinformation and disinformation, hate speech, inflammatory narratives, victimhood, ethnic and religious accusations, graphic content, digital mobilisation, perceptions of threat, retaliation, early warning, peace messaging, and counter-narratives. A cross-case comparison identifies recurring patterns and context-specific differences in how social media is weaponised. Source triangulation strengthens the credibility of the findings by comparing information across independent sources, while ethical considerations guide how sensitive conflict-related information is handled and discourage the reproduction of unverified or inflammatory content. Overall, the methodology examines social media not as the primary cause of ethno-religious conflict but as an amplifier and accelerator of existing grievances, while also assessing its potential contribution to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Perspective

The study adopts Agenda-Setting Theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), which offers a useful framework for explaining how social media shapes public perceptions of ethno-religious conflicts. The theory proposes that the media may not determine what people think, but can significantly influence what they think about by giving prominence and repeated attention to particular issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; McCombs, 2008). Although the theory was initially developed to explain traditional mass media, it remains relevant to social media, where users simultaneously produce, consume, and disseminate information. Through repeated sharing, commenting, reposting and algorithmic amplification, conflict-related content can become highly salient within public discourse (Hassan, 2026).

In the context of ethno-religious conflicts, repeated exposure to attacks, killings, victim narratives, ethnic accusations, religious claims and inflammatory commentary can shape how individuals understand and interpret conflict. Second-level agenda setting further explains how emphasis on particular attributes, such as victimhood, persecution, injustice, or ethnic domination, may shape how audiences perceive conflict events (Almakaty, 2025). Thus, social media may not only determine which conflict issues receive public attention but also shape the narratives through which audiences understand them. Applied to Plateau State and other conflict-affected areas, the theory suggests that continuous exposure to images of violence, reports of attacks and allegations against particular ethnic or religious groups may reinforce perceptions of threat, collective victimisation and hostility. However, Agenda-Setting Theory does not imply that social media automatically causes violence or determines individual behaviour. Rather, its influence interacts with pre-existing grievances, identities, experiences and levels of trust. This study therefore conceptualises social media primarily as an amplifying mechanism that gives existing conflict narratives visibility and salience.

The theory also highlights digital platforms' peacebuilding potential. Just as repeated exposure to divisive narratives can increase the salience of conflict, sustained dissemination of verified information, peace messages, counter-narratives and reconciliation initiatives can place peace and coexistence on the public agenda. Agenda-Setting Theory therefore provides an appropriate lens for examining both the weaponisation of social media in ethno-religious conflicts and its potential contribution to early warning, conflict de-escalation and peacebuilding in Nigeria.

Conceptual framework

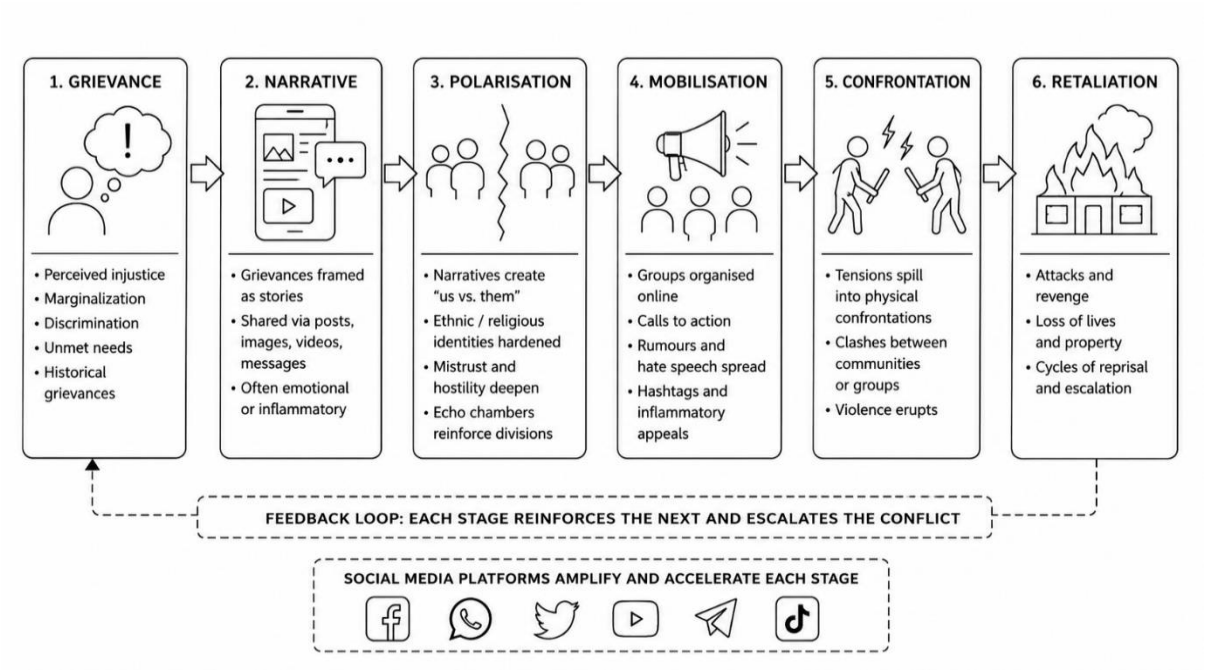

Fig. 1: Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework presents social media weaponisation as a progressive process of conflict escalation, beginning with existing grievances such as perceived injustice, marginalisation, discrimination, unmet needs and historical grievances. Posts, images, videos, messages, and hashtags transform these grievances into emotionally charged narratives, shaping how individuals interpret events and identify perpetrators or victims. This process reflects framing theory, which explains how people select and emphasise particular aspects of reality to shape public interpretation (Entman, 2006; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). As such narratives circulate repeatedly, they can reinforce *"us versus them"* perceptions, strengthen ethnic, religious or political identities, and deepen mistrust and polarisation (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Lorenz-Spreen *et al*., 2023).

