



STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND COUNTER-TERRORISM IN NIGERIA

(2010 – 2023)

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Abstract

This study examines the role of strategic communication in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts between 2010 and 2023. Against the backdrop of persistent security threats posed by Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP), the research investigates how communication strategies have been employed by the Nigerian government to counter terrorist propaganda, shape public perception, and foster civic resilience. Anchored on Clausewitz's Trinitarian Theory and adopting a mixed-methods research design, the study draws on data from structured questionnaires, Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), and policy document analysis to assess the effectiveness, challenges, and implementation gaps of strategic communication within Nigeria's counterterrorism framework. Findings reveal that while strategic communication is acknowledged as an essential non-kinetic tool in the fight against terrorism, its application remains fragmented, reactive, and insufficiently localised. Terrorist groups have successfully utilised digital platforms and community narratives to influence and radicalise vulnerable populations, often outpacing government responses. Moreover, inter-agency rivalry, limited technological capacity, underfunding, and poor community engagement have significantly undermined the impact of state-led communication efforts. The study further identifies that public trust in official counterterrorism messaging is low, particularly in rural and conflict-affected regions. The study concludes that for Nigeria's strategic communication to effectively complement its kinetic operations, it must be institutionalised, community-based, and technologically adaptive. Key recommendations include the modernisation of digital communication infrastructure, strengthening of inter-agency coordination, integration of grassroots voices, and capacity building for media actors.

Keywords: Strategic Communication, Counterterrorism, Boko Haram, Digital Communication, Capacity Building

Introduction

Terrorism, a persistent global threat, has increasingly relied on communication as a tool to propagate its ideologies and influence public perception. Since 2009, terrorist organisations worldwide have effectively utilised various media platforms, including traditional outlets like newspapers and films, and more recently, digital and social media, to advance their agendas. In



response, strategic communication has emerged as an essential component of counterterrorism strategies, aimed at countering the narratives of these groups and gaining public support.

Countries around the world have recognized the importance of integrating strategic communication into their counterterrorism operations. For instance, India successfully used strategic communication to reshape public perception of its security forces by promoting positive national narratives (Nagar, 2019). Similarly, Colombia's fight against the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) insurgency was bolstered by strategic communication efforts that garnered public support for the government's initiatives (Arana & Jaramillo, 2016). In Uganda, strategic communication through radio broadcasts played a crucial role in encouraging fighters from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) to surrender, highlighting the effectiveness of these non-kinetic approaches in counterterrorism (Titeca, 2018).

Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts face significant challenges from both domestic and foreign non-state actors who skillfully exploit digital and social media platforms to spread disinformation, recruit followers, and incite violence (Ojebode et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, the Nigerian government has not fully harnessed the power of strategic communication to effectively engage the population and build public support for its counterterrorism initiatives (Adebayo, 2020). The need for a comprehensive approach that includes strategic communication as a core element is crucial in bridging the gap between government efforts and public perception.

Recognizing the importance of strategic communication, the Nigerian government has taken steps to develop a framework to support its counterterrorism efforts. This includes the establishment of the Forum of Spokespersons of Security and Response Agencies (FOSSRA) and the development of the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy (NACTEST) (ONSA, 2016). These initiatives aim to coordinate public information activities across security agencies and foster better inter-agency collaboration. However, challenges persist in effectively reaching and engaging the public, as well as in building trust in government-led counterterrorism efforts (Sampson, 2019). The Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) has been at the forefront of Nigeria's strategic communication initiatives. It has emphasised the need for a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to counterterrorism, one that places strategic communication at its core (Ewokor, 2022). Despite these efforts, there remains a significant gap in public trust and confidence in the government's



counterterrorism measures, underscoring the need for further development and implementation of strategic communication strategies.

The period between 2010 and 2023 has seen Nigeria intensify its strategic communication efforts as part of a broader counterterrorism strategy (ONSA, 2021). During this period, various administrations have recognized the importance of winning the "hearts and minds" of the population, particularly in regions affected by terrorism (Agbiboa, 2017). This approach is grounded in the understanding that military might alone is insufficient to defeat terrorism; instead, there is a need to address the underlying ideological, social, and economic factors that fuel extremism (Olojo, 2019). Thus, strategic communication in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts has encompassed a range of activities, including media campaigns to counter extremist propaganda, public diplomacy to foster trust between government agencies and the public, and community engagement programs to prevent radicalization. These efforts aim to counter the propaganda of terrorist groups, highlight the government's achievements in combating terrorism, and promote national unity (Sampson, 2019). However, the effectiveness of these strategies has been a subject of debate, with varying opinions on their impact on reducing terrorism and enhancing national security (Adebayo, 2020).

It is against this background that this study appraises the role of strategic communication in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts from 2010 to 2023. It pays attention to the strategies employed, their effectiveness, and the challenges encountered. Through analysing the intersection of communication and counterterrorism, this research contributes to the broader discourse on how nations can leverage strategic communication to combat terrorism and enhance national security

Statement of the Research Problem

The persistent threat of terrorism in Nigeria, largely driven by extremist groups such as Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa Province, has compelled the Nigerian state to rely predominantly on kinetic counterterrorism strategies centred on military offensives and intelligence-led operations. While these measures remain essential for degrading insurgent capabilities, they have proven insufficient in addressing the ideological, psychological, and communicative dimensions that sustain violent extremism. A critical gap within Nigeria's



counterterrorism architecture is the absence of a coherent and institutionalised strategic communication framework capable of countering extremist narratives and fostering public trust. Although policy instruments such as the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy acknowledge the importance of communication in countering radicalisation, implementation has remained fragmented, under-resourced, and poorly coordinated across relevant institutions. This limitation is further compounded by the inadequate localisation of communication strategies, limited engagement with community stakeholders, and the underutilisation of digital and traditional media platforms for disseminating credible counter-narratives.

