

ASSESSMENT OF DIGITAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT'S IMPACT ON PEACEBUILDING IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Peacebuilding is a multi-stakeholder initiative that requires the collaboration and cooperation of various actors to work efficiently. Over the years, this role has traditionally been occupied by the government, civil society, religion, and traditional media in Nigeria. Digital players have become active in various forms of social issues through social media platforms and have influenced peacebuilding engagements. Extant studies have scarcely assessed the impact of digital community engagement on peacebuilding in Nigeria. This study, therefore, assessed the impact of digital community engagement on peacebuilding in Nigeria. Findings from the study show that digital community engagements have been effective in peacebuilding in Nigeria through their ability to unite the people to fight for a common cause, raise international awareness on the state of human rights abuses in the country, and promote conflict resolution ideals. This study, therefore, investigated the phenomenon of #Endsars, #EndHunger in Nigeria, and #Bringbackourgirls digital engagements and how they both enhance peacebuilding in Nigeria, as well as the challenges they experienced in this endeavour. Secondary literatures were used to assess the phenomenon and challenges of engaging digital communities in peacebuilding in Nigeria. This study, therefore, recommends that policies should be enacted to regulate the use of social media space for both citizens and government departments to prevent abuse that could lead to violent conflicts and promote quality engagements and debates on national developmental issues.

Keywords: Digital Community, Digital Engagement, Peace Building

1.1 Introduction

Peacebuilding is a multi-stakeholder initiative requiring the collaboration and cooperation of various actors to work efficiently (Ekpe, 2024; James, 2024; Charlton, 2023; Adeshina, 2022). This role has traditionally been occupied by the government, civil society, religion, eminent individuals, research institutions, financial institutions, and traditional media (El Tarabishi & Galal, 2023; Grunewald & Hedges, 2020). Since 2014, however, new digital players have become active in various arms of social issues, including peacebuilding through social media platforms (James, 2024; Mare, 2023; Yar'Adua et al., 2023; Osu, 2021). These new players have engaged in the use of new and emerging digital spaces and platforms to promote engagements and interactions on vital social, national, and economic issues such as politics,

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governance, security, peacebuilding, social justice, and even religion (Shaka & Osunwa, 2024; Alfakoro et al., 2021). These issues, which are at the core of nation-building, have become the object of engagement in different digital platforms across the world as an extension of democratic privileges (Puig-Larrauri, 2024; Verma & Kulshrestha, 2022). These engagements are obtainable at all levels of society: local, regional, national, and international (Osu, 2021; Gallardo et al., 2018). The popular #BlackLivesMatter movement on digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram exemplifies the attempt of the digital community to build racial equality and equity across the European and American continent (Afolaranmi, 2023; Akinyetun, 2021; Egbunike, 2021). Popularly referred to as netizens, the digital community comprising citizens of different countries and regions are united in the democratic calls for good governance and, where relevant, peacebuilding (Okoji & Azeez, 2023; Amodu, 2017).

The wars between Israel and the Palestinian Jihadist group Hamas, which commenced in 2023 for instance, have garnered sufficient responses and debates on the internet space calling for an end to the battles and justice for offended groups (Whitfield, 2024; Anderlini, 2024). The war between Russia and Ukraine has also attracted large social media engagements calling for an end to the war and the prosecution of guilty parties (Slim, 2024). Other global security issues such as the election of countries, the grievance of secessionist groups, the highhandedness of security forces on citizens as well as the organisation of international sports events are some of the vital issues debated on digital media. Importantly, these issues are not discussed for social reasons only but also as an avenue to express democratic rights and influence the social and political dynamics of their different nations (Slim, 2024; Afako, 2024; Whitfield, 2024). The implications of these various engagements are that governments and governance are increasingly observing the importance of the digital community and also engaging these platforms to bring governance closer to the people. This paper engages secondary literatures to assess the phenomenon and challenges of engaging digital communities in peacebuilding in Nigeria. The objective of the study is to investigate the phenomenon of #Endsars, #EndHunger in Nigeria, and #Bringbackourgirls digital engagements and how they both enhance peacebuilding in Nigeria, as well as the challenges they experienced in this endeavour.

