



Social Media Hate Speech and Ethno-Religious Conflict in Jos, Plateau State: A Qualitative Study of Stakeholders' Perspectives

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Abstract

Conflicts based on religion, ethnicity and negative narratives have fuelled violence, hatred, discrimination and segregation between the two dominant religions and various ethnic groups for decades, particularly in North-Central Nigeria. Existing studies often explain the conflict through isolated ethnic, religious, political, historical and economic factors. Such explanations overlook the dynamic ways in which conflict narratives are constructed and communicated on social media platforms. Against this backdrop, this study examined stakeholders' perspectives on hate speech on social media, with a focus on recurrent ethno-religious conflict in Jos, Plateau State. It interrogates the role of hate speech on social media in influencing ethno-religious conflict. Hinged on the theoretical postulations of Media Determinism Theory (MDT), the study adopted a qualitative research method. It utilised semi-structured in-depth interviews as the method of data collection. Seventeen (17) stakeholders, including traditional rulers, religious leaders, community leaders, civil society members, youth leaders, media/academia representatives and policymakers, were purposively selected to constitute the study population. Data were analysed based on generated themes that emerged inductively. The study found that hate speech on social media is a potent accelerant of conflict, exacerbated by the spread of misinformation, ease of dissemination, lack of regulation, and derogatory and inciting statements. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions, including self-censorship, community-based initiatives, media literacy, improved regulations, policy implementation and continuous peacebuilding, to mitigate the impact of hateful content on social media during conflict and promote social cohesion in Nigeria's diverse sociocultural society.

Keywords: conflict management, ethno-religious conflict, hate speech, social media, stakeholders

Introduction

The dynamic nature of a society makes the outbreak of conflicts inevitable. Plateau State in North-Central Nigeria has witnessed recurrent ethno-religious conflicts of varying degrees for more than two decades. The conflicts pit the Berom, Anaguta and Afizere, who are predominantly Christians and referred to as indigenes, against the Hausa–Fulani, who are predominantly Muslims and referred to as settlers by the indigenes (Gambo et al., 2025). Nnabuihe (2019) opines that perceived inequalities in political, economic, cultural and educational opportunities contribute to the conflict. Madueke (2018) further demonstrates that historical records, ethnic mobilisation and the framing of group identities contribute to ethnic and religious differences. While contestations over land, access to resources, historical inequalities and political representation remain central drivers of disputes, the rapid penetration of digital media introduces a new accelerant to the conflict. Nababa and Ya'u (2017) agree that social media platforms have become indispensable tools for communication and information dissemination on a wide array of issues in contemporary society. In complex and diverse societies, however, the same platforms that facilitate interaction,



participation and collaboration are also used to circulate hostility, prejudice, stereotypes and negative narratives that deepen societal divisions. For instance, Datsau and Gaiya (2026) found that social media messages in Nigeria frequently promote ethno-religious sentiments rather than issue-based social and political discourse. Similarly, Ridwanullah et al. (2025) identified ethnic, political, religious and regional hate speech as dominant themes in online discourse, especially in highly polarised contexts. The rapid and widespread dissemination of negative content raises concerns about its implications for intergroup and interreligious conflicts.

The Problem

Despite sustained peace-building initiatives and extensive scholarly contributions to the recurrent crises in Plateau State, violence and intergroup tensions have persisted. While prior studies have largely focused on the political, ethnic, religious, economic and historical drivers of the conflict, as well as descriptive analyses of the crises, insufficient empirical attention has been paid to the changing digital communication environment. This prompts further investigation into how negative narratives circulate through social media and how they may reinforce existing ethno-religious divisions. This study addresses this gap by examining stakeholders' perspectives on hate speech on social media and how it impacts conflict. By focusing on stakeholders, the study seeks to gain insight into lived experiences within the specific context of Jos, Plateau State.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Social Media

Social media has become one of the most significant developments in contemporary society, particularly in the communication arena. Its emergence and continuous evolution have greatly transformed how individuals, groups, institutions and societies interact and share information. Aichner et al. (2021), in their review of definitions and applications of the concept, observed that there is no single definition of social media. Rather, the concept describes a broad range of internet-based applications and platforms built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content and facilitate communication, interactions, networking and collaboration. Thus, social media is not merely a collection of platforms but a broader communication environment characterised by interactivity and participation.