The consequences of these structural weaknesses are significant. Extremist organisations have effectively exploited communication vacuums by disseminating persuasive ideological content through encrypted messaging platforms and social media networks to recruit members, radicalise vulnerable individuals, and instil fear within affected populations (Ojebode et al., 2021; UNODC, 2021). In contrast, official communication initiatives led by institutions such as the Office of the National Security Adviser and the Forum of Spokespersons of Security and Response Agencies have often been criticised for their reactive posture, excessive centralisation, and limited resonance with local communities (Adebayo, 2020; Sampson, 2019). Empirical evidence further underscores the magnitude of Nigeria's terrorism crisis. Between 2009 and 2023, terrorism and counterterrorism operations were responsible for over 70,000 deaths, with the North-East region—particularly Borno State—accounting for a substantial proportion of casualties and humanitarian disruptions. During the same period, more than 2.9 million people were displaced internally, reflecting the profound human security implications of the conflict (ACLED, 2023; GTI, 2023; UNHCR, 2023).

In response to the escalating threat, Nigeria has implemented several counterterrorism initiatives, including military operations such as Operation Lafiya Dole and Operation Hadin Kai, alongside legislative measures such as the Terrorism (Prevention) Act and deradicalisation programmes like Operation Safe Corridor. Regional cooperation mechanisms, particularly the Multinational Joint Task Force, as well as institutional contributions from agencies such as the Department of State Services and the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps, further demonstrate the state's multidimensional response to terrorism. Nevertheless, these interventions continue to face



operational inefficiencies, weak inter-agency coordination, and limited strategic communication outreach.

Within this complex environment, the media and social media function both as instruments for civic mobilisation and counter-narrative dissemination, and as platforms for extremist propaganda and disinformation. Consequently, strengthening strategic communication through effective media partnerships, enhanced digital literacy, and institutionalised fact-checking mechanisms is essential for disrupting terrorist messaging, reinforcing public trust, and advancing national security objectives. This study therefore examines the role of strategic communication in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts between 2010 and 2023, with the aim of assessing its effectiveness, identifying prevailing challenges, and proposing strategies for strengthening its contribution to national security.

Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

- a) In what ways does strategic communication contribute to the effectiveness of counterterrorism objectives in Nigeria?
- b) What are the challenges hindering the implementation of strategic communication in Nigeria's counterterrorism framework?
- c) How have terrorist groups exploited communication platforms for recruitment, radicalisation, and propaganda dissemination in Nigeria?
- d) What strategies can be adopted to strengthen strategic communication in order to enhance Nigeria's counterterrorism objectives?

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to assess the role of strategic communication in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts. Specifically, it aims to:

- a) To examine the contribution of strategic communication to the effectiveness of counterterrorism objectives in Nigeria.



- b) To identify the challenges hindering the implementation of strategic communication strategies within Nigeria's counterterrorism framework.
- c) To analyze how terrorist groups in Nigeria utilise communication platforms for recruitment, radicalisation, and propaganda dissemination.
- d) To propose strategies that can be adopted to strengthen strategic communication in order to enhance Nigeria's counterterrorism objectives.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design, utilizing a mixed-methods approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of strategic communication and counterterrorism in Nigeria from 2010 to 2023. The descriptive survey design is appropriate for this study as it allows for the systematic collection of data from a targeted population to assess perceptions, experiences, and the effectiveness of strategic communication in counterterrorism efforts (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The population of this study comprises a broad spectrum of stakeholders actively engaged in Nigeria's counterterrorism and strategic communication landscape. This includes government officials, security and law enforcement personnel, media practitioners, communication experts, civil society organisations (CSOs), academic researchers, and members of communities affected by terrorism. The selection of these categories is purposive, designed to capture a multidimensional understanding of how strategic communication shapes, supports, or constrains counterterrorism efforts within the Nigerian context. To ensure a representative and statistically reliable analysis, this study determines its sample size using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula, which is commonly employed for calculating sample sizes in social science research. Given the estimated study population of 655 individuals, the formula is applied as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where n = Sample size

N = Population of the study (in this case 655)

e = Margin of error (in this case 5%)

Therefore:



$$n = \frac{655}{1 + 655 (0.05)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{655}{1 + 655 (0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{655}{1 + 1.6375}$$

$$n = \frac{655}{2.6375}$$

$$n = 248$$

Therefore, the sample size using the Taro Yamane formula is 248.