The framework further proposes that polarisation facilitates mobilisation, as social media provide relatively accessible channels for organising groups, spreading calls to action, circulating rumours and inflammatory messages, and coordinating collective responses. Mobilisation can subsequently move from the digital environment into physical confrontation, where online hostility contributes to clashes, violence and destruction. Retaliatory attacks then generate new grievances, creating a feedback loop in which each stage reinforces the next and potentially escalates the conflict further. Thus, social media are conceptualised not as a single cause of violence but as amplifiers and accelerators that can increase the reach, speed and intensity of existing social tensions (Gilardi *et al*., 2022; Madueke, 2024). The framework therefore integrates agenda-setting, framing, polarisation, and mobilisation perspectives to explain how digital communication can transform grievances into narratives, narratives into collective action, and collective action into cycles of confrontation and retaliation (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Mechanisms of Social-Media Weaponisation

Social-media weaponisation refers to the deliberate or consequential exploitation of digital platforms to manipulate information, perceptions, emotions, identities and collective behaviour in ways that intensify conflict or undermine peace and security. In Nigeria, this significance is heightened by longstanding ethnic, religious, political and socioeconomic grievances. Social media therefore often functions less as the original cause of conflict than as an amplifier and accelerator of existing grievances. Hassan (2023), for example, found that social-media disinformation can reinforce traditional media narratives and exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions in Nigeria. Six interconnected mechanisms are particularly relevant: misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, propaganda, digital mobilisation and visual weaponisation.

Misinformation involves circulating false, inaccurate, or misleading information without necessarily intending to deceive (American Psychological Association, 2026). For example, during conflict, this may include unverified reports of attacks, inaccurate casualty figures, rumours about perpetrators or false claims concerning impending violence. Its potential for conflict stems from the speed and scale at which such information can circulate through WhatsApp, Facebook, X, and other platforms, especially in communities already experiencing fear and distrust. In Benue State, Okwori (2020) found that social-media-channelled fake news aggravated farmer–herder conflict by reinforcing political, ethnic and religious biases. Similarly, during periods of renewed violence in Plateau State, the rapid circulation of unverified and inflammatory claims contributed to heightened perceptions of threat and possible retaliation (Ahmad, 2026). In this way, misinformation can accelerate conflict by reducing the time available for verification and rational assessment before individuals or communities respond.

Disinformation differs from misinformation because it involves deliberate fabrication, manipulation or strategic dissemination of false information to deceive audiences, influence perceptions or damage opponents (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It can be particularly dangerous in conflict environments when specific ethnic, religious or political groups are deliberately portrayed as perpetrators or collective threats. For instance, the 2023 Nigerian general elections illustrate this mechanism, as social-media disinformation contributed to political polarisation and reinforced ethnic and religious divisions (Hassan, 2023; Freedom House, 2024). In Taraba State, a 2019 publication accused the Clerk of the State House of Assembly of involvement in the Jukun–Tiv crisis, an allegation he publicly denied (Bolaji, 2019). Although the case does not establish that the allegation caused violence, it demonstrates how unverified accusations can acquire political and communal significance within a sensitive conflict environment.

Hate speech involves communication that demeans, threatens, stereotypes, or dehumanises individuals or groups based on identity, particularly ethnicity or religion (United Nations, 2019). Its potential for weaponisation lies in transforming individual grievances into collective hostility by attributing individuals' actions to entire communities. For example, during the 2023 elections, Ejiga and Ede (2024) found ethnicity, religion, candidate characteristics, and malicious content to be prominent dimensions of hate speech on Facebook, while Alugbin and Adepoju (2025) identified derogation, stereotyping, dehumanisation, scapegoating, demonisation and polarisation in Nigerian electoral discourse. In Benue, Sase, Tarnaha and Igbe (2021) found that social-media campaigns surrounding farmer–herder conflict contributed to ethnic consciousness and perceptions of Fulani herders as outsiders, invaders and threats. This implies that hate speech can consequently construct an identifiable "enemy," deepen identity boundaries and reduce social resistance to hostility and retaliation.

Beyond hate speech, propaganda refers to strategic communication intended to influence attitudes, perceptions, and behaviour to pursue political, ideological, or conflict-related objectives (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). Unlike disinformation, propaganda does not necessarily depend on false information; it may selectively present facts, omit relevant information or frame events in emotionally persuasive ways. Boko Haram's insurgency provides an important Nigerian example. The group strategically employed communication and imagery to project its ideological message, demonstrate power and generate fear, while social media became an arena for competing insurgent and counter-insurgent narratives (Ette & Joe, 2018; Abdulazeez & Malefakis, 2021). Propaganda therefore serves as a mechanism of narrative control, shaping perceptions of who counts as the victim, perpetrator, aggressor, or legitimate defender.