1.2. Interplay of Concepts: Digital Community Engagement and Peacebuilding

The concept of Digital Community is a new lexicon occasioned by the increasing mobilisation of netizens to a social or political course on the internet/digital space (Egbunike, 2021; Bettivia & Stainforth, 2022; Kreishan & Al-Dajah, 2019). It represents not necessarily the whole community of internet users but the loosed group of netizens aligned for a social or political cause (Verma & Kulshrestha, 2022). The engagements of these communities are aimed at achieving a social effect, policy change, or government action for the good of the aligned community (Osu, 2021; Gallardo et al., 2018). This community is, however, digital because it is basically faceless and limited to the internet spaces except on occasions where digital engagements translate to physical meetings and mobilisations (James, 2024; Meron, 2024; Adams, 2023). Peacebuilding, on the other hand, refers to the process of engaging specific actions and structures that are aimed at achieving peace and security in a nation (Grunewald & Hedges, 2020). According to Adeshina (2022), it involves implementing certain social,

political, and economic structures that drive social integration and cohesion for national development. As El Tarashibi and Galal (2023) aver, the absence of these structures threatens the sustainability of peace in society, while the presence of these structures portends lasting peace in society. Though separate concepts, digital community engagements and peacebuilding have been increasingly linked in recent times due to the politicisation and political orientation of the digital space in the last two decades (Ekpe, 2024). Beginning with the Arab Spring protests, otherwise tagged the Arab political revolution protests, social media have since attained a new role as a political watchdog in the global society (Asogwa et al. et al., 2021).

Although it serves other purposes such as entertainment, education, and orientation, the political implications relating to nation-building, peacebuilding, political mobilisation, national security, regional integration, and social cohesion are new options that have been explored by the digital community in the last two decades (Jegbefume & Furfuri, 2022). According to Alfaboro et al. (2021), digital media plays the role of peacebuilding by providing platforms for intercultural, interracial, and intra-national social cohesion, outlining the basic obstacles to nation-building projects in nations. For peacebuilding, these digital communities contribute and initiate necessary social debates on national cohesion as well as draw attention to hostile structures that negate national philosophies and ideologies (James, 2024; Adams, 2023; Adeshina, 2022). The participation of international organisations such as the United Nations and its various offices and departments, the European Union, the World Bank, various international departments of states, financial institutions, and research institutions in the digital engagements of online communities are proofs of the vital role of digital communities in peacebuilding globally (Ferroggiaro, 2021).

2.1 Effectiveness of Digital Community Engagement in Peacebuilding in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the digital community has been particularly active in national and peacebuilding processes since 2012, beginning with online mobilisations like the #OccupyNigeria protests that eventually resulted in the reduction of pump prices and reversed the subsidy removal policy of the President (Egbunike, 2021; Wachikma, 2018). From this novel case in the country, social media particularly have been engaged by civil societies, activists, labour unions, political groups, and even religious groups to promote their various nation-building endeavours in the country (Akinyetun, 2023; Okoji & Azeez, 2023; Afolaranmi, 2023). This is, however, an extension of the traditional role of the media because Nigeria's history is replete with cases of individuals and organisations engaging the mass and print media to promote nationalism and peacebuilding projects (Eruchi & Okolo, 2024). For some, therefore, the increasing use of hashtags, trends, and digital community engagements to influence policies for national interests. Aside from the 2011 subsidy protests, Nigeria has experienced a series of protests that amalgamated different religious, ethnic, cultural, political, educational, and even regional divides in the country (Okoji & Azeez, 2023; Wachikma, 2018). This was evident in the #BringBackOurGirls protest that was initiated in 2014 following the kidnap of over 200 secondary schools from Chibok Local Government in Borno state, northeast Nigeria, by the Boko Haram Islamic jihadist group (Okoji & Azeez, 2023; Dami, 2021). This was particularly

unifying for Nigeria because of the historical religious and ethnic distrust that ordinarily characterises relations between the north and south of the country (Joshua & Chijioke, 2018).

As Asogwa et al. (2021) observed, however, the digital community formed to promote awareness for the rescue of these mostly northern school girls comprised of political, academic, religious, traditional, and ordinary citizens from across Nigeria jointly promoting active online and offline engagements without considerations for ethno-religious boundaries. The mobilisation of this online community, however, exceeded Nigeria's boundaries and involved prominent individuals and organisations across the globe who committed financial, political, and social resources to the rescue of these girls from the kidnappers (Wachikma, 2018). The #EndSARS protests in October 2020 also represent another digital community peacebuilding engagement initiated by Nigerians in the online space to address police brutality and harassment of youths across the country (Ukam et al., 2024; Tanyi et al., 2022). Unlike the previous digital campaigns, however, this campaign led to physical marches across the country with active virtual support from the sections of the community in the diaspora, sustaining the protest marches for days and also raising funds to address social concerns at the community level (Akinyetun, 2021; Egbunike, 2021; Nnaemeka, 2021). This not only raised international awareness of the state of human rights abuses in the country, but it also enhanced sociocultural cohesion across the country (Okoji & Azeez, 2023; Obadare, 2021).