Additionally, this study employs the snowball sampling technique, a non-probability sampling method in which initial respondents refer the researcher to other potential participants who meet the study's selection criteria. Snowball sampling is particularly effective in studies involving specialized populations, such as security personnel, policymakers, media practitioners, and counterterrorism experts, who may be difficult to access directly (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Given the sensitive nature of counterterrorism efforts, government officials, security personnel, and intelligence officers may be hesitant to participate in research unless introduced through trusted networks. Snowball sampling helps in identifying and reaching such respondents (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Since strategic communication in counterterrorism requires insights from individuals with specialized knowledge and experience, initial participants (such as officials from the Office of the National Security Adviser, military spokespersons, or senior journalists covering security issues) can recommend other knowledgeable individuals within their professional circles (Noy, 2008).

This study adopts a mixed-method approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data analysis to provide a comprehensive assessment of strategic communication in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts. Quantitative data obtained through structured questionnaires were



analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores, with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to summarise patterns and trends in respondents’ perceptions of counterterrorism communication. In addition, qualitative data derived from interviews and document analysis were analysed using the Thematic Analysis, which involves identifying, coding, and interpreting recurring themes within the data. This method enables the integration of participants’ narratives and direct quotations, thereby enriching the analysis and enhancing the credibility of the findings by grounding theoretical insights in the lived experiences of stakeholders involved in counterterrorism efforts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Data Presentation and Analysis

The findings provide insights into the effectiveness of strategic communication in counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria from 2010 to 2023. Considering the sample size of 248, the researcher used 18 respondents for KIIs, while 230 were utilised for questionnaire administration. In administering the survey instrument (questionnaire), out of 230 copies of the administered questionnaire, only 225 copies were correctly filled and successfully retrieved for use in the study.

Table 1: Respondents’ Perceptions of the contribution of Strategic Communication to Counterterrorism in Nigeria

Statements	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean Score	Decision
Strategic communication helps to deconstruct terrorist ideologies by promoting alternative narratives rooted in peace, tolerance, and national unity.	105 (46.7%)	80 (35.6%)	20 (8.9%)	12 (5.3%)	8 (3.6%)	4.17	Agree
Effective communication strategies help bridge the gap between security forces and the civilian population, fostering cooperation in	98 (43.6%)	85 (37.8%)	25 (11.1%)	10 (4.4%)	7 (3.1%)	4.14	Agree



Statements	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean Score	Decision
intelligence gathering and early warning systems.							
Strategic communication helps to reduce public fear, distrust and misinformation among local population	110 (48.9%)	75 (33.3%)	15 (6.7%)	15 (6.7%)	10 (4.4%)	4.16	Agree
Strategic communication promotes interagency coordination and unified messaging among security and governmental institutions.	90 (40.0%)	80 (35.6%)	20 (8.9%)	25 (11.1%)	10 (4.4%)	3.95	Agree
Strategic communication enables government and security agencies to provide timely, credible, and consistent information to the public during terrorist threats or attacks.	88 (39.1%)	85 (37.8%)	30 (13.3%)	15 (6.7%)	7 (3.1%)	4.03	Agree

Source: Field Survey (2024).

The data presented in Table 1 reflect a generally positive perception among respondents regarding the contribution of strategic communication in Nigeria’s counterterrorism objectives. All statements recorded mean scores above 3.90, indicating consensus around the importance of communication in counterterrorism strategies. The highest mean score of 4.17 corresponds to the statement that strategic communication helps to deconstruct terrorist ideologies by promoting alternative narratives rooted in peace, tolerance, and national unity. A total of 82.3% (SA = 46.7%; A = 35.6%) of respondents agreed, underscoring the perceived value of ideological contestation in disrupting extremist influence. This aligns with scholarly findings that emphasize the utility of counter-narratives in reducing radicalization (Ojebode et al., 2021).

The second-highest score (Mean = 4.14) supports the view that effective communication bridges the gap between security forces and civilians, especially in intelligence gathering and early



warning. This affirms the contribution of strategic communication to trust-building and community engagement, which is crucial in asymmetric conflict environments (Onuoha, 2014).

The third statement, which describes strategic communication as a tool for both surveillance and ideological disruption, also scored high (Mean = 4.16). This reflects recognition of the dual utility of communication for both intelligence and narrative warfare. A slightly lower mean score (3.95) was recorded for the statement on interagency coordination and unified messaging. While still within the “Agree” category, this suggests that while respondents acknowledge the potential of strategic communication to enhance coordination, practical implementation gaps may exist (Adebayo, 2020). The statement regarding the contribution of strategic communication in providing timely and credible information during terrorist threats also received a strong validation (Mean = 4.03). This suggests that effective information dissemination is seen as vital in mitigating panic, correcting misinformation, and sustaining public trust during crises (UNODC, 2021).

The findings affirm that strategic communication is perceived as a critical non-kinetic component in Nigeria’s counterterrorism strategy. Respondents recognize its role in ideological counteraction, community engagement, information management, and institutional synergy. However, slightly lower scores on coordination may indicate operational deficiencies that require targeted policy and institutional reforms.

To further validate the quantitative findings from Table 9, insights from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were analyzed. Responses from security officials, policymakers, media practitioners, and community leaders provided qualitative evidence supporting the identified contributions of strategic communication in counterterrorism objectives in Nigeria. Regarding the contribution of Strategic Communication to counterterrorism objectives, the insights provided by both policymakers and religious leaders underscore a shared understanding; combating extremism requires more than just military or law enforcement strategies; it necessitates a concerted effort in communication that resonates with individuals at risk of radicalization. By leveraging authentic religious teachings through credible messengers, there exists a valuable opportunity to reshape narratives surrounding extremism.