Relatedly, digital mobilisation uses online networks to organise, coordinate, or encourage collective action, bridging digital communication and offline behaviour (Steinert-Threlkeld *et al*., 2015). For instance, social media can facilitate peaceful protest, humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding, but the same infrastructure can also be exploited for intimidation, retaliation or violent mobilisation. The 2020 #EndSARS protests demonstrate the mobilisation capacity of Nigerian digital networks. Uwalaka and Nwala (2023) found that WhatsApp and Facebook played important roles in informing protesters and coordinating participation, while Uwalaka (2024) similarly identified Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter as important mobilisation platforms. Although #EndSARS was principally a civic protest rather than communal conflict, it demonstrates how digital networks can transform individual grievances into coordinated collective action. Therefore, in conflict settings, the same mobilisation infrastructure can facilitate rapid collective responses to narratives of victimisation or perceived threat.

Visual weaponisation involves the misleading manipulation, circulation or contextualisation of photographs, videos, audio recordings, screenshots and increasingly AI-generated or deepfake content (Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023). Its significance stems from audiences' tendency to treat visual material as direct evidence, even when its date, location, source, or context is false. During the 2023 Plateau crisis, for example, a video circulated as showing Nigerian soldiers maltreating women in Plateau State. Still, the Defence Headquarters subsequently stated that the footage originated from a 2021 incident in Sambisa Forest and warned against its misleading circulation (Vanguard, 2023). Similar misleading visual materials have circulated in relation to farmer–herder conflicts in Benue (Akewushola, 2025). The emergence of generative AI further increases this threat by enabling the creation of increasingly convincing synthetic images, audio and videos of events that never occurred.

These mechanisms are interconnected, not independent. An unverified report may begin as misinformation, become deliberately manipulated as disinformation, take on an ethnic or religious dimension through hate speech, and then be incorporated into a broader propaganda narrative. As such, digital networks may then facilitate mobilisation, while manipulated photographs, videos or AI-generated material provide apparently convincing "evidence" to reinforce the narrative. The resulting content can generate further misinformation and restart the cycle of reprisal. The relationship should therefore not be reduced to a simple Social Media-Conflict relationship. Rather, the process can be conceptualised as Existing Grievance → Conflict Event → Digital Narrative → Amplification → Identity and Emotional Framing → Mobilisation → Offline Behaviour → Conflict Escalation. Evidence from Plateau, Taraba, Benue, and Kaduna suggests that social media does not independently create every conflict; rather, its weaponisation can increase the speed, reach, emotional intensity, and behavioural consequences of existing conflict narratives. Addressing these risks therefore requires an integrated approach that combines digital literacy, rapid fact-checking, conflict-sensitive communication, platform accountability, digital early-warning mechanisms, and improved public access to credible information.