Rhee et al. (2021) argue that understanding the concept requires consideration of how users themselves perceive and define these platforms. This dimension takes into consideration the forums that social media offer users, as it enables ordinary individuals to create and distribute text, pictures, videos, audio materials and opinions, thus expanding opportunities for individuals and groups to participate directly in public discourse. Oso (2017) makes a similar argument when he asserts that social media have put discursive power in the hands of mere consumers of media content. According to him, ordinary citizens can now produce and disseminate their own media content. Observably, this democratisation of media access has been effectively used by many oppositional and alternative social groups, as exemplified by the Arab Spring.

The participatory and interactive nature of social media is particularly important in relation to the study of social conflicts, as these platforms allow individuals and groups to air their identities, beliefs, grievances and perspectives. This practice can further deepen conflicts, particularly in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies. For instance, Dauda et al. (2017)



observed that, in a diverse society like Nigeria, social media are increasingly being deployed as tools for complicating and fuelling conflict discourses and championing retrogressive causes.

Zeitsoff (2017) provided a framework for understanding social media's influence on conflict through four interrelated points. First, social media reduce the costs of communication. Second, they increase the speed of information dissemination. Third, the new data that social media provide are not only an important resource but also fundamentally change the information available to conflict actors, thereby shaping the conflict itself. The study, which adopted an in-depth analysis of existing literature on the use of social media in selected case studies of conflict situations, such as the Arab Spring, ISIS, the 2012 Gaza conflict, and the anti-Russian and pro-Russian demonstrations of 2013/2014, among others, concluded that social media have become potential tools in the hands of the elite for the mass mobilisation of the public, opinion formation and agenda-setting, canvassing for support, and the radicalisation and de-radicalisation of the masses, among other purposes. The study provides evidence of the widespread adoption and application of social media in conflict situations by the masses, owing to their relative advantages in terms of popularity, mass appeal and cost-effectiveness compared with mainstream media of communication. Thus, social media can facilitate dialogue, information sharing and public discourse while also enabling the rapid circulation of misinformation, hostile narratives, discrimination and harmful communication.

For the purpose of this study, social media is conceptualised as a collection of internet-based interactive platforms used by individuals and groups to create, disseminate, share and engage with user-generated content and interact within networked communities in relation to ethnic and religious issues. This definition is relevant because it recognises the role of participation and how communication can influence intergroup relations and conflict dynamics.

Hate Speech

The concept of hate speech is fluid to different definitions, as there is no global or legal definition of the term. Pate & Ibrahim (2021) opine that, the language, content and context of what constitute "hateful speech" is controversial and disputed. Gagliardone, et al., (2015) stated that the concept is best understood within local, national, regional or international boundaries. Thereby, taking into consideration the social and cultural context hate speech is published. The United Nations (2019) defines the term as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. This is often rooted in, and generates intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive" (United Nations, 2019).

Another definition that is popular is that of the Council of Europe, which states that the term hate speech includes, all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin" (Council of Europe, 1997). This definition takes into cognizance the issue of migrants and minorities which are seen and refer to as "others". In the context of Jos, Plateau State, the categorization "others" can be the basis for in-group favoritism and out-group discrimination. The in-groups may be defined along ethnic or religious lines, with individuals showing strong loyalty to their own groups and hostility towards others. This social comparison can lead to the pursuit of positive distinctiveness, where individuals



strive to see their group as better than others. On social media, this can manifest as the spread of hate speech that denigrates out-groups and glorifies in-groups, fueling and escalating conflict. In the Nigerian context, The Center for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) (2017) sees hate speech as:

any speech that insult people based on their religion; that abuses people based on ethnic or linguistic affiliation; that expresses contempt against people because of their place of origin; that disparages or intimidates women or girls because of their gender; that condones discriminatory assertions against people living with disability; that abuses or desecrates symbols of cultural or religious practices; that denigrates or ridicules traditional or cultural institutions of other people.

