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**The Role of Social Media in Peace Building and Conflict Resolution in Jos, Plateau State,
Nigeria**

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Abstract:

The persistent ethno-religious conflicts in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, represent a significant challenge, marked by cycles of violence, displacement, and immense loss. While traditional media have long shaped narratives around these crises, the rapid proliferation of social media has introduced a complex and often volatile new dimension to the conflict landscape. Platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, with their unparalleled speed and reach, can both foster community dialogue and dangerously escalate tensions through the unchecked spread of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech. Yet, despite the acknowledged influence of these digital spaces, there has been a notable gap in empirical research specifically exploring how ordinary users in Jos perceive this dual-edged role. This study was therefore designed to bridge that gap, moving beyond qualitative analyses of media content to quantitatively investigate the perceptions of social media users themselves. Guided by Agenda-Setting Theory, which explains how the media shapes public discourse, the study employed a survey inferential research design. Data was collected from 369 active social media users in the Jos metropolis using a structured questionnaire, with respondents selected through a multi-stage sampling technique from the Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas. The findings reveal a complex and ambivalent digital landscape. A simple majority of respondents (59.1%) reported encountering hate speech or inciting content frequently, and a significant minority (33.9%) admitted a likelihood of sharing unverified information during a crisis. This exposure directly correlates with a widespread perception that social media harms intergroup understanding, with over half (56.3%) of respondents holding this view. Yet, the findings also illuminate a constructive side to these platforms: a similar proportion (59.1%) relies on social media for critical safety alerts during conflicts, and a meaningful segment (33.9%) actively participates in online communities dedicated to peacebuilding. This duality underscores that social media is not inherently a force for good or ill; its impact is contingent on user behaviour and the nature of the content being amplified. The study concludes that while social media currently acts as a significant vector for conflict escalation in Jos, it also holds untapped potential for peace. To harness this potential, it is recommended that stakeholders implement targeted interventions, including strengthening digital literacy and verification training for youth, institutionalising official early-warning channels on popular platforms, and partnering with trusted local influencers to amplify credible peace messaging. These evidence-based strategies are crucial for mitigating the risks associated with social media while leveraging its capacity to foster a more informed and resilient community.

Keywords: social media, conflict escalation, peacebuilding, user perceptions, misinformation

Introduction

One major issue troubling developing nations is the rising incidence of ethnic and communal strife. In Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria, the timeline of ethnic clashes has caused massive loss of lives and property valued at billions of Naira (Adebayo, 2024). Since 2001, this region has suffered a prolonged saga of ethno-religious turmoil. Ojewale (2024) observed that these disputes, mainly between local Christian groups and the settler Hausa-Fulani Muslim factions, have led to severe casualties, displacements, and ruin of assets. The root causes are complex and layered. They include competition for land and resources, political and economic exclusion, and deeply rooted identity politics, often exacerbated by religious divides (Alubo, Gofwen, & Sha, 2017).

While traditional media has played a role in shaping stories and views on these conflicts, the rise and widespread use of social media platforms have introduced a fresh aspect to the conflict dynamics in this state and across the nation. Social media's speed and extensive reach, along with users' power to create and share content, offer both chances for peace building and serious dangers for escalating tensions through the swift spread of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, and provocative contents.

The debate surrounding social media's impact on conflicts is ongoing worldwide. Even though social media's influence has surged dramatically over the past ten years, experts have yet to reach a consensus on its level and extent of impact in conflicts (Udo Usiere, & Udo, 2025). Social media platforms shape public discussions by highlighting important issues and occurrences as they unfold in the society. Lately, Plateau State, particularly Jos, has faced recurring crises, resulting in the tragic loss of lives and properties. Therefore, this research investigates how users perceive the role of social media in either alleviating or intensifying the ongoing crises in Plateau State.