2.1 Role of Digital Platforms in Conflict Resolution

The digital media spaces such as Facebook, Twitter, Zoom, and Instagram, amongst others, are variously engaged to promote e-conferences, seminars, and conflict resolution meetings among conflict parties for reconciliatory engagements (Mare, 2023).

Awareness Campaigns and Orientation

Aside from raising awareness of the state of human rights abuses across the country, digital platforms have also been used to promote conflict resolution ideals and platforms across the country (Ogoshi & Ukwela, 2022; Alfakoro et al., 2021). From the case studies cited above, reports show that aside from raising deep security concerns, digital platforms also served as the basis for resolving differences between conflicting parties (Jegbefume & Furfuri, 2022). Peacebuilding actors have used digital platforms through their education and orientation capacity to promote conversations and discussions aimed at resolving differences (Ukam et al., 2024; Dami, 2021). Ordinarily, the media has been advised by several actors to promote conflict resolution process by scrutinising the frames of news reports and coverage in conflict prone and sensitive areas to avoid the escalation of tensions (Erushi & Okolo, 2024; Yar'Adua et al., 2023). According to James (2024), social media specifically has a significant impact on conflict resolution by modifying communication dynamics, amplifying voices, and shaping public opinions. In other words, through social media, conflict resolution efforts are easily amplified across a wider audience and also provide the opportunity for all levels of participants to be involved in these communications (Shaka & Osunwa, 2024). Some of these digital platforms are highlighted briefly below:

a. X (Twitter) Spaces

On the digital platform formerly known as Twitter (currently X), over the last five years, users have been brought together to discuss different topics of interest from religion, sports, lifestyle, politics, and governance (Verma & Kulshrestha, 2022; Tanyi et al., 2022; Ogochi & Ukwela, 2022). These online engagements, which are facilitated by individuals or group hosts, serve as avenues for exchanging divergent views, reconciling differences providing necessary information to both the government and the general public (Nnaemeka, 2021). Lawmakers, government representatives, and other relevant stakeholders have also taken to this space to promote rich dialogues that reduce tensions and conflicts. For instance, during the build up to the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria, several of these spaces were engaged to promote interactions between youths from across the country to harness political unity (Okoji & Azeez, 2023). This was instrumental in reducing tensions and reconciling ethno-religious differences that had been massively whipped up across the country. This space is used to mobilise the online community for public actions, public awareness, and peaceful protests against bad policies in government.

b. Zoom Meetings

Zoom meetings are another avenue for conflict resolution engagements, amongst other functions. This platform is a closed group where members are admitted into an online conference room for discussion and deliberations. Governments and nongovernmental organisations across the globe have engaged this platform to promote peacebuilding and conflict resolution initiatives (Osu, 2021).

The use of these digital platforms, however, has not been without peculiar challenges that threaten the overall conflict resolution and peacebuilding initiatives in Nigeria. These challenges are, however, not unique in the sense that they are general outcomes of engaging the virtual space for any socio-political engagement. These are discussed in the next section.

2.3 Challenges of Digital Community Engagement in Peacebuilding in Nigeria

These challenges are discussed thematically as realised from the case studies;

i. Proliferation of Unverified Information

The digital community, aside from being active and efficient in coordinating peacebuilding forums in the digital space, faces the challenge of the proliferation of unverified information in an attempt to command internal and external awareness of the issue of discourse (Majcin, 2018). During the #EndSARS protests, for instance, although there were adequate reports of police harassment from different regions across the country, several persons took advantage of the trend to project false and unverified information into the internet space (Ukam et al., 2024; Asogwa et al., 2021). This was not limited to the participants of the protests but also included government security agencies and parastatals using social media platforms to promote messages aimed at disqualifying the protests (Dami, 2021). This mix of information with no

verifiable source continues to threaten the potential of peace and nation-building in the digital space.