Wogu and Egwu (2019, p. 256) state that hate speech includes “all communications (written, verbal, symbolic) that insult a racial, ethnic or political group, whether by suggesting that they are inferior in some way or by indicating that they are despised or not welcome for any other reason”. The authors argue that hate speech is likely to provoke violent reactions and increase the risk of physical assault. In the context of Jos, Plateau State, this can manifest in violence and crisis situations.

Based on the reviewed literature, this study conceptualises hate speech as any form of communication published on social media platforms that attacks, insults, threatens, demonises or dehumanises a person or group of people, uses pejorative and discriminatory language, or advocates violence against them on the basis of their religion or ethnicity.

Ethno-religious Conflict

Ethno-religious conflict refers to violent clashes, tensions and confrontations between groups whose boundaries are demarcated by both religion and ethnicity. It is a condition in which relations between members of different ethnic or religious groups in multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies are marked by distrust, mutual suspicion, fear and a propensity towards violent confrontation (Salawu, 2010). Similarly, Kaufmann (2020) defines it as an organised, sustained struggle between different groups, in which the boundaries of identity are sharply drawn around ethnicity and religion. This definition moves the concept beyond mere intergroup disagreement to disputes situated around and centred on fundamental aspects of group identity.

In Nigeria, contemporary research points to political exclusion, competition for resources and the role of various institutions in producing and intensifying conflicts. Salawu (2010) corroborates this view when he states that the failure of Nigerian leaders to establish good governance, forge national integration and promote what can be described as genuine economic progress through deliberate and well-articulated policies has led to mass poverty and unemployment. This has resulted in communal, ethnic, religious and class conflicts that have come to characterise the Nigerian nation.

This situation is particularly evident in many states in Nigeria, especially Plateau State, where clashes between ethnic and religious groups have persisted for more than two decades. The aftermath of ethno-religious conflicts is profound and far-reaching, often leading to disruptions at multiple levels, from the national level to local communities. The consequences are evident in weakened social cohesion, disrupted peaceful coexistence, undermined trust among groups and hindered sustainable development (Dunka & Shadrach, 2025).

Various efforts have been made to resolve ethno-religious conflicts in Plateau State. These include government interventions, peace-building initiatives by non-governmental organisations



and community-based approaches. Peace-building initiatives by NGOs and community groups have focused on dialogue, reconciliation and the promotion of mutual understanding. These efforts have recorded some success in reducing violence and building trust between communities. However, the recurring nature of the conflict means that lasting peace requires sustained and multifaceted efforts.

Review of Empirical Studies

The relationship between social media communication and group-based hostility has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Otebe and Mohammed (2021) conducted a survey to examine students' opinions on the widespread presence of hate speech on social media and its implications for Nigeria's national integration. Anchored on Mediamorphosis Theory, the findings revealed that the majority of respondents (96%) were aware of and attested to the prevalence of hate speech on social media platforms in Nigeria, while 88% of the respondents opined that hate speech on social media had negative effects on national integration and the potential to disrupt peace, progress and national development. The study concluded that hate speech was prevalent on social media and recommended that it should be treated as a crime and its promoters punished. The study posits that new media (social media) have changed how society interacts, thereby transforming communication media. However, it did not directly examine intergroup or interreligious conflict situations.

Also, Ridwanullah et al. (2025) investigated the prevalence of hate speech on Twitter/X in Nigeria, anchored on Technological Determinism Theory. The study used the Twitter API to generate data, which were subjected to content analysis. The findings revealed that political, ethnic, religious and regional themes constituted dimensions of hate discourse on social media, particularly during politically sensitive periods. The study recommended the development of a legal framework for regulating hate speech on social media. Although it did not specifically examine ethno-religious conflict, the study demonstrated that social media can become a platform through which existing social divisions and identities are propagated and potentially intensified. This view is supported by Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021), who explored the role of social media in polarising public opinion and deepening societal divisions. Their research indicates that hate speech on social media can reinforce existing prejudices and exacerbate social tensions, potentially leading to increased conflict and violence.