In an interview, a Policymaker (Office of the National Security Adviser – ONSA) stated that:



We have seen progress where strategic messaging is used to refute extremist ideologies, especially when we incorporate Islamic scholars who explain that terrorism contradicts true religious teachings. This is a valuable tool in preventing recruitment into extremist groups. However, its effectiveness depends on how well the message is crafted and who delivers it. (Personal Interview, 2024)

Also in an interview, a Religious Leader (Islamic Cleric, Adamawa) mentioned that:

Extremists distort religious teachings to radicalize young people. The government must collaborate with religious scholars to counter these false narratives with proper Islamic teachings. (Personal Interview, 2024)

In the context of security institutions, strategic communication plays a critical role in shaping public perceptions, fostering trust, and enhancing cooperation between the community and security forces. The effectiveness of these communications often hinges on their cultural sensitivity and localization, which can significantly influence public engagement and intelligence-sharing. Community engagement is essential for building trust between security institutions and the populations they serve. Traditional leaders and local influencers can act as intermediaries, facilitating dialogue and understanding. By utilizing localized messaging that resonates with the community's cultural context, security institutions can foster a sense of ownership among citizens regarding their safety and security. The outreach programs mentioned in the interview excerpts highlight how community radio stations serve as effective platforms for disseminating information. These stations are often more trusted than other forms of media because they are rooted in local culture and language. By providing security tips through these channels, institutions not only inform but also empower communities to take an active role in their own safety.

The increase in community-driven intelligence reported by the Public Relations Officer from the Department of State Services (DSS) underscores the importance of trust in facilitating information flow. When citizens feel engaged and respected by security forces, they are more likely to report



suspicious activities or share concerns about potential threats. This shift from a passive to an active role in security matters represents a significant change in public perception. Moreover, when communities perceive that their input is valued, it enhances their willingness to cooperate with law enforcement agencies. This cooperation is crucial for effective policing and intelligence-gathering efforts. The traditional leader's comments reflect a transformation where citizens no longer view themselves as adversaries but rather as partners in maintaining peace and order.

Table 2: Respondents’ Perception on the challenges hindering the implementation of strategic communication approaches within Nigeria’s counterterrorism framework

Statements	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean Score	Decision
The government lacks advanced technology for digital counterterrorism efforts.	90 (40.0%)	85 (37.8%)	30 (13.3%)	15 (6.7%)	10 (4.4%)	3.99	Agree
Lack of inter-agency information sharing affects the effectiveness of counterterrorism communication.	85 (37.8%)	80 (35.6%)	35 (15.6%)	15 (6.7%)	15 (6.7%)	3.89	Agree
Terrorist groups use digital platforms more effectively than government agencies.	95 (42.2%)	80 (35.6%)	30 (13.3%)	10 (4.4%)	15 (6.7%)	4.00	Agree
Political interference limits the effectiveness of counterterrorism communication.	80 (35.6%)	85 (37.8%)	40 (17.8%)	10 (4.4%)	15 (6.7%)	3.90	Agree
Inconsistent government messaging leads to public distrust in counterterrorism efforts.	75 (33.3%)	80 (35.6%)	45 (20.0%)	15 (6.7%)	15 (6.7%)	3.86	Agree

Source: Field Survey (2024).

Table 2 presents a quantitative analysis of various challenges that impact strategic communication in counterterrorism efforts. The first statement indicates that a significant portion of respondents (40.0% strongly agree and 37.8% agree) believe that the government lacks advanced technology



necessary for effective digital counterterrorism efforts, resulting in a mean score of 3.99. This suggests a consensus among participants that technological inadequacies hinder the government's ability to combat terrorism effectively in the digital realm. The second statement addresses inter-agency information sharing, with 37.8% strongly agreeing and 35.6% agreeing that its lack affects counterterrorism communication effectiveness, leading to a mean score of 3.89. This highlights the importance of collaboration among different governmental agencies, suggesting that silos can lead to inefficiencies and missed opportunities in counterterrorism initiatives.

The third statement reflects concerns about terrorist groups' adeptness at utilizing digital platforms compared to government agencies, with an overwhelming majority (42.2% strongly agree and 35.6% agree) affirming this view, resulting in a mean score of 4.00. This finding underscores the urgency for governments to enhance their digital strategies and capabilities to keep pace with evolving threats. The fourth statement points out that political interference limits effective counterterrorism communication, receiving agreement from 35.6% who strongly agree and another 37.8% who agree, culminating in a mean score of 3.90. This indicates that external political factors may compromise strategic messaging and operational integrity within counterterrorism frameworks. Finally, the fifth statement discusses how inconsistent messaging from the government leads to public distrust in counterterrorism efforts, with responses showing that 33.3% strongly agree and another 35.6% agree, yielding a mean score of 3.86. This finding emphasizes the critical role consistent communication plays in maintaining public trust and support for counterterrorism initiatives.

To further substantiate the quantitative findings from Table 10, insights from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were analyzed thematically. The responses from security officials, policymakers, media professionals, and community leaders provided valuable qualitative evidence supporting the identified challenges affecting strategic communication in counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria. As identified in the study, lack of advanced technology for effective digital counterterrorism efforts (Mean Score: 3.99 – High Agreement in Survey) is a critical challenge affecting strategic communication in counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria.