Statement of the Research Problem

Recent studies have highlighted the complex relationship between social media and conflict dynamics. For instance, a study on social media and conflict in Nigeria noted that social media can both fuel and mitigate conflicts, depending on how it is used (Adeyanju, 2020). Another study

emphasises the need for critical media literacy to counter misinformation and promote peace (Ogola, 2021). The dual-edged nature of social media's power in conflict cannot be overstated. While it can promote understanding and peace-building, it also has the potential to exacerbate tensions. As Goldfield (2023) illustrated, encountering diverse perspectives on social media does not guarantee positive engagement, even though such an outcome is possible. Social media has the potential to spread both constructive and destructive information to the public. While wrong information could help escalate conflict and cause people to take opposing positions during conflict, accurate information could reduce tension. In Plateau State, social media users are prone to express their opinions in a prejudiced manner, often without considering how it may impact public relations and stability.

Despite the significant roles that social media can play in conflict resolution in Plateau State, this subject has not been extensively studied by scholars and practitioners. Although its role in modern conflicts is acknowledged, little is known about how users in Jos specifically perceive its impact on conflict escalation. Several studies have examined general causes of conflicts in Plateau State and other parts of the country (Igbashangev & Abdullahi, 2023; Usman & Alade, 2025; Usman & Alade, 2025). However, these studies have hardly investigated the indirect and invisible roles of social media in conflict resolution. Moreover, while attempts have been made to find supportive evidence linking media to conflict, little has been done regarding user perceptions in conflict escalation.

Research shows social media plays a double-edged role in conflict. On one hand, it often fuels tensions by spreading misinformation, hate speech, and divisive content that deepens existing divides and can trigger violence. On the other, platforms also serve as tools for peace—activists and community leaders use them to share information, encourage dialogue, and mobilize communities (Rehman & Riaz, 2021; Mohammed & Dominic, 2024). Still, there are gaps in the research. Most studies on media and conflict in Jos have centered on traditional outlets, overlooking the unique dynamics of social media and while those that exist tends to rely on qualitative methods like interviews, which offer depth but limit how broadly findings can be

applied (Igbashangev & Abdullahi, 2023; Abubakar, Ibrahim, & Ibrahim, 2025b). This study addresses that gap by using a quantitative survey to explore how users actually perceive social media's role in conflict—and whether digital literacy can help reduce its negative effects in Jos.

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed to:

1. Ascertain respondents' level of exposure to conflict-related content on social media, with specific attention to inciting messages and hate speech.
2. Assess respondents' perceptions of social media's role in the dissemination of conflict information and its influence on conflict escalation in Jos Metropolis.
3. Determine respondents' level of participation in peace-oriented online groups, pages, and discussions in Jos Metropolis.
4. Examine respondents' perceptions of social media as a tool for peacebuilding.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Agenda-Setting Theory (AST), which elucidates the dynamics of social media proliferation in violent environments. McCombs, and Shaw, in their 1972 paper, introduced "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. This theory explains how the media influence public opinion by selecting which issues to cover and how prominently to feature them. Through this selection process, the media shape what the public thinks about and deems important. AST offers a valuable framework for analysing how media narratives shape perception in complex conflicts, such as the one in Jos.

Applying this theory to Jos reveals how media coverage shapes public understanding. Traditional and social media in Jos often prioritise specific issues, elevating them above others. For instance, by focusing relentlessly on ethno-religious violence, they convince the public that this is the conflict's primary cause. This constant reporting ignores other critical drivers, such as political competition and economic inequality. Consequently, the public perceives the crisis as purely religious or ethnic, overlooking its multifaceted nature. This framing can overshadow peace

initiatives or other community peace-building efforts, thus fuelling the conflict. The consistent focus on violence ensures that violence itself becomes the central topic of public discourse.

Media outlets in Jos frequently frame conflicts using charged terminology. Terms such as "reprisal attacks," "indigenes vs. settlers," and "Muslims vs. Christians" appear regularly in coverage. These specific word choices shape how audiences interpret the violence.

Such framing creates a powerful narrative effect. By repeatedly using these labels, the media constructs a story of endless revenge cycles. This portrayal suggests that divisions run so deep that they make coexistence impossible. When outlets selectively highlight negative attributes of particular groups, they actively reinforce harmful stereotypes. This process hardens public attitudes and complicates efforts toward dialogue and reconciliation.