Furthermore, Okolie (2022) conducted a study to explore the effect of hate speech on ethno-religious violence across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones using a descriptive survey. The findings revealed a significant relationship between ethno-religious violence and hate speech. The study reported that hate speech was mostly attributed to political leaders and their religious, ethnic or regional supporters. It recommended that politicians should practise true federalism, cultivate a positive political culture and move beyond ethnic and religious rancour. It also highlighted the need for the government, ethno-religious groups and their leaders to adopt preventive mechanisms for achieving peace. This study is relevant to the present research because it identifies hate speech as a contributing factor to ethno-religious violence in Nigeria. The research also acknowledged the role of stakeholders in understanding ethno-religious hate speech, as its respondents included traditional and religious leaders, civil society groups and youth leaders. However, it did not focus on the propagation of hate speech on social media.

Insights from prior studies have established the prevalence of hate speech on social media platforms and its effects on society, particularly during conflicts. Additionally, there is a growing



body of literature on how negative media narratives fuel violence. However, studies that specifically examine how hate speech on social media contributes to recurrent ethno-religious conflict in Plateau State remain inadequate, creating a gap that necessitates the present study.

Theoretical framework

This study adopts the postulations of Media Determinism Theory (MDT). MDT is a philosophical and sociological position that examines the relationship between media technologies and social change, as conceived and developed by Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan (1964) argued that every medium extends some human capacity while simultaneously reorganising the environment in which people communicate and interact. Therefore, new advancements in communication technology may alter not only the speed and volume of communication but also patterns of perception, interpersonal relationships, social participation and cultural organisation.

MDT provides a foundation for examining social media communication and social relations. The assumption that the medium itself constitutes an important part of the message remains relevant for understanding contemporary digital communication. Recent literature applying MDT to social media argues that communication technologies can contribute to changes in social behaviour and cultural transmission. For example, Jan et al. (2022) examined technological determinism and social media and argued that “mediated technologies can influence cultural transmission and human social behaviour”. Their submission reinforces the relevance of technological characteristics when analysing contemporary digital communication.

In the context of Jos, the theory provides a framework for examining how the speed, reach, interactivity and networked nature of social media may facilitate the circulation and amplification of ethnic and religious hate narratives during conflict. At the same time, the study recognises that media technologies operate within particular contexts. Thus, technological factors should be considered alongside human agency and the broader sociocultural and historical conditions within which social media platforms are used. Therefore, the theory serves as an explanation of how technology may shape communication processes rather than asserting that technology alone determines conflict outcomes.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using the open-ended, semi-structured in-depth interview method. The population consisted of stakeholders managing ethno-religious conflicts in Plateau State. The selected sample included 2 traditional rulers, 4 community leaders, 2 religious leaders (CAN and Muslim Council), 1 youth leader, 1 member/leader of a non-governmental organisation, 2 civil society members/leaders, 1 member of a security agency, 2 members of the media/academia, a government representative and a legal practitioner. This selection was made to reflect their roles as high-level stakeholders in ethno-religious conflict management in the state (Plateau Peace Building Agency [PPBA], 2024). Purposive and chain-referral/snowball sampling techniques were employed to select respondents. A visit to the PPBA served as the first point of contact; subsequently, other stakeholders were identified and contacted. Data were collected between March 2024 and April 2024, in person and through secure video calls, depending on participants' preferences. Recruitment stopped when saturation was achieved. The study used an interview guide as the instrument for data collection. Thematic analysis was employed as the technique for data analysis. This method looks across all the data to identify common themes that recur and the main themes that summarise all the views. To analyse the data,



the study employed the constant comparative technique as follows: transcription and coding, followed by the inductive generation of themes.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

In an attempt to unearth the role of hate speech on social media and its influence on ethno-religious conflict in Jos, Plateau State, in-depth interview sessions were held with seventeen (17) stakeholders involved in conflict management. From the primary data generated, the following themes emerged.