Plateau State Case

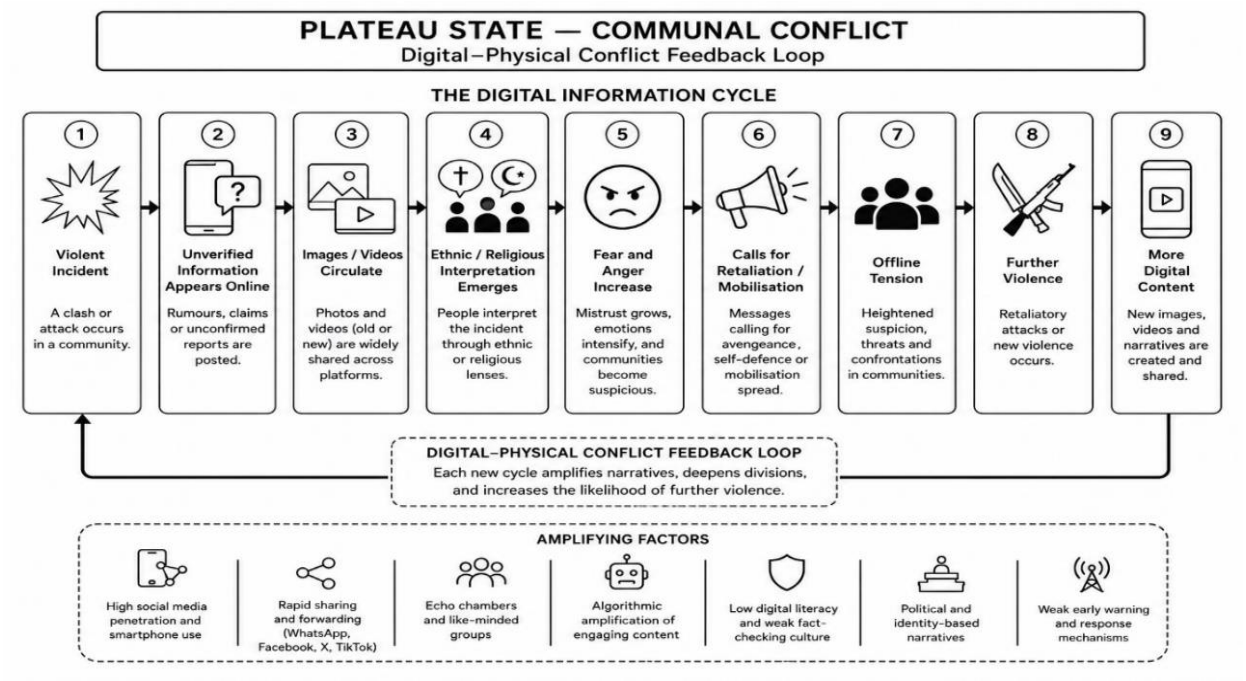

Fig. 2: Digital–Physical Conflict Feedback Loop using the Plateau State case

The diagram above presents a Digital–Physical Conflict Feedback Loop through which communal violence and digital communication mutually reinforce one another. The cycle begins with a violent incident that generates rumours, unverified claims, photographs and videos that rapidly circulate through social-media platforms. As these materials are interpreted through existing ethnic, religious and political identities, they can intensify fear, anger, mistrust and perceptions of collective threat. Research in Benue State, for example, found that social-media campaigns surrounding farmer–herder conflict contributed to ethnic consciousness and reinforced perceptions of Fulani herders as foreigners, invaders and threats (Sase *et al*., 2021). Similarly, Okwori (2020) found that fake news circulated on social media aggravated farmer–herder conflicts in Benue by fueling baseless attacks and reprisals.

The diagram further explains how digital narratives can translate into offline mobilisation and renewed violence. As fear and anger rise, social-media messages may encourage retaliation, self-defence, or collective mobilisation, heightening tension and confrontation in physical communities. This reflects the logic of connective action, in which digital platforms facilitate personalised content sharing and the formation of networks that support collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). The subsequent violence produces new photographs, videos, eyewitness accounts, and narratives that re-enter the digital environment and initiate another cycle. Visual materials matter because visual disinformation can affect audiences in distinctive ways and may amplify misleading information through the psychological processing of images and videos (Weikmann & Lecheler, 2023).

The strength of this feedback loop depends on the amplifying factors identified at the bottom of the framework, including widespread smartphone and social-media use, rapid forwarding, echo chambers, algorithmic amplification, low digital literacy, weak fact-checking practices, political and identity-based narratives, and weak early-warning and response mechanisms. These factors can increase the speed, reach and emotional intensity of conflict-related information. Consequently, the diagram conceptualises social media not merely as a channel for transmitting conflict information, but as a potential conflict multiplier and feedback mechanism in which physical events generate digital narratives, and digitally amplified narratives contribute to subsequent physical tensions and violence. Conversely, timely fact-checking, responsible communication, digital literacy, effective early-warning systems and rapid institutional responses may help interrupt the cycle and reduce the likelihood of escalation.

Case Comparison and Analysis: Plateau, Taraba, Benue and Kaduna States

To examine how social-media weaponisation operates across different conflict environments in Nigeria, this study purposively selects Plateau, Taraba, Benue and Kaduna States. Plateau State serves as the principal case, while Taraba, Benue and Kaduna provide comparative environments characterised by different combinations of communal, ethnic, religious, political and resource-related insecurity. The comparative approach assumes that social media does not independently create the structural conditions underlying conflict; rather, digital platforms can amplify, reframe, and accelerate pre-existing grievances and conflict incidents. Comparing the four states therefore allows us to identify common mechanisms of digital conflict escalation while also examining how these mechanisms vary with the nature of the underlying conflict.

Plateau State provides the principal illustration of the relationship between social media, communal conflict and identity-based insecurity. Over the years, the state's conflict environment has been shaped by longstanding disputes over land, indigeneity, political representation, ethnicity, religion, and community security. Within such an environment, violent incidents can quickly generate competing narratives on Facebook, WhatsApp, X and other platforms. Reports of attacks, casualties, displacement, and alleged perpetrators may circulate before independent verification. At the same time, people can remove photographs and videos from their original context and present them as evidence of current violence (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017). These processes can generate narratives of collective victimisation and imminent threat, particularly when specific incidents are interpreted through ethnic or religious identities. Consequently, the digital environment may drive a progression from existing grievances and conflict incidents to misinformation, identity polarisation, fear, anger, mobilisation, and retaliatory violence. Plateau's significance, therefore, is not simply that false information circulates during conflict, but that digital narratives can interact with existing communal divisions and shape perceptions of responsibility, threat, and the legitimacy of retaliation. Moreover, physical violence can subsequently generate additional photographs, videos, testimonies and allegations, creating a feedback loop in which offline conflict produces new digital narratives that may contribute to further escalation.

Taraba offers an important comparative case because its conflict environment is closely tied to protracted Jukun–Tiv ethno-communal tensions, especially in Wukari and surrounding areas. The conflict has been linked to competing claims over land, territory, indigeneity, political representation and ethnic identity (Yusuf *et al*., 2026; Ahmadu, 2026). As in Plateau, social media can rapidly disseminate interpretations of violent incidents, casualty reports, and allegations about opposing communities. Research on the 2019 Jukun–Tiv conflict indicates that conflict reporting frequently emphasised violence, casualties and ethnic confrontation, while emotive and sensational framing could reinforce polarised narratives (Lawan & Madaki, 2025). In the digital environment, such narratives may become more immediate and geographically extensive, enabling community members and diaspora audiences to encounter conflict-related information almost instantaneously. Consequently, an incident rooted in local territorial or political grievances can acquire broader ethnic significance when circulated through identity-based digital narratives. For instance, the Taraba case shows how social media can reinforce collective victimhood, fear, and mobilisation, while also supporting peace messaging, dialogue, and conflict management. The state therefore provides evidence of social media's dual character as both an amplifier of communal tension and a potential mechanism for peacebuilding.