Traditional media no longer hold a monopoly on setting the public agenda. Social media has introduced a significant shift in this dynamic. Now, the public can influence what traditional media covers. In Jos, this plays out in concrete ways. Viral posts about alleged attacks can force mainstream outlets to report on incidents they might otherwise ignore. A single tweet or Facebook post can rapidly transform into a major news story.

This interaction between social and traditional media creates a feedback loop. User-generated content accelerates the spread of information and misinformation. Calls to action that circulate online can escalate tensions on the ground. As viral posts gain traction, they pressure journalists to investigate and report, which then amplifies the original message further. This cycle can rapidly intensify a crisis, demonstrating how agenda-setting now flows in multiple directions.

Social media has fundamentally altered how information flows and reaches audiences, with significant implications for conflict. Adamu (2020) notes that this transformation has deeply impacted conflict situations in Nigeria, where millions now actively use various platforms daily. However, this connectivity comes with risks. The spread of misinformation, hate speech, and inflammatory contents across social networks can directly contribute to conflict escalation. Research demonstrates that conflict-related posts generate high engagement rates, which amplifies divisions and reinforces existing tensions (Bradshaw & Howard, 2017).

Understanding conflict as a process helps clarify how social media intervenes. Pondy (1967) conceptualized conflict as a dynamic sequence moving through distinct stages: latent, perceived, felt, manifest, and aftermath. This framework treats conflict not as isolated incidents but as interconnected episodes within ongoing relationships. Deutsch (1973) further defined conflict as situations where parties hold incompatible goals and believe that achieving their own objectives prevents others from achieving theirs. This perspective highlights the centrality of perceived opposition.

Conflict escalation involves the intensification of disputes through multiple mechanisms. Coleman (2006, 2021) identifies increased participation, expanded issues, and heightened emotional investment as key drivers. When this process occurs in digital spaces, online platforms fundamentally transform its nature. While conflicts may originate in real-world issues such as politics, identity, or resource competition, the digital environment accelerates and amplifies escalation through unique features. Speed, anonymity, reach, and algorithmic content distribution distinguish this process from traditional conflict dynamics. In digital contexts, escalation operates through viral information spread, algorithmic amplification of divisive material, and network-driven mobilization (Tucker, Theocharis, Roberts, & Barberá, 2017). Social media functions as a double-edged instrument in conflict settings. It can intensify existing tensions, yet it also offers pathways for peace-building. Perceived positive applications include facilitating dialogue, disseminating information, raising awareness, and enabling citizen journalism.

Recent large-scale quantitative studies provide empirical evidence for social media's influence on conflict perceptions. Osmundsen, Bor, Vahlstrup, Bechmann, and Petersen (2021) tested competing hypotheses by mapping psychological profiles of over 2,300 American X users and analyzing behavioral sharing data alongside sentiment analyses of more than 500,000 news headlines. Their findings contradicted the ignorance perspective but supported the disruption perspective and strongly validated the partisan polarization perspective. Users who strongly disliked political opponents proved most likely to share political fake news and selectively distribute content that derogated these opponents, thereby fueling disharmony. This demonstrates

that social media usage patterns directly impact conflict perceptions, a finding highly relevant to understanding tensions in places like Jos.

Longitudinal research tracks how user awareness evolves over time. Auxier and Anderson (2021), in Pew Research Centre studies, followed American users' perceptions of social media's role in political polarization. Their data showed increasing awareness of platform influence across successive survey waves. These studies establish that measuring user perceptions quantitatively and tracking changes over time is feasible. Baseline perceptions predict future platform usage patterns and engagement with conflict-related contents. Users reporting higher perceived influence scores demonstrate increased selective exposure and reduced willingness to engage with challenging information (Barberá, 2020).

Cross-national comparative research reveals significant variation across different contexts. Fletcher et al. (2020) analyzed survey data from 37 countries, finding that perceived social media influence on conflicts varies based on democratic governance quality, media freedom, and digital literacy levels. Upchurch and Grassman (2016) similarly observed that social media transforms how, when, and whether workplace conflicts manifest, with online interactions amplifying tensions through rapid information diffusion and polarized group dynamics.