Social Media as a Tool for Misinformation

Respondent 12, a civil society member during the IDI on the 30th of March, 2024 in his office, while commenting on the issue of misinformation observed that:

When there is crises, tempers are high and because of the element of not knowing what is happening in a particular place and a particular time, more people are likely inclined to go through social media to get news or information to what is the real cause of the situation, so if you have somebody who has the means he would naturally begin to send out false narratives out there...when you are not in control of information, you are most likely to believe news coming from a particular perspective. People will begin to pounce on the news and give out their own version as to what was fed them by the social media (Resp. 12, 30/03/2024 Office)

The spread of misinformation is a prevalent concern. Social media platforms allow for the rapid and widespread dissemination of information, but this often includes false or misleading content. Misinformation can easily fuel hate speech, as users share unverified or exaggerated claims that incite anger and hostility. In the context of the crises in Jos, Plateau State false and misleading information spreads through word of mouth, local networks, and more quickly through the social media, thus, fueling anger and hostility between religious and ethnic groups. This can cause one community/group to blame the other easily, leading to mistrust, reprisal attacks, retaliatory violence and cycles of revenge. People rely on rumors and unverified information, disregarding official sources such as conventional media, the government and security agencies. Implication of the above to the society is that stereotypes, prejudices and conspiracy theories thrive, thereby widening the divide between communities, religions and relations. This contrast makes dialogue, peace building and reconciliation hard.

The Perceived Ease of Dissemination and Immediacy

A stakeholder, respondent 5, who granted the IDI in his office on 22nd March, 2024 explained that:

The social media has been the medium the new media has given birth to in the last two decades, the average man on the streets now has access to a smart phone or an android phone with a cheap data; with as cheap as fifty naira, somebody can post anything that he or she feels they can post out there... (Resp. 5, 22/03/2024 PPBA Office)

This ease of dissemination allows hate speech to spread rapidly on social media, reaching a large audience before it can be addressed or countered. Stakeholders recognize this as a major challenge, noting that the very nature of social media facilitates the quick and widespread propagation of harmful content. During crises, these factors contribute to heightened tension and increased violence. Stakeholders observed that during crises in Jos, Plateau State, hate speech on social media tend to escalate, as people seek information and react emotionally to events. The rapid spread of incendiary content can inflame emotions, incite violence, and prolong conflicts as users of social media interact freely. Oso (2017) argues same when he asserts that "ICTs and new media



technologies (social media) have put discursive power in the hands of mere consumers of media content”. According to him, ordinary citizens can now produce and disseminate their own media content without restriction. This democratization of media access and use has been effectively used by many oppositional and alternative social groups as exemplified in the Arab Spring. It is apt to note that this submission resonates with MDT as social media is seen as a contemporary example of media form and its impact on human societies, which affect and influence human social, political, economic and cultural communication behaviour. These platforms expand the frontier of citizens socio-economic relations and political participation in both develop and emerging democratic societies.

Lack of Regulation

Commenting on the above, respondent 17, a media practitioner who contributed on WhatsApp on 2nd April, 2024, stated that:

propagation of hate speech on social media during crises often worsen situations as unfounded news and information are spread unguided, since there is no regulation to the use of social media, especially in Nigeria. Therefore, perpetrators take advantage. (Resp. 17, 2/04/2024 WhatsApp)

Lack of regulation is another critical factor identified by stakeholders. Social media platforms often operate with minimal oversight, allowing hate speech to proliferate unchecked. Corroborating on the issue of regulation Takwa (2017) notes that, “the largely unregulated social media whose access is coming closer to the population on a daily basis, thanks to the availability of mobile apps and android phones is now an opportunity for people to conceal identities and express sentiments, hate statements, and at times insults that would have been censored in the traditional media outlets”. The stakeholders’ concerns about regulation reflect a broader debate about the responsibilities of social media companies to monitor and control content.