Benue presents a distinct comparative pathway because its major conflict dynamics are strongly associated with farmer–herder relations, competition over land and grazing resources, livelihood insecurity and community-level violence. Although these conflicts have important environmental and economic dimensions, simplified digital narratives can imbue them with ethnic and religious meanings. Reports concerning killings, destroyed farms, cattle rustling, grazing disputes and displacement can spread rapidly through social-media networks (Okwori, 2020). Where such reports are inaccurate, exaggerated or presented without context, they can reinforce stereotypes and perceptions of collective responsibility. Examining the social-media-channelled, Okwori (2020) further indicates that fake news is a major setback in Benue's case, with misinformation perceived to aggravate farmer–herder tensions and could contribute to attacks and reprisals. Similarly, research on social-media campaigns surrounding the farmer–herder crisis indicates that online narratives can influence ethnic consciousness and contribute to distrust between farming communities and herders (Ogunbola & Ogunbiyi, 2020). The Benue case therefore highlights an important distinction from Plateau and Taraba: social-media weaponisation can transform a conflict initially rooted largely in land, livelihood, and resource competition into

an increasingly identity-based conflict. The digital pathway may therefore shift from resource grievances and conflict incidents to misinformation, ethnic framing, fear and distrust, community mobilisation, retaliation, and further displacement, after which new conflict-related content is produced and circulated online.

Kaduna's case provides a further comparative dimension because it combines longstanding communal and ethno-religious tensions, exemplified by the Kafanchan crisis of 1987 and the Zangon-Kataf crises of 1992, with more recent insecurity involving banditry, kidnapping and other forms of violence. These overlapping sources of insecurity create a particularly complex information environment in which narratives about ethnicity, religion, criminality, victimhood, and responsibility may circulate simultaneously and shape perceptions of conflict (Okpanachi, 2010; Oláyokù, 2017). Historical conflict in Kaduna shows how rumours and inflammatory narratives generate fear and feed cycles of retaliatory violence, while contemporary digital platforms have substantially increased the speed, reach, and persistence of conflict-related information. International assessments have identified the interaction of ethnic and religious tensions with farmer–herder conflict, banditry and kidnapping as important components of Kaduna's contemporary security environment (International Crisis Group, 2021; European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2025).

The circulation of unverified claims, such as allegations that particular ethnic or religious communities are responsible for attacks, inflammatory religious narratives portraying violence as an attack on a particular faith community, manipulated visual materials presented as evidence of ongoing violence, and accusations of collective responsibility can consequently intensify fear, mistrust and polarisation. The case of Kaduna therefore demonstrates how social media can operate within a multidimensional security environment in which communal conflict, ethno-religious tensions, farmer–herder disputes, banditry and kidnapping overlap, making the verification of conflict-related information particularly difficult. In such an environment, digitally circulated narratives may reinforce perceptions of victimhood and collective threat, potentially contributing to communal mobilisation, retaliatory attitudes and further escalation of tensions (International Crisis Group, 2021; European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2025).

A comparison of the four cases reveals both significant similarities and important contextual differences. Across Plateau, Taraba, Benue and Kaduna, social media provides a mechanism through which conflict incidents can be rapidly transformed into narratives of victimisation, threat and collective responsibility. The platforms reduce the time between an event and its interpretation by large audiences, compressing the relationship between information, perception, and action. In each case, the underlying conflict predates the emergence of contemporary social-media platforms; however, digital communication can alter the speed, scale and emotional intensity with which conflict narratives circulate. This implies that social media should not be regarded as the original cause of these conflicts but as an important amplifier and accelerator of existing conflict dynamics.

The comparison also shows that the main mechanism of digital weaponisation varies with the conflict structure. In Plateau, communal, ethnic and religious narratives are particularly significant, with visual content and victimisation narratives capable of intensifying perceptions of collective threat, such as the circulation of photographs or videos depicting injured persons, destroyed homes or displaced residents as evidence of attacks by an entire ethnic or religious community. Taraba demonstrates how ethnic identity, territorial competition, and Jukun–Tiv narratives shape digital interpretations of conflict. While Benue highlights how resource and livelihood disputes transform into ethnicised narratives about farmers and herders, Kaduna illustrates a more complex interaction in which ethnic, religious, political, and armed-security narratives can overlap and reinforce one another. Therefore, these differences show that the effects of social media cannot be understood without considering the social, historical, and political context in which digital communication occurs.

Another important similarity concerns the role of victimhood and identity narratives. Conflict-related social-media content rarely offers only neutral descriptions of events. Information often fits into broader narratives about who is the victim, who is responsible, and which community is under threat. Once such narratives become associated with collective identities, people may interpret individual incidents as evidence of a wider campaign against an entire ethnic, religious, or communal group. This process matters because it can transform individual grievances into collective grievances and, in turn, increase individuals' willingness to support mobilisation or retaliation.