Controlled experiments provide causal evidence for social media's effects. Bail et al. (2018) conducted a randomized controlled trial with over 1,600 participants, measuring how exposure to cross-cutting political content affects perceived polarization and conflict intensity. They found that increased exposure to opposing viewpoints initially increases perceived conflict before potentially reducing polarization over time.

Nigerian-specific data contextualizes these global patterns. The Centre for Democracy and Development (2022) conducted cross-sectional surveys across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, measuring user perceptions of social media's influence on conflicts. Results revealed significant regional variation, with North Central states, including Plateau, showing higher concern levels. The Afrobarometer Round 9 survey (2023) found that 58% of Nigerian respondents perceived

social media as increasing ethnic and religious tensions, providing national context for localized studies in conflict-affected regions.

Platform-specific research identifies differential perception patterns. Buchanan et al. (2021) examined how users perceive various platforms, finding that WhatsApp, used by 90% of Nigerian internet users, rates highest for perceived influence in spreading both accurate information and misinformation during crises. Users reported that WhatsApp groups significantly shape community opinions about conflicts, suggesting high escalation potential in the region.

Demographic factors significantly shape user perceptions. Statista (2024) data shows that users aged 18 to 35 report stronger perceived Facebook influence on conflict escalation compared to older users, while educational level correlates inversely with perceived influence. Pew Research (2022) identified age as a consistent predictor, with younger users (18-25) reporting 32% higher influence perception scores than users over 45. Educational attainment shows complex relationships with perception patterns. Users with secondary education report the highest perceived influence scores, while tertiary-educated users demonstrate more nuanced understanding of platform mechanisms but similar overall influence perception. This indicates that younger populations face greater exposure and may form different perceptions in conflict situations such as Jos.

Recent studies directly examine Jos and Nigerian contexts. Gambo et al. (2025) analyzed the historical roots and manifestations of ethno-religious violence in Jos using qualitative methods and secondary data from scholarly sources. They investigated official and non-official responses, including the 2004 Plateau State Conference, the Plateau Peace Building Agency (PPBA), and faith-based organization initiatives. The research identified the indigene-settler dichotomy as the primary conflict driver, with media often reinforcing this division. It also highlighted online-based peace-building efforts. Nasidi et al. (2025) collected survey data from digital users via Google Forms to analyze information spread's effect on national conflict in Nigeria. Using Structural Equation Modeling - Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) analysis, they demonstrated that fake news, misinformation, and disinformation directly escalate national conflicts.

Methodology

This study adopted the quantitative approach, using the survey inferential research design, to provide a comprehensive understanding of social media users' perceptions regarding the influence of social media in conflict escalation within Jos, Plateau State. The decision to adopt this approach aligned with the research objectives and the nature of the data being collected. The primary goal was to investigate users' perceptions, which could be effectively measured and quantified through a structured questionnaire. The design offered objectivity and reliability potential. The use of standardised instruments minimised researcher bias. The systematic collection and statistical analysis of numerical data enhanced the objectivity and reliability of the findings, making the results more trustworthy and replicable. The design also allowed for valid and inferential generalisation of findings. By collecting data from a large and representative sample, the findings could be generalised to a broader population within Jos, allowing for conclusions that reflected wider trends.

The target population for this study is social media users, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, residing in Jos, aged between 18 and 54, who have access to and actively used these platforms. Using a growth rate of 2.4%, the projected population of Jos metropolis stood at 923,652 in 2025 (*Nigeria Population (2026) - Worldometer, n.d.*). This figure represented the urban agglomeration of Jos, which included the city and its adjacent suburban areas. The study focused specifically on the Local Government Areas that comprised the Jos metropolitan area: Jos North and Jos South.

While this study was conducted in Jos Metropolis, Plateau State, Nigeria with an estimated total population of 923,652), the population of interest for this study was social media users in Jos, whose exact number is not known and was treated as very large/indeterminate. Therefore, the sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for an unknown (large) population.