The frequent mention of this issue underscores the perceived inadequacy of current regulatory frameworks in preventing the spread of hate speech on social media. This has significant implication for the ethno-religious crises, insecurity and governance in Jos, Plateau State. Lack of regulatory frameworks for the social media space, makes hate speeches go unchecked, this has the ability to escalate small disputes into violent clashes, thus, making communities vulnerable to attacks. This deepens divisions, crises, escalates violence and makes peace building efforts fragile.

Derogatory Statements

Respondent 5, the representative of the Plateau Peace Building Agency (PPBA) during the IDI held in the agency office on 22nd March, 2024 submitted that:

Speeches that are: derogatory in nature; aimed at degrading the person or an individual or a group aimed at demeaning their humanity; targeted at stereotyping, if you like or making that individual that is targeted at or the group feel less human in the eyes or in the estimation of the public. (Resp. 5, 22/03/2024, PPBA Office)

Derogatory statements are expressions intended to demean or insult an individual or a group; it is expressing a low opinion of someone; and showing a strong dislike towards someone or something, when propagated on social media space, can escalate tensions, divide communities and hinder peace, particularly in diverse communities typical of Plateau state where ethnic and religious identities are significant. Communities on the plateau are said to be multi-ethnic and multi-religious, the state houses more than 54 different ethnic groups (Plateau State Government, 2022). These variations make conflicts difficult to resolve, tendencies are that statements that



demean, insult or degrade individuals or groups on social media can easily reinforce stereotypes and create a cycle of conflicts, as small disputes escalate into violent clashes. The implication for ethno-religious conflict situation, like the one on the Plateau is that peaceful coexistence and reconciliation efforts will be undermined.

Incitive Statements

The representative of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) who granted his session on 1st March, 2024 at Tekan Headquarters, Jos explained that:

...any utterance or communication on social media, which can be verbal or written that is made or aimed against somebody or some people that can stimulate aggressive response or action and that action can be violence. (Resp. 1, 1/03/2024 Tekan Headquarters, Jos)

Another critical component of social media hate speech identified by stakeholders' is incitive statements, this refers to speeches that provokes action, violence or discrimination, against an individual or a particular group. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the ethno-religious crises happening in Jos, Plateau State, where incitement can lead to real-world violence and further division. The recognition of incitive statements as propagated on social media is aligned with legal definitions in many jurisdictions, where incitement to violence is often criminalized. For instance, Nigerian laws, thus: *Cybercrime Act (2015)*, the *Penal Code*, and the *Electoral Act*, submits that incitement to violence can be a breach; offenders can face arrest, fines or imprisonment. In Jos, Plateau State, where ethno-religious conflicts have a long-standing history (more than two decades), making such statements harden boundaries between groups (e.g. Muslim and Christians, indigene and settlers, and others). It has the tendencies to undermine peaceful inter-ethnic and inter-religion interactions in communities and the society as a whole, division can be noticed in markets, schools and neighborhoods, this has resulted in residential segregations. Communities tend to become more suspicious of one another by building mistrust, the implication is that reconciliation efforts between conflicts torn communities becomes difficult.

Result and Discussion

The study sought to investigate stakeholders' perspectives on hate speech on social media and its influence on recurrent ethno-religious conflict in Jos, Plateau State. The findings revealed that hate speech on social media serves as a potent accelerant of conflict, facilitated by the spread of misinformation, the ease and speed of information dissemination, inadequate regulation, and the circulation of derogatory and inciting statements. These findings suggest that social media do not merely provide channels for expressing existing ethnic and religious divisions but may also intensify hostility by increasing the visibility, reach and circulation of hateful narratives. Critically, the findings indicate that the influence of hate speech extends beyond the content of individual messages to the communication environment that enables such messages to circulate rapidly and widely. This is consistent with Zeitzoff (2017), who highlighted how social media reduce communication costs and accelerate information dissemination, and with Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas (2021), who linked online hate speech with the reinforcement of prejudice and the exacerbation of social tensions. Similarly, Ridwanullah et al. (2025) identified ethnic, religious, political and regional themes in online hate discourse in Nigeria. However, while these studies illuminate the characteristics and potential consequences of hate speech, the present study contributes stakeholder perspectives specifically to understanding recurrent ethno-religious conflict in Jos. Its findings also complement Okolie's (2022) evidence of a relationship between hate speech and ethno-religious violence in Nigeria, while extending the discussion to the role of