In an interview, a Cybersecurity Analyst (Department of State Services – DSS) mentioned that:



The terrorists are always ahead of us in digital innovation. They use encrypted messaging apps, artificial intelligence, and dark web platforms to spread propaganda, while we are still struggling to monitor basic social media channels. (Personal Interview, 2024)

Additionally, a Digital Counterterrorism Expert from the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) provided critical insights into the technological gaps hindering Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts. The expert emphasised that the absence of advanced data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI)-driven tracking systems has made it difficult for security agencies to combat online radicalization proactively. According to the Digital Counterterrorism Expert (Office of the National Security Adviser – ONSA):

Our agencies lack advanced data analytics and AI-driven tracking systems. Without real-time monitoring of extremist content online, we are always reacting instead of preventing radicalization. (Personal Interview, 2024)

The expert explained that terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram and ISWAP have sophisticated digital strategies, including automated bot networks to spread extremist propaganda, encrypted messaging applications for recruitment and attack coordination, deepfake videos and AI-generated content to manipulate public perception. Meanwhile, Nigeria's counterterrorism agencies struggle with outdated monitoring systems, slow intelligence-sharing, and limited AI integration in tracking online extremist activities. The insights from this Digital Counterterrorism Expert at ONSA highlight the urgent need for AI-powered solutions in Nigeria's counterterrorism communication strategy. Without real-time tracking systems and predictive analytics, security agencies will remain reactive rather than proactive in combating online radicalization and terrorist propaganda. Investing in AI-driven surveillance, cybersecurity infrastructure, and intelligence-sharing platforms is critical for staying ahead of extremist groups in the digital age.

A Social Media Strategist from a Private Technology Firm in Abuja highlighted a critical challenge in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts, the lack of investment in digital surveillance tools and cybersecurity infrastructure. The strategist, who specializes in digital communication and online



threat monitoring, stressed that terrorist groups are far more agile in their use of digital platforms than government agencies. According to the Social Media Strategist (Private Technology Firm, Abuja):

There is little investment in digital surveillance tools and cyber security infrastructure. Terrorists recruit and spread misinformation online faster than we can respond. (Personal Interview, 2024)

He further explained that terrorist organisations like Boko Haram and ISWAP leverage encrypted messaging apps, social media algorithms, and the dark web to spread propaganda, coordinate attacks, and recruit followers, while government response remains slow and underfunded. The insights from this Social Media Strategist reveal that Nigeria's counterterrorism communication remains digitally weak, while terrorist groups effectively exploit social media, encrypted apps, and digital recruitment tactics. To counter this, Nigeria must invest in AI-driven digital surveillance, improve cybersecurity infrastructure, and adopt modern digital storytelling techniques. Without urgent reforms, extremist narratives will continue to spread faster than government responses, further weakening national security efforts.

These qualitative insights reinforce the survey finding that 77.8% of respondents agree that Nigeria lacks advanced digital technology for counterterrorism. The absence of AI-driven monitoring, encrypted communication tracking, and digital media engagement tools significantly hampers counterterrorism efforts.

Table 3: Respondents' Perception on how terrorist groups in Nigeria utilise communication platforms for recruitment, radicalization, and propaganda dissemination

Statements	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean Score	Decision
Online communication tools are strategically employed by terrorist groups to recruit	60 (26.7%)	75 (33.3%)	45 (20.0%)	30 (13.3%)	15 (6.7%)	3.60	Agree



Statements	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean Score	Decision
vulnerable individuals, especially youth.							
Insurgent groups disseminate misleading narratives to discredit government counterterrorism efforts and gain public sympathy.	50 (22.2%)	80 (35.6%)	40 (17.8%)	35 (15.6%)	20 (8.9%)	3.46	Neutral
Encrypted messaging applications are widely used by terrorist groups to coordinate attacks and evade state surveillance.	98 (43.6%)	85 (37.8%)	25 (11.1%)	10 (4.4%)	7 (3.1%)	4.14	Agree
Videos and images of violence are deliberately circulated by terrorist groups to instill fear and demonstrate power.	55 (24.4%)	70 (31.1%)	50 (22.2%)	35 (15.6%)	15 (6.7%)	3.51	Agree
Lack of adequate government presence on digital platforms allows extremist messages to go unchallenged in many rural and urban communities.	90 (40.0%)	80 (35.6%)	20 (8.9%)	25 (11.1%)	10 (4.4%)	3.95	Agree

Source: Field Survey (2024).

In Table 3, a majority of the respondents (60% combining SA and A) agree that terrorist groups strategically use online communication tools to recruit vulnerable individuals, particularly the youth. The first statement received the highest mean score of 3.60 (Decision: Agree), indicating a general consensus among respondents that terrorist groups actively leverage digital platforms, especially social media, to recruit disaffected youth. This finding aligns with existing literature that shows how terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and ISWAP, use platforms like Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp to disseminate targeted recruitment content (Adewumi & Adeniran, 2022; UNODC, 2021). The relatively strong agreement suggests that recruitment is seen as a principal function of terrorist online activities.