Cochran's Sample Size Formula (for large/unknown population)

$$n_0 = \frac{Z^2 p(1-p)}{e^2} \quad n = \frac{Z^2 p(1-p)}{e^2}$$

Where

- n_0 is the initial minimum sample size for a large/unknown population
- Z is the Z-value corresponding to the chosen confidence level
- p is the estimated proportion of the population with the attribute of interest (when unknown, $p=0.5$ is used to produce the maximum sample size)
- e is the margin of error

Parameters Used in This Study

$Z=1.96$ (95% confidence level)

$e=0.05$ (5% margin of error)

$p=0.5$ (assumption of maximum variability)

Computation of Initial Sample Size

$n_0=(1.96)^2$

$n_0=(0.05)^2(1.96)^2 \times 0.5(1-0.5)$

$n_0=3.8416 \times 0.250.0025n_0=0.00253.8416 \times 0.25$

$n_0=0.96040.0025=384.16n_0=0.00250.9604=384.16$

The value was approximated to the nearest whole number:

$n_0 \approx 385$

Adjustment for Non-Response (10%)

To account for an anticipated 10% non-response rate, the sample size was adjusted as follows:

$n=n_0(1-r)$

Where r is the non-response rate.

$n=384.16(1-0.10)=384.16(0.90)=426.84$

Approximating to the nearest whole number:

$n \approx 427$

Based on the above, the study adopted a final sample size of 402 respondents

The study utilised a multi-stage sampling technique. First, particular localities impacted by conflict were chosen from Jos North and Jos South Local Government Areas using purposive sampling. Second, to guarantee representation across various demographic groups within the chosen

communities, the researchers employed stratified random selection. In Jos North, the selected communities included Tudun Wada, Angwan Rogo, and Farin Gada. In Jos South, the selected communities included Bukuru, Vom, and Rantya. Within each chosen ward, the researchers randomly selected streets and used systematic sampling to choose every *n*th household. The researchers then approached selected households and administered the questionnaire to eligible individuals who consented to participate. Consequently, a total of 402 questionnaires were administered to social media users in Jos metropolis, and after data cleaning, 369 questionnaires were found valid for analysis, representing a 92.25% response rate.

The primary instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The instrument was designed to elicit information on respondents' socio-demographic characteristics, social media use patterns, and perceptions of social media's role in conflict-related communication in Jos Metropolis, Plateau State, Nigeria. Specifically, the questionnaire captured respondents' views on social media's role in the dissemination of conflict information, its perceived influence on conflict escalation, the types of content considered provocative or capable of heightening tensions, and perceptions of social media as a tool for peacebuilding. The questionnaire comprised mainly closed-ended items, with a limited number of open-ended questions included to obtain additional clarifications and context. Perception-based items were measured using binary response options (Yes/No) and five-point Likert-scale statements to support quantitative analysis.

Prior to administration, respondents were provided with an introductory script explaining the purpose of the study, participation requirements, and assurances of confidentiality. Thereafter, informed consent was obtained, and respondents who agreed to participate signed the consent form before completing the questionnaire.

Results and discussions

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 402 questionnaires were administered to social media users in Jos metropolis. After data cleaning, 369 questionnaires were found valid for analysis, representing a 92.25% response rate.

Table 1: Gender Distribution

Sex	Count	Percentage
Female	252	68.3%
Male	117	31.7%
Total	369	100%

The sample shows a predominance of female respondents (68.3%) compared to males (31.7%). This gender distribution reflects patterns in social media adoption and suggests that interventions should consider gender-sensitive approaches.

Table 2: Age Distribution

Age Group	Count	Percentage
18-24 years	138	37.4%
25-30 years	99	26.8%
31-35 years	36	9.8%
36-44 years	44	11.9%
45-54 years	52	14.1%
Total	369	100%

The age profile indicates that the majority of respondents (64.2%) are between 18 and 30 years old, confirming that young people constitute the primary social media user population in Jos. This finding aligns with national and global trends showing higher social media adoption among youth. The sample has higher representation from Jos South (73.4%) than Jos North (26.6%). This distribution reflects accessibility factors and suggests that locally tailored programming should consider potential differences in dynamics between the two LGAs.