ii. Government Policies

The digital community in Nigeria, especially the unorganised groups interested in national issues, has also been faced with the challenge of government bans and hostile policies against the operations of digital spaces in the supposed attempt to regulate the social media space (Jegbefume & Furfuri, 2022). After the #EndSARS protests, for instance, the Nigerian government issued a ban on Twitter where national discussions and engagements on the dynamics of the protests and other national issues were discussed (Okoji & Azeez, 2023; Nnaemeka, 2021). Before and after then, there have been several attempts by the government to regulate and restrict the freedom of expression on the platform for the perceived possibility of inciting Nigerians to massive industrial actions.

iii. Unregulated Use of Digital Spaces

While the social media space and digital communities have humongous impacts on social peace and development, the unregulated use of the platforms is a concern for peacebuilding chiefly because there are no adequate regulations and guidelines implemented to guide users. This threatened the aim of peacebuilding during the #EndSARS and the #BBOG protests as several individuals and organisations, in an attempt to discredit the activities of protesters, promoted hate speeches, ethnic sentiments, political rivalries, and false narratives without any sanctions (Okoji & Azeez, 2023; Wachikma, 2018). Even the attempt by the government to regulate the space has been met with resistance due to perceived biased stands by government media aides and social media handlers (Afolaranmi, 2023; Ugba & Akor, 2021). In the just concluded ten days of #EndHungerinNigeria protests, security agencies were reported to have arrested certain individuals in the northern part of the country promoting incisive content capable of disrupting national cohesion and peace (Ganzallo, 2024). While such actions are necessary to discourage unguided utterances and contents, it does not, however suffice for an objective regulation of the digital space for national security.

iv. Structured Leadership

The digital community in Nigeria in recent times, particularly those poised toward national issues, is characteristically organic with no leadership structure, which has repeatedly proven to be a threat to the nation's security (Lawal & Ibrahim, 2021). This is because of the lack of responsibility it portends for the nation in case of violence and riots. During the #EndSARS protests, for instance, and the just concluded #EndHunger protests in Nigeria, the possibility of guiding the procession of the protests so they are not hijacked was repeatedly highlighted by both the government and security agencies (Ganzallo, 2024; Afolaranmi, 2023). However, in both cases, online and onsite engagements for peaceful protests were disrupted by pro-government protesters after a series of opposing views on and off social media (Ugba & Akor, 2021). The implication this has on digital communities peacebuilding activities is that

negotiations with governments are difficult especially in the face of pro-government actors acting to discredit peacebuilding and nation-building engagements on the internet space.

2.4 Conclusion

Nigeria's current socio-political dynamics have shown the gradual migration of onsite political engagements to digital spaces for security reasons and also for greater opportunities to express opinions and ideas. This tool holds potential advantages for the Nigerian government and the peacebuilding project in the country if properly harnessed. While there is a physical side to these engagements, ensuring the citizens' right to engage in political and civil processes is guaranteed and protected online and onsite is a positive step towards attaining and sustaining good governance in Nigeria. Rather than eliminate the potential of these platforms, they can be harnessed to promote national unity. As it is, however, the impact of the digital community's engagement in peacebuilding in Nigeria reflects mixed results. For instance, these engagements have promoted public awareness and necessary government policies to promote peace in the country, such as the elimination of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) following the #EndSARS protests and the energised efforts to rescue the Chibok girls following the #BBOG global campaign on the internet space (Egbunike, 2021; Ugba & Akor, 2021; Wachikma, 2018). However, negative effects such as the loss of lives during massive protests, destruction of properties, and promotion of ethnic sentiments against certain people in the country have also characterised digital spaces, which are unhealthy for national cohesion and peacebuilding.

2.5 Recommendations

The findings from the study so far reveal salient loopholes for relevant government agencies and policymakers in pursuance of peacebuilding activities in the digital space. Firstly, there is a need for policies to regulate the use of the social media space in terms of content promoted. This is important to regulate and guide against the promotion of ethnic rivalries and political dissension in the country. On the contrary, avenues and digital communities that promote quality engagements and debates on national developmental issues should be promoted and protected by the government. These dialogues and engagements, which draw citizens from the various regional, religious, political, and socioeconomic divides of Nigeria, are important to promote national unity and peace, especially as they help understand the peculiarities of each other's experience in a common Nigeria. Therefore, this right should be protected rather than restricted. Furthermore, there is a need for policies to guide the social media engagements of government departments, media aides, and security agencies, particularly those focused on promoting government propaganda. The experience from the recent protests in Nigeria has shown the tendency of government departments to discredit and use propagandas against peaceful and nonviolent engagements in digital spaces for cheap political goals.

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