

FRAMING INSECURITY IN NORTH-WEST NIGERIA: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ACTORS AND NIGERIA POLICE FORCE NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of social media has transformed the communication ecology of insecurity in North-West Nigeria by enabling citizens, journalists, security agencies, and non-state actors to compete in framing conflicts. While the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) seeks to frame insecurity through official narratives emphasizing operational successes, public reassurance, and institutional legitimacy, social media actors frequently construct alternative frames highlighting government failure, human suffering, insecurity, and distrust in state institutions. This conceptual paper examines the competing frames employed by social media actors and the Nigeria Police in communicating insecurity across Northern Nigeria. Guided by Framing Theory, the study adopts a conceptual research design based on documentary analysis of scholarly publications, government reports, media studies, and policy documents. The paper argues that framing contests between institutional and citizen-generated narratives significantly shape public perceptions of insecurity, confidence in security institutions, and national discourse on conflict management. The study concludes that while social media democratizes security communication by amplifying marginalized voices, it also accelerates misinformation, emotional polarization, and competing truth claims. Conversely, official police communication often prioritizes institutional legitimacy over transparency, thereby widening public distrust. The paper recommends adopting evidence-based strategic communication, collaborative digital engagement, and transparent crisis communication to enhance public confidence and strengthen democratic policing in Nigeria.

Keywords: Social media, Nigeria Police Force, insecurity, Northern Nigeria, security communication

1.0 Background to the Study

North-Western Nigeria has experienced persistent insecurity over the past two decades, manifested in armed banditry, kidnapping for ransom, communal conflicts, farmer–herder violence, and attacks on educational institutions. These security challenges have produced severe humanitarian consequences, including large-scale displacement, economic disruption, educational setbacks, and loss of public confidence in state institutions. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023), insecurity in northern Nigeria has evolved from isolated criminal activities into complex security threats sustained by weak governance, poverty, ideological extremism, environmental pressures, and transnational criminal networks.

Traditionally, conventional media served as the principal channel through which citizens obtained information regarding conflicts and security operations. However, the rapid diffusion of digital communication technologies has fundamentally altered this information environment. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter),

WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have enabled citizens to report security incidents in real time, share eyewitness accounts, disseminate photographs and videos, and comment on government responses without relying on traditional gatekeepers (Castells, 2015). Consequently, social media has emerged as an influential arena where multiple actors compete to define, interpret, and explain insecurity.

Akinyetun (2021) observed that unlike conventional journalism, which generally follows professional standards of verification, social media communication is decentralized, participatory, and instantaneous. During security emergencies, users frequently circulate information before official confirmation, producing alternative narratives that sometimes contradict statements issued by government agencies. Although such platforms enhance democratic participation and information accessibility, they also facilitate misinformation, rumours, emotional amplification, and the rapid spread of unverified claims that may intensify public anxiety and undermine security operations.

Within this evolving communication environment, the Nigeria Police Force has increasingly adopted social media as a strategic public relations and crisis communication tool. Through verified accounts on X, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms, the Police disseminate operational updates, crime prevention messages, rebuttals to misinformation, public advisories, and reports of arrests and rescues. These official communications aim to reassure citizens, demonstrate institutional effectiveness, and strengthen public confidence in law enforcement. Nevertheless, several scholars argue that official security communication in Nigeria often emphasizes operational achievements while providing limited information regarding operational failures, intelligence gaps, allegations of human rights violations, or systemic policing challenges (Bullock, 2018; Akinyetun, 2021).

The contest between official police narratives and citizen-generated social media narratives can best be understood through framing. Framing refers to the process through which communicators select certain aspects of reality while emphasizing particular interpretations, causes, moral evaluations, and possible solutions (Entman, 1993). Rather than merely presenting facts, both institutional communicators and social media users actively construct meanings around security events. Consequently, identical incidents may be interpreted differently depending on the communicator's objectives, ideological orientation, institutional interests, or lived experiences.

Ya'u (2021) argued that in Northern Nigeria, this competition over meaning has become increasingly significant. Following attacks by bandits or insurgents, official police statements often frame incidents as isolated criminal acts, emphasize rapid security responses, highlight arrests or ongoing investigations, and reassure citizens that security agencies remain in control. Conversely, social media actors frequently frame the same incidents as evidence of government incapacity, institutional failure, intelligence breakdown, corruption, or neglect of vulnerable communities. Despite the growing importance of digital communication in Nigeria's security landscape, comparatively limited conceptual scholarship examines how social media actors and the Nigeria Police simultaneously construct competing frames of insecurity, leaving a gap regarding the interaction between institutional and citizen-generated narratives.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The paper examines how social media actors and the Nigeria Police frame insecurity in Northern Nigeria and explores the implications of these competing narratives for public perception, policing legitimacy, security communication, and conflict management. The specific objectives are to: (i) examine the dominant frames employed by social media actors in reporting insecurity in North-West Nigeria; (ii) analyze the framing strategies adopted by the Nigeria Police in communicating security issues in North-West Nigeria; (iii) compare the similarities and differences between citizen-generated and official police narratives; and (iv) discuss the implications of competing frames for public trust, security communication, and democratic policing in Nigeria.

2.0 Empirical Literature Review

Social Media and Security Communication in Nigeria

The emergence of social media has fundamentally altered the dynamics of security communication by decentralizing information production and enabling citizens to participate actively in the dissemination and interpretation of security