Table 3: LGA of Residence

LGA	Count	Percentage
Jos South	271	73.4%
Jos North	98	26.6%
Total	369	100%

Table 4: Frequency of Social Media Usage

Frequency	Count	Percentage
Few times a week	68	18.4%
Monthly	63	17.1%
Once a day	58	15.7%
Less than once a week	58	15.7%
Never	53	14.4%
Other frequencies	69	18.7%
Total	369	100%

Social media usage is widespread but varied. While substantial groups report using social media daily (15.7%) or several times weekly (18.4%), notable proportions report less frequent use or never using social media. This variation suggests that information dissemination strategies should not rely exclusively on social media platforms.

Exposure to Conflict-Related Content

A majority of respondents (59.1%) reported encountering content they believe incites violence or spreads hate speech either "very often" or "often". An additional 32.8% reported encountering such content "sometimes". Only 8.2% reported rarely or never encountering such content. This finding indicates that exposure to harmful content is widespread among social media users in Jos.

Table 5: Encounter with Inciting or Hate Speech Content

Response	Count	Percentage
Very often	162	43.9%
Often	56	15.2%
Sometimes	121	32.8%
Rarely	15	4.1%
Never	15	4.1%
Total	369	100%

Sharing Behaviour during Conflict

Table 6: Likelihood of Sharing Unverified Information

Response	Count	Percentage
Very likely	38	10.3%
Likely	87	23.6%
Neutral	98	26.6%
Unlikely	135	36.6%
Very unlikely	11	3.0%
Total	369	100%

Regarding willingness to share unverified information during conflict, 33.9% of respondents indicated they would be "very likely" or "likely" to share such content. A larger proportion (39.6%) reported being "unlikely" or "very unlikely" to share unverified information, while 26.6% remained neutral. This suggests mixed sharing behaviour, with a substantial minority representing potential vectors for misinformation spread.

Social Media and Intergroup Understanding

Table 7: Social Media's Role in Intergroup Understanding

Response	Count	Percentage
Helps greatly	12	3.3%
Helps somewhat	56	15.2%
Neutral	93	25.2%
Hurts somewhat	133	36.0%
Hurts greatly	75	20.3%
Total	369	100%

When asked whether social media helps or hurts the ability of people from different ethnic/religious groups to understand each other's perspectives during conflict, 56.3% of respondents indicated that social media "hurts somewhat" or "hurts greatly". Only 18.5% believed it helps, while 25.2% remained neutral. This suggests that most users perceive social media as having a negative impact on intergroup understanding during conflicts.

Social Media as a Safety Tool

Table 8: Receipt of Safety Alerts via Social Media

Response	Count	Percentage
Very often	162	43.9%
Often	56	15.2%
Sometimes	121	32.8%
Rarely	15	4.1%
Never	15	4.1%
Total	369	100%

Interestingly, the same pattern observed for exposure to harmful content appears for receipt of safety alerts. A majority of respondents (59.1%) reported receiving warnings or safety alerts related to conflict in Jos primarily through social media "very often" or "often". An additional 32.8% reported receiving such alerts "sometimes". This indicates that social media serves as a significant channel for safety information dissemination.

Participation in Peace-Promoting Online Communities

Table 9: Participation in Peace-Promoting Online Groups

Response	Count	Percentage
Yes, actively	38	10.3%
Yes, occasionally	87	23.6%
Neutral/Unsure	98	26.6%
No, rarely	135	36.6%
No, never	11	3.0%
Total	369	100%

Regarding active followership or participation in online groups, pages, or discussions aimed at promoting peace and unity in Jos, 33.9% of respondents reported active or occasional participation. A larger proportion (39.6%) reported rarely or never participating, while 26.6% were neutral. This suggests that while a substantial minority engages with peace-promoting content online, the majority do not actively participate in such spaces.

Discussion

The findings from this study reveal that social media plays a complex and ambivalent role in conflict dynamics in Jos. This discussion interprets these findings in relation to the research objectives and existing literature.