social media in disseminating such content. Nevertheless, given its qualitative design and reliance on stakeholders' perspectives, the study provides contextual insight into perceived influence rather than establishing a direct causal relationship between social media hate speech and specific conflict outcomes.

Viewed through the lens of Media Determinism Theory (MDT), the findings demonstrate how the technological characteristics of social media, particularly their speed, reach, interactivity and networked structure, may shape communication processes and influence intergroup relations. The rapid circulation of misinformation and inciting messages illustrates how the communication environment can amplify existing grievances and deepen ethnic and religious divisions. However, the findings do not imply that technology alone causes conflict; rather, its influence operates alongside human agency, existing prejudices, historical grievances and broader sociocultural conditions. Theoretically, this reinforces the relevance of MDT in explaining how media technologies can shape the circulation and reception of conflict-related narratives while highlighting the need to consider the social contexts in which these technologies operate. This implies that mitigating online hate speech requires coordinated interventions involving social media users, community and religious leaders, civil society organisations, media practitioners and relevant regulatory institutions.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Social media have become viable tools of interaction through which information, opinions, transactions, connections and networks are shared and established. They also provide platforms for disseminating religious sentiments, expressing ethnic identities and circulating conflict-related narratives, as members of the public generate their own content and interact freely without rigid restrictions. Although these platforms can promote communication, peacebuilding and intergroup engagement, their misuse has contributed to the spread of hate speech, misinformation, stereotypes, discrimination and prejudice, which can intensify existing ethno-religious tensions. In Jos, Plateau State, stakeholders' perspectives reveal that hate speech on social media does not necessarily cause conflicts independently; rather, it interacts with pre-existing political, economic, historical, social, ethnic and religious grievances to trigger or intensify crises.

In a conflict-prone environment such as Jos, where past conflicts, intergroup distrust, interreligious differences and deep-rooted grievances have created persistent tensions, hate speech, inflammatory content and provocative online messages can reinforce negative perceptions, deepen divisions, heighten fear and contribute to the escalation, retaliation and recurrence of conflicts. The rapid circulation of unverified or misleading information, the accessibility of social media platforms and the lack of effective regulation, compounded by derogatory and inciting statements, further increase the potential for harmful narratives to spread.

Accordingly, all stakeholders should intensify public orientation and sensitisation on the negative effects of hate speech on social media during conflicts. Individuals, groups, communities and society at large should practise self-censorship and strengthen digital literacy to distinguish credible information from false and misleading content. The government should also develop and enforce regulations that specifically address hate speech on social media while balancing freedom of expression with the need to prevent harm. Furthermore, stakeholders should facilitate dialogue and community-level discussions on ethnic and religious issues to promote mutual understanding and reduce prejudice, grievances and hostility.



Limitations/Suggestion for further Studies

This work employed a qualitative method of enquiry, which has certain limitations and weaknesses. Some of these include the possibility of bias because of its subjective nature and the use of small samples, which limits a researcher's ability to generalise the results to a wider population. Thus, further researchers can extend this work by using other designs, such as surveys and content analysis, to engage larger samples that will help establish quantitative evidence and make the findings generalisable. Future studies could explore:

1. Social media content analysis of hate speech during specific conflict episodes.
2. Comparative analysis of hate speech on Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and X.
3. Audience studies examining how residents interpret and respond to hate speech on social media.

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None.