While 57.8% (SA and A) of respondents acknowledge that insurgents spread disinformation to undermine public confidence in the government's counterterrorism efforts, a significant proportion (24.5%) disagree, and 17.8% remain neutral. This suggests a moderate perception among the respondents, possibly indicating variability in awareness or direct exposure to such narratives. Empirical studies by UNESCO (2018) and Ingram (2016) show that propaganda campaigns often seek to exploit governance failures and amplify dissent. The second statement received a mean score of 3.46 (Decision: Neutral). This response reflects moderate agreement, falling within a neutral interpretive range. It suggests that while some respondents recognize the role of disinformation in terrorist communication strategies, others may lack exposure to specific propaganda campaigns or view them as less impactful. Nonetheless, studies have confirmed that Boko Haram and ISWAP often frame the government as corrupt or ineffective to undermine state legitimacy (Sampson, 2019; Adebayo, 2020).

Furthermore, a substantial majority (81.4%) of respondents agree that terrorist groups extensively use encrypted messaging apps to coordinate their operations and evade surveillance. This high agreement rate reflects growing public and institutional awareness of the security implications of platforms such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Signal. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021), such platforms have become essential tools in terrorist operational logistics due to their end-to-end encryption features. The third statement received a mean score of 4.14 (Decision: Agree) indicating that the rise of encrypted messaging applications has significantly transformed the landscape of communication, particularly for groups engaged in illicit activities, including terrorism. The high level of public awareness regarding the use of encrypted messaging apps by terrorist groups underscores a critical intersection between technology and security policy. As these platforms continue to evolve, so too must the strategies employed by law enforcement and intelligence communities to mitigate risks associated with their misuse.

Respondents moderately agree (55.5% combining SA and A) that videos and images of violence are circulated deliberately by terrorist groups to evoke fear and project dominance. The use of graphic content to terrorize populations and gain notoriety has been well documented in global counterterrorism literature (Klausen, 2015; Conway, 2017), and this perception is mirrored in the



responses. The fourth statement received a Mean score of 3.51 (Decision: Agree) emphasizing that the phenomenon of terrorist groups utilizing graphic content, such as videos and images of violence, is a significant aspect of modern terrorism. This strategy serves multiple purposes: it aims to instill fear, assert dominance, and garner attention both from potential recruits and the general public. The circulation of such content is not merely incidental; it is a calculated tactic employed by these groups to achieve their objectives. Therefore, understanding how these groups utilise graphic content allows governments and organisations to develop more effective counter-narratives aimed at mitigating fear and undermining recruitment efforts.

The highest level of agreement (75.6% combining SA and A) is observed on the statement regarding the lack of a robust government presence on digital platforms. This finding highlights a critical weakness in Nigeria's strategic communication infrastructure, wherein extremist narratives often go unchallenged in both urban and rural digital spaces. Scholars such as Ojebode et al. (2021) argue that the absence of credible state narratives online allows violent extremists to dominate the information environment. This finding is particularly alarming given the context of rising extremist narratives that proliferate in both urban and rural digital environments. The absence of effective state narratives online creates a vacuum that violent extremists can exploit, leading to an unchallenged dominance over the information landscape. The implications of this finding are profound for Nigeria's strategic communication infrastructure. A robust communication strategy must include active participation from government entities on digital platforms to ensure that accurate information is disseminated effectively. This involves not only countering extremist narratives but also engaging with citizens in meaningful ways to build trust and credibility. The failure to do so can lead to increased polarization and radicalization among vulnerable populations who may turn to extremist groups for guidance and community.

Many interviewees emphasised the strategic exploitation of digital media by terrorist groups for recruiting disillusioned or vulnerable youth populations. The advent of digital media has transformed the landscape of communication, providing unprecedented opportunities for various actors, including terrorist organisations. These groups have adeptly exploited digital platforms to disseminate propaganda, recruit members, and radicalize individuals, particularly among vulnerable youth populations. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in regions facing socio-



economic challenges, such as northeastern Nigeria. In an interview, a Senior Officer, Department of State Services (DSS) stated that:

The Internet has become a virtual training camp. Many youths in northeastern Nigeria are exposed to persuasive messages that promise belonging, identity, and divine mission. Terrorist recruiters know this and tailor their messages accordingly. (Personal Interview, 2024)

Similarly, a Digital Analyst, Media NGO stated that:

You will be shocked by the number of young people who get radicalized through Facebook, WhatsApp, and even gaming forums. These platforms are poorly monitored, making them fertile grounds for recruitment. (Personal Interview, 2024)

Digital media encompasses a wide range of platforms, including social media sites like Facebook and WhatsApp, as well as online gaming forums. These platforms offer anonymity and reach that traditional recruitment methods lack. They allow terrorist groups to craft tailored messages that resonate with specific audiences. For instance, young people often seek belonging and identity during their formative years; terrorist recruiters exploit these psychological needs by presenting their ideologies as solutions to feelings of alienation or disenfranchisement. Youth populations are particularly susceptible to radicalization due to various factors such as socio-economic instability, lack of educational opportunities, and exposure to violence. In regions like northeastern Nigeria, where many youths face disillusionment with governmental structures and societal norms, the allure of belonging to a group with a perceived noble cause becomes increasingly attractive. Recruiters utilise persuasive narratives that promise not only community but also a sense of purpose—often framed within a religious or ideological context.