Social Media Reach and User Profile

The sample's age profile, with 64.2% of respondents aged 18-30 years, mirrors global trends in social media adoption, showing higher usage among younger populations (Pew Research, 2022; Statista, 2024). This finding suggests that peacebuilding interventions should prioritise platforms and messaging styles that resonate with younger users. The higher representation of female respondents (68.3%) in the sample may reflect either higher willingness to participate in surveys or actual gender differences in social media engagement patterns in Jos. The concentration of respondents from Jos South (73.4%) means that locally tailored programming is feasible, but should not ignore Jos North, where conflict dynamics may differ. Gambo et al. (2025) noted that the indigene-settler dichotomy, which drives much of the conflict, manifests differently across these areas. The variation in social media usage frequency has important implications. While many respondents use social media regularly, substantial groups use it infrequently or never. This finding aligns with Fletcher et al. (2020), who noted that digital divides persist even in areas with high overall penetration. For peace building practitioners, this means that social media cannot be the sole channel for conflict prevention messaging; traditional media and community-based approaches remain essential complementary channels.

Exposure to Harmful Content Versus Reliance on Social Media

A key finding is that while many respondents (59.1%) report encountering content they judge as incitatory or hateful, reliance on social media for conflict information is not uniformly high. This combination indicates that harmful content reaches many users even if they do not entirely depend on social media as their sole information source. This creates a persistent risk: harmful narratives and rumours can spread into the public sphere even among those who nominally consult multiple information sources. This finding supports the work of Nasidi et al. (2025), who demonstrated that the spread of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation escalates national conflicts. The mechanisms identified in their SEM-PLS analysis-rapid dissemination, emotional appeals, and network effects-appear operative in Jos as well.

Similarly, Osmundsen et al. (2021) found that users who strongly dislike their political opponents are most likely to share political fake news. In the Jos context, where ethno-religious identities are deeply entrenched, such dynamics likely amplify conflict potential. The finding also aligns with Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The consistent exposure to conflict-related content, regardless of whether users actively seek it, suggests that social media platforms are setting the agenda for public discourse around conflict. This agenda-setting function operates even for users who do not heavily rely on social media, as content can spill over into offline conversations and traditional media coverage.

Sharing Behaviour and Verification

The dataset shows mixed behaviour regarding information sharing. While a large segment (39.6%) reports cautious sharing (lower likelihood to share unverified content), medium-to-high sharing exists among meaningful minorities (33.9% likely to share unverified content). This suggests that digital literacy and trust dynamics are heterogeneous in the Jos population. This finding has practical implications. In tense situations, the minority willing to share unverified information can act as amplifiers of rumours, potentially triggering or escalating violence. Bail et al. (2018) found that exposure to opposing viewpoints initially increases perceived conflict, suggesting that even well-intentioned sharing can have negative consequences. Targeted education on verification could reduce harmful re-sharing and slow rumour spread during tension. The finding also relates to what Buchanan et al. (2021) observed about WhatsApp's role in Nigerian information ecosystems. As the most used platform, WhatsApp's private group structure makes verification difficult and can facilitate the rapid spread of unverified content. In Jos, where WhatsApp usage is high, this platform-specific dynamic requires attention in intervention design.

Social Media as a Safety and Peace Tool

Despite negative perceptions, many respondents report positive uses of social media. A majority (59.1%) report receiving safety alerts or warnings via social media, and 33.9% participate in peace-promoting online groups. Importantly, while 56.3% view social media as hurting intergroup understanding, 18.5% see it as helpful, and 25.2% remain neutral. This suggests that not all users

have wholly negative perceptions, and some recognise positive potential. This dual finding signals an existing foundation for positive uses that can be strengthened rather than replaced. Rapid alerts during crises, mobilising peace messaging, and community moderation are all functions that users already engage with. Upchurch and Grassman (2016) noted similar patterns in workplace conflict contexts, where online interactions could both amplify tensions and facilitate resolution depending on how platforms were used. The positive potential aligns with Adeyanju's (2020) observation that social media can both fuel and mitigate conflicts depending on usage. During the #EndSARS movement, for example, social media platforms were used to coordinate protests but also to disseminate safety information and counter rumours. In Jos, similar dynamics appear operative, with the same platforms serving both conflict-escalating and conflict-mitigating functions.