The comparative cases further demonstrate the importance of visual weaponisation. Photographs, videos, screenshots, and other audiovisual materials often have considerable persuasive power because audiences may see visual evidence as inherently authentic, even when its provenance or context is uncertain (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Yet visual materials can be misleading when they are old, geographically unrelated, digitally manipulated or presented without context. In conflict situations, the circulation of such material can create an immediate perception that violence is occurring or that a particular community is responsible, thereby reinforcing fear, mistrust and perceptions of collective threat. The growing availability of generative artificial intelligence further increases this risk by lowering the barriers to producing convincing synthetic images, audio and video, making it increasingly difficult for audiences and even professional information actors to distinguish authentic material from manipulated or AI-generated content (Frau-Meigs, 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

The four cases also show that digital mobilisation bridges online narratives and offline behaviour. Social media can transform individual reactions into collective awareness and, under certain conditions, collective action (Castells, 2012). Calls to defend communities, attend demonstrations, resist perceived threats, or retaliate against alleged perpetrators can move rapidly through online networks, particularly where users share strong perceptions of collective identity or threat. However, digital mobilisation is not necessarily violent; the same networks can facilitate peaceful demonstrations, humanitarian assistance, community dialogue, early-warning reporting and reconciliation. The direction and consequences of mobilisation therefore depend substantially on the narrative framing, the actors involved, the objectives of mobilisation, and the institutional mechanisms available to monitor, verify and intervene in the circulation of conflict-related information (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

These findings provide empirical support for the Digital–Physical Conflict Escalation Model (DPCEM) proposed by this study. Across the four cases, the process can broadly be represented as existing grievances → conflict incident → digital narrative formation → misinformation/disinformation/hate speech → identity polarisation → fear, anger and perceived threat → digital mobilisation → offline mobilisation or violence → security response → counter-narratives → peacebuilding or further escalation. The comparison, however, indicates that this is not an inevitable or strictly linear process, but that intervention at any stage can potentially interrupt escalation. In addition, rapid government clarification can prevent rumours from becoming established narratives and reduce their potential to generate fear and tension. A recent example is the circulation of social-media reports and allegedly AI-generated images suggesting that a Hisbah organisation had been established in parts of Jos North Local Government Area of Plateau State. The reports generated public concern and prompted the Plateau State Government to intervene by declaring the reported activities unauthorised, directing security agencies to investigate those involved, and clarifying that no group had the legal authority to operate as a parallel enforcement body in the state. Jama'atu Nasril Islam's (JNI) later clarification that no Muslim organisation had announced plans to establish Hisbah further illustrates the importance of timely institutional and community-level responses to potentially inflammatory online claims (Channels Television, 2026; Business Times Nigeria, 2026). Moreover, while community leaders and fact-checkers can challenge inflammatory claims and expose manipulated information, security agencies can intervene before mobilisation becomes violent, and peacebuilding organisations can use the same platforms to promote dialogue and reconciliation.

DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of Plateau, Taraba, Benue and Kaduna States shows that social-media weaponisation operates differently depending on the nature of underlying grievances, identity structures, conflict actors and institutional responses, although common mechanisms such as misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, propaganda, mobilisation and visual manipulation occur across the four settings. In Plateau, social media most clearly illustrates the digital–physical escalation cycle, where grievances relating to land, indigeneity, ethnicity and communal insecurity are activated by conflict incidents and subsequently amplified through misinformation, victimisation narratives and visual content. Digital narratives can intensify perceptions of collective threat, fear and anger, thereby facilitating mobilisation and retaliation. The key significance of the Plateau case is therefore the feedback relationship between physical violence and digital narratives, in which violent incidents generate online content, online content reinforces perceptions of threat, and heightened emotions may contribute to further offline mobilisation and violence.

Taraba shows a different pattern, shaped mainly by Jukun–Tiv ethnic identity, territorial competition, and communal grievances. Here, social media can transform local disputes and violent incidents into broader narratives of collective ethnic victimisation and political exclusion. The circulation of contested allegations about actors linked to the Jukun–Tiv crisis shows how unverified information can become politically and communally consequential. At the same time, subsequent denials highlight the need for rapid clarification and credible counter-narratives. Taraba therefore underscores the importance of identity-sensitive crisis communication, particularly where historical grievances and intergroup distrust make communities highly receptive to narratives portraying the opposing group as a collective threat.

Benue illustrates another pathway, in which social-media weaponisation interacts with farmer–herder conflict, land, livelihood, resource competition, indigeneity and ethnicity. Digital narratives can simplify these complex socioeconomic and environmental disputes into an antagonistic "farmers versus herders" framework, reinforcing perceptions of Fulani herders as outsiders or threats (Sase, Tarnaha & Igbe, 2021). Misinformation and misleading photographs or videos can further strengthen perceptions of invasion, victimisation and insecurity. Compared with Plateau and Taraba, Benue therefore shows more clearly how social media can transform a resource and livelihood conflict into an identity-based conflict narrative, narrowing space for dialogue and undermining efforts to address the structural causes of violence.

Kaduna offers a more multidimensional environment where ethnicity, religion, politics, and communal insecurity intersect. During periods of political and communal tension, social-media narratives can intensify ethnic and religious identification, while divisive political communication may turn electoral competition into broader communal polarisation. Unlike cases where digital narratives emerge mainly after specific violent incidents, Kaduna demonstrates the importance of continuous identity-based digital polarisation, which can create a permissive environment for future conflict. Political actors, supporters and other online users may frame political competition through ethnic or religious identities, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and threat even before physical violence occurs.

Across the four cases, three major patterns emerge. First, underlying conflict structures shape the dominant digital narratives: Plateau is strongly associated with communal and ethno-religious narratives; Taraba with Jukun–Tiv identity competition; Benue with farmer–herder, land and resource grievances; and Kaduna with the intersection of ethnic, religious and political identities. Social media therefore does not create these conflicts independently but digitises, amplifies, and accelerates existing divisions. Second, identity constitutes the principal connecting mechanism. Specific incidents are frequently transformed online into collective claims about "our community" and "their community," increasing the tendency to interpret individual acts of violence as attacks against entire groups. Third, visual content has become a key instrument of conflict amplification, as photographs, videos, and screenshots can appear to provide compelling evidence even when their origin, date, or context is inaccurate.

The comparison broadly supports the Digital–Physical Conflict Escalation Model (DPCEM) proposed in this study: Existing Grievances → Conflict Incident → Digital Narrative Formation → Misinformation/Disinformation/Hate Speech → Identity Polarisation → Fear/Anger/Perceived Threat → Digital Mobilisation → Offline Mobilisation/Violence → Security Response → Counter-Narratives → Peacebuilding or Further Escalation. However, these cases also show that the stages do not operate with equal intensity or inevitably lead to violence. Effective counter-narratives, credible government communication, community leadership, fact-checking and timely security intervention can interrupt the cycle, whereas institutional distrust, weak verification and persistent inflammatory narratives can sustain escalation. Comparative evidence therefore challenges the assumption that social media inevitably causes conflict; instead, its effects are most consequential when digital narratives interact with pre-existing grievances, strong identity divisions, perceptions of collective threat, and weak mechanisms for information verification and conflict resolution.

The implications for national security and peacebuilding are consequently context-specific. While Plateau requires stronger rapid verification of conflict-related rumours and visual content, Taraba needs identity-sensitive communication and intercommunity dialogue. Benue requires measures that address misinformation alongside underlying farmer–herder and livelihood grievances; Kaduna, on the other hand, requires stronger management of ethnic, religious, and political narratives, particularly during periods of heightened political

competition. At the same time, all four cases demonstrate social media's dual-use character. The same platforms that facilitate misinformation, polarisation, and mobilisation can also support early warning, fact-checking, peace messaging, intercommunity dialogue, humanitarian coordination, and reconciliation. Overall, social media should therefore be understood neither as an independent cause of conflict nor as an inherently peaceful technology, but as a contested information environment whose effects depend on existing grievances, actors, narratives and institutional responses. Nigeria's central policy challenge, therefore, is to transform social media from a potential conflict amplifier into a strategic resource for early warning, credible communication, dialogue, accountability, and sustainable peacebuilding.

The Implications of Social Media on National Security and Peacebuilding

The weaponisation of social media has significant implications for Nigerian national security because its effects extend beyond the digital environment into public order, intelligence and early warning, communal relations, human security, state legitimacy and international relations. Social-media platforms have become key sources for citizens to obtain information about insecurity and conflict. Still, they can also amplify misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and extreme narratives, making it harder for security institutions to distinguish credible threats from rumours or deliberate deception. For instance, studies have identified information disorder as a factor that can aggravate existing ethnic, religious, and communal tensions in Nigeria (Mercy Corps, 2021; Hassan, 2023; Nasidi *et al*., 2025).

Firstly, social-media weaponisation poses a significant threat to public order because digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X, and others enable information, narratives, and calls for collective action to reach large populations almost instantaneously. During political or communal crises, inflammatory posts, videos, voice notes, rumours, and unverified claims can rapidly shape public perceptions and spark demonstrations, road blockades, retaliation, or other forms of collective action before conventional security institutions have time to verify the information and respond effectively (Uwalaka & Nwala, 2023). The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria clearly illustrate this dynamic, showing how social-media platforms can turn online communication and coordination into large-scale physical mobilisation. Although the protest began with legitimate grievances, it illustrates the broader capacity of digital networks to enable rapid mobilisation beyond the immediate control of conventional institutional structures. Mercy Corps (2021) similarly observes that the same digital infrastructure that facilitates communication and mobilisation can potentially be exploited to support violent mobilisation. This creates a critical speed asymmetry between digital information flows and conventional security responses: while narratives, rumours, and mobilisation messages can spread within minutes, intelligence verification, institutional decision-making, and the deployment of security personnel often require considerably more time. Consequently, when social media is weaponised, it can compress the interval between the emergence of a contentious event, the formation of public perceptions, and the initiation of collective action, thereby increasing the potential for the rapid escalation of crises and disruption of public order.