This finding underscore that terrorist organisations employ sophisticated strategies to engage potential recruits through digital media. They create content that is visually appealing and emotionally charged. Videos depicting acts of heroism or martyrdom can be particularly compelling. Additionally, the use of testimonials from former recruits who share their



transformative experiences can further entice vulnerable individuals. Moreover, the interactive nature of social media allows for direct engagement between recruiters and potential recruits. This interaction can take the form of private messages or comments on posts where individuals express doubts or seek guidance. Such personalized communication fosters a sense of intimacy and trust that can be pivotal in the radicalization process.

Additionally, interviewees across sectors expressed concern about the use of encrypted messaging applications like WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal for secure coordination and operational planning. The rise of encrypted messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, and Signal has significantly transformed the landscape of communication, particularly in contexts involving security operations and counter-terrorism efforts. These platforms offer end-to-end encryption, which ensures that messages are only readable by the sender and the recipient. This feature poses substantial challenges for law enforcement and intelligence agencies attempting to intercept communications related to criminal activities, including terrorism. In an interview with a Cybercrime Investigator (Nigeria Police Force, Abuja), he stated that:

Intercepting terrorist communications is getting harder. They've moved to encrypted platforms where surveillance is either slow or impossible without international cooperation.

Also, a Senior Intelligence Analyst (Nigerian Army) stated that:

Even low-level operatives use Telegram to share information about movement routes, targets, and logistics. It's very organized and sophisticated.

Table 4: Strategies to Improve Strategic Communication in Counterterrorism

Statements	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean Score	Decision
Expanding the use of digital media will enhance counterterrorism messaging.	95 (42.2%)	85 (37.8%)	25 (11.1%)	10 (4.4%)	10 (4.4%)	4.03	Agree
Strengthening inter-agency collaboration will enhance	100 (44.4%)	80 (35.6%)	20 (8.9%)	15 (6.7%)	10 (4.4%)	4.09	Agree



Statements	SA (5)	A (4)	N (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Mean Score	Decision
counterterrorism communication.							
Providing counter-narratives to terrorist propaganda will reduce extremist recruitment.	90 (40.0%)	85 (37.8%)	30 (13.3%)	10 (4.4%)	10 (4.4%)	4.03	Agree
Engaging local communities in counterterrorism communication is essential.	95 (42.2%)	90 (40.0%)	20 (8.9%)	10 (4.4%)	10 (4.4%)	4.07	Agree
Enforcing media regulations to prevent misinformation will improve counterterrorism efforts.	85 (37.8%)	80 (35.6%)	30 (13.3%)	15 (6.7%)	15 (6.7%)	3.93	Agree

Source: Field Survey (2024).

Table 4 presents a quantitative analysis of various strategies aimed at enhancing strategic communication within the realm of counterterrorism. The first strategy evaluated is the expansion of digital media usage to enhance counterterrorism messaging. With a mean score of 4.03, this strategy received significant support, with 42.2% of respondents strongly agreeing and 37.8% agreeing. This indicates a strong belief in the potential of digital platforms to disseminate counter-narratives effectively and reach broader audiences, particularly younger demographics who are often more engaged online. The second strategy focuses on strengthening inter-agency collaboration for improved communication in counterterrorism efforts. It achieved the highest mean score of 4.09, with 44.4% strongly agreeing and 35.6% agreeing. This suggests that respondents recognize the importance of cohesive action among various governmental and non-governmental agencies to create a unified front against terrorism, facilitating information sharing and coordinated responses. The third strategy involves providing counter-narratives to combat terrorist propaganda, which garnered a mean score of 4.03 as well. Here, 40% strongly agreed while 37.8% agreed, indicating that there is substantial support for developing narratives that challenge extremist ideologies and reduce recruitment by presenting alternative viewpoints.

Engagement with local communities emerged as another critical strategy, receiving a mean score of 4.07. With 42.2% strongly agreeing and 40% agreeing, this reflects an understanding that



grassroots involvement is essential for effective communication strategies in counterterrorism efforts, fostering trust and cooperation between authorities and community members. Finally, enforcing media regulations to prevent misinformation scored the lowest among the strategies with a mean score of 3.93, although it still falls within the “Agree” category overall. Here, only 37.8% strongly agreed while 35.6% agreed, suggesting some skepticism about regulatory approaches versus more proactive communication strategies.

To further substantiate the quantitative findings from Table 4, insights from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were analyzed thematically. The responses from security officials, policymakers, media practitioners, academicians and community leaders provided valuable qualitative evidence supporting the identified strategies for enhancing strategic communication in counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria. On the expansion of digital media for counterterrorism messaging, a senior official from the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) emphasised that terrorist organisations extensively use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram to spread radical ideologies.

A Digital Counterterrorism Expert (ONSA) stated that:

Terrorist organisations are outpacing us on social media. We need to move beyond traditional government press statements and engage directly with the online audience. A coordinated digital strategy involving influencers, religious leaders, and youth organisations is crucial. Therefore, there is an urgent need for the government to strengthen its presence in the digital space. Counter-narratives must be amplified on social media and adapted to resonate with the youth. (Personal Interview, 2024)

A media practitioner from a national newspaper highlighted that government communication remains reactive rather than proactive in countering terrorist propaganda. He noted:

Terrorist groups invest in high-quality, visually engaging content to appeal to young people. Our counter-messaging



efforts must be just as compelling and well-targeted. Young people are drawn to visually engaging, interactive content. The government must invest in high-quality digital campaigns that are compelling, not just informative. (Personal Interview, 2024)

A lecturer of Media and Communication Studies from Kaduna State University provided valuable insights into the role of digital media in counterterrorism messaging and the need for its expansion in Nigeria. The professor emphasised that digital platforms offer the most effective means to counter extremist propaganda, yet Nigeria's counterterrorism strategies remain heavily dependent on traditional media. According to the lecturer:

The expansion of digital media is crucial for counterterrorism messaging. Traditional methods like press conferences and radio announcements are no longer enough. Terrorist groups are actively using digital platforms to recruit and spread misinformation, and the government must modernize its communication strategies to counter this. (Personal Interview, 2024).

The lecturer explained that terrorist organisations such as Boko Haram and ISWAP leverage digital media effectively, using social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, TikTok) to spread propaganda and recruit members. Short-form video content to make extremist ideologies more accessible and engaging to youth. Fake news and deepfake technology to distort public perception and discredit government security efforts. The insights from this Professor from Kaduna State University highlight the need for Nigeria to modernize its counterterrorism messaging by fully integrating digital media into its security strategy. Terrorist groups outpace the government in digital engagement, and without strategic investment in AI, social media, and online counter-narratives, extremist propaganda will continue to spread faster than security agencies can respond. Expanding digital counterterrorism efforts is essential to effectively counter-radicalization, misinformation, and recruitment in Nigeria's evolving security landscape.



Discussion of Major Findings

The first objective examined the extent to which strategic communication contributes to counterterrorism efforts in Nigeria. Findings from both the survey and interviews confirm that strategic communication plays a pivotal role in deconstructing terrorist ideologies, bridging the gap between security agencies and communities, and enhancing inter-agency coordination. Respondents agreed that strategic communication promotes alternative narratives rooted in peace and national unity, improves public trust in government institutions, and enables timely dissemination of credible information during crises. Interviews with officials from the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) and community leaders reinforced these perceptions, emphasizing the use of religious leaders and localized content to counter extremist narratives.

The second objective explored the challenges hindering the implementation of strategic communication strategies in Nigeria's counterterrorism architecture. The study revealed several systemic barriers, including limited digital infrastructure, inter-agency rivalry, inconsistent messaging, political interference, and insufficient funding. Quantitative data showed mean scores above 3.80 for all major constraints, while interviews highlighted weak coordination among security agencies and the digital superiority of terrorist groups. Respondents stressed that poor localization of communication strategies and lack of grassroots engagement further hinder effective implementation. These findings indicate that Nigeria's strategic communication efforts remain fragmented and under-resourced, weakening the broader counterterrorism strategy.

The third objective assessed how terrorist groups in Nigeria utilise communication platforms for recruitment, radicalization, and propaganda dissemination. The findings confirmed that extremist groups such as Boko Haram and ISWAP use social media, encrypted messaging apps, and violent visual content to recruit youths, spread misinformation, and instill fear. Survey results showed high agreement on the use of online tools and encrypted platforms, with a mean score of 4.14 for operational coordination via encrypted apps. Interviews with media practitioners and intelligence officers provided qualitative confirmation, revealing that extremist groups often exploit the absence of government presence on digital platforms to push their narratives unchallenged.



The fourth objective sought to identify strategies for strengthening the role of strategic communication in Nigeria's counterterrorism efforts. The study found that enhancing inter-agency collaboration, investing in digital surveillance infrastructure, engaging credible local actors, and institutionalizing communication units within security agencies are essential. Respondents recommended the creation of localized counter-narratives, digital media training for government communicators, and the integration of civil society organisations in message development. The findings suggest that a coordinated, well-funded, and community-based strategic communication framework is necessary to counter extremist propaganda and build societal resilience against radicalization.

Conclusion

The study concludes that strategic communication holds transformative potential in Nigeria's fight against terrorism, not merely as a supportive mechanism but as a central pillar of counterterrorism policy. However, its efficacy is currently undermined by several systemic weaknesses, including bureaucratic inertia, fragmented messaging, insufficient media partnerships, and minimal integration of local stakeholders. Terrorist groups continue to dominate the communication landscape through sophisticated propaganda that exploits state failures and disinformation gaps. While efforts such as NACTEST and Operation Safe Corridor represent progressive steps toward a multidimensional response, the absence of a coherent, inclusive, and adaptive communication strategy limits their impact.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. The Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) should establish a dedicated digital communication and analytics unit. This unit should leverage artificial intelligence, social media analytics, and real-time digital monitoring tools to detect, track, and respond rapidly to extremist propaganda.



- ii. The Forum of Spokespersons of Security and Response Agencies (FOSSRA) should be restructured to serve as an operational inter-agency communication command center and include regular inter-agency briefings, shared communication protocols.
- iii. Strategic communication should be decentralised and localised by engaging traditional rulers, religious leaders, youth influencers, and civil society organisations. Government messaging should be translated into indigenous languages and reflect local values and experiences.
- iv. Partnerships should be fostered between security agencies and media institutions through periodic training programs on responsible reporting of terrorism and crisis communication.
- v. Nigeria's strategic communication campaigns should incorporate survivor testimonies, human-interest stories, emotional appeals, and culturally rooted narratives.

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