Operational Implications

Because harmful content is present even if overall reliance is mixed, prevention and mitigation measures must focus on reducing the visibility and impact of inciting posts through platform moderation, community reporting, pre-bunking, and fast corrections. Simultaneously, amplifying credible safety alerts and locally credible peace messages from trusted leaders and civic institutions can strengthen positive uses. The demographic patterns observed suggest that interventions should be tailored. Younger users, who report higher exposure and willingness to share, should be the primary targets for digital literacy training. Gender-sensitive approaches are needed, given the higher female representation in the sample. Area-specific programming should account for potential differences between Jos North and Jos South.

Conclusion

This study examined social media users' perceptions of the role of social media in conflict escalation and peacebuilding in Jos, Plateau State. The findings demonstrate that social media plays a complex dual role in conflict dynamics. On one hand, exposure to inciting content and hate speech is widespread, and a substantial minority of users express willingness to share unverified information during conflicts. Most users perceive social media as hurting intergroup understanding. On the other hand, social media serves as a significant channel for safety alerts, and

a meaningful minority of users participate in online peace-promoting communities. These findings support the theoretical framework of Agenda-Setting Theory, which suggests that media platforms shape public discourse by elevating certain issues. In Jos, social media platforms consistently elevate conflict-related content, influencing what users think about and potentially reinforcing divisive narratives. However, the same platforms can also elevate peace messages and safety information when intentionally used for these purposes. The study concludes that social media is neither inherently conflict-escalating nor peace-promoting. Rather, its effects depend on how platforms are used, what content is amplified, and what interventions are in place to promote responsible use. This understanding points toward practical strategies for harnessing social media's potential for peace while mitigating its risks.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed. First, stakeholders should strengthen digital literacy and verification training by designing short, platform-specific modules for WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and X, implemented through community centres, youth groups, and schools. These modules should emphasise simple heuristics for verification, such as checking sources, using reverse-image search, and waiting to verify before sharing. Programmes should target youth, who are highly represented in the sample and are both influential sharers and crucial audiences.

Second, stakeholders should support community-based early-warning channels and official rapid alerts by institutionalising official safety-alert channels on the most-used platforms, such as WhatsApp broadcast lists managed by trusted local authorities or civil society coalitions. Because many respondents already receive safety alerts on social media, formalising and promoting known, verified channels can improve reach and reduce confusion during crises.

Third, stakeholders should work with local influencers and community leaders to amplify peace messaging. The dataset shows people recognise social media's potential for improving understanding. Programmes should recruit credible local voices, including religious, youth, and women leaders, for periodic, targeted peace campaigns and model conflict de-escalation language

through paid or structured collaborations such as content calendars and scripts for calm messaging during tension spikes.

Fourth, stakeholders should create rapid-response fact-checking and counter-messaging workflows by establishing a local fact-checking node through an NGO-university partnership to quickly verify circulating claims and produce concise corrections for wide redistribution. Programmes should pair corrections with easy reporting buttons and official signposting to reduce rumour spread.

Fifth, stakeholders should strengthen reporting and moderation pathways with platforms by convening platform liaisons or regional platform safety contacts to fast-track removal or labelling of harmful content during crises and empower community moderators for local language moderation and referral of posts that may incite violence.

Sixth, stakeholders should encourage and fund peace-promoting online communities by supporting the growth of online groups that deliberately focus on dialogue across ethnic and religious lines. These groups should be moderated with rules promoting respect and fact-based exchange. Given evidence that many respondents participate in such spaces, scaling them could increase the relative volume of constructive content.

Seventh, stakeholders should implement targeted monitoring and evaluation by developing a simple monitoring dashboard tracking the volume of inciting posts, reach of safety alerts, and engagement with peace campaigns. Programmes should regularly survey targeted cohorts, particularly youth and Jos North residents, to measure changes in verification behaviour and exposure to incitement.

Eighth, stakeholders should tailor interventions to demographic differences. Given gender and age skews in the sample, programmes should design gender-sensitive and age-appropriate content. For example, they might use short video content on Instagram and TikTok for younger users and WhatsApp audio messages for groups preferring that channel.

Finally, stakeholders should build institutional trust through partnerships. Because trust in government channels may vary, government safety messaging should partner with civil society and

trusted community figures to boost credibility. Multi-stakeholder messages combining government, religious leaders, and local NGOs increase perceived legitimacy.

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