Secondly, social media presents both a significant intelligence opportunity and an emerging early-warning challenge for national security. Digital platforms can provide security agencies with timely information about attacks, threats, unusual movements, public grievances, and emerging tensions, supporting situational awareness and early intervention. However, the speed, volume, and uncertain reliability of online content also create substantial verification challenges. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) noted that security agencies must distinguish credible information from rumours, misinformation, and deliberate deception, particularly when authentic photographs or videos are recirculated with false dates, locations, or misleading interpretations, as this challenge becomes more critical during periods of conflict, when rapidly circulating but unverified information can distort threat assessments and influence security responses. Consequently, effective national-security intelligence increasingly requires integrating social-media monitoring and open-source intelligence (OSINT) with digital forensics, human intelligence, community reporting, and rapid verification mechanisms, rather than relying exclusively on conventional intelligence sources (Social Science Research Council, 2021). Such an integrated approach can strengthen security institutions' capacity to identify genuine threats early while reducing the risk of responding to fabricated or manipulated information.

Thirdly, social-media weaponisation can intensify communal polarisation by repeatedly exposing audiences to identity-based narratives that reinforce existing ethnic and religious divisions (Hassan, 2023; Freedom House,

2024). For instance, misinformation, hate speech and propaganda may transform individual incidents into perceived attacks by entire communities, weakening intergroup trust and making conflict prevention and reconciliation more difficult. Once communities interpret security incidents through an "us versus them" framework, relatively isolated events can generate disproportionate reactions. Relatedly, social-media weaponisation affects human security, displacement, and community wellbeing. Inflammatory or false narratives can create perceptions of imminent danger even when the information is unverified, leading individuals and communities to flee, relocate or take precautionary action. Although digital narratives may not directly cause physical displacement in every case, they can intensify fear, undermine confidence in personal safety and compound vulnerabilities associated with existing insurgency, banditry and communal violence (Nasidi *et al*., 2025).

Finally, social media has weakened the traditional gatekeeping role of established media, allowing political actors, community groups, influencers and citizens to compete directly with government institutions in shaping public interpretations of crises (Social Science Research Council, 2021). For instance, when official information fails to respond quickly to emerging rumours, alternative narratives may fill the information vacuum, leading citizens to see the state as slow, unresponsive, or disconnected from their experiences. Conversely, credible, transparent, and timely crisis communication can strengthen public trust and prevent misinformation from dominating. Moreover, digital platforms' cross-border and diaspora reach enables information from conflict-affected areas such as Plateau, Taraba, Benue, and Kaduna to circulate rapidly among Nigerian diaspora communities, international media organisations, foreign governments, humanitarian agencies, and global advocacy networks. This connectivity may generate positive outcomes by facilitating humanitarian assistance, international advocacy, documentation, and peacebuilding initiatives. However, misleading, exaggerated, or highly emotional narratives can also influence international perceptions of Nigerian conflicts, potentially affecting diplomatic relations, investment confidence, humanitarian responses, and broader international engagement.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social media has transformed Nigeria's contemporary conflict environment by reducing the distance between information, perception, and action. The comparative analysis of Plateau, Taraba, Benue and Kaduna shows that while social media does not necessarily create underlying grievances, misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, propaganda, visual weaponisation and digital mobilisation can amplify existing tensions, deepen identity polarisation, generate fear and anger, and facilitate the transition from digital narratives to offline violence. The Digital–Physical Conflict Escalation Model (DPCEM) demonstrates that this process is cyclical, involving interactions among existing grievances, conflict incidents, digital narratives, emotional responses, mobilisation and institutional responses. However, social media is also a dual-use, contested space that can support early warning, fact-checking, public communication, dialogue, reconciliation, and peacebuilding. Nigeria therefore needs to move beyond a predominantly reactive approach towards an integrated digital–physical security and peacebuilding framework that combines rapid crisis communication, digital early warning, media literacy, responsible platform governance and multi-stakeholder collaboration. Ultimately, the strategic objective should be to interrupt the pathway from grievance to harmful digital narratives and from digital narratives to violence, while strengthening the pathway from digital communication to early warning, dialogue, reconciliation and sustainable peace.

Therefore, the study recommends that Nigeria adopt an integrated, whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach to addressing the weaponisation of social media in conflict situations by shifting from predominantly reactive responses to preventive digital-security and peacebuilding strategies. Secondly, the Federal Government should strengthen national strategic communication, coordinate counter-disinformation mechanisms, and ensure that crisis information is rapid, credible, transparent, and impartial. At the same time, state governments, particularly in conflict-affected states such as Plateau, Taraba, Benue, and Kaduna, should establish effective crisis-communication and community-based early-warning systems that connect local reporting, rapid verification, security response, and peacebuilding interventions. In addition, security agencies should strengthen lawful, proportionate open-source intelligence (OSINT), digital monitoring, verification, and digital-forensics capabilities. At the same time, traditional and religious leaders should be included in digital early-warning and

community communication networks to counter rumours, discourage retaliatory narratives, and promote peaceful engagement. Beyond security agencies' intervention, civil-society organisations should support independent fact-checking, digital literacy, monitoring of harmful narratives, and community peacebuilding. At the same time, social-media platforms should strengthen transparent, context-sensitive content moderation; accessible reporting mechanisms; crisis-response protocols; and collaboration with credible fact-checking organisations, without undermining legitimate freedom of expression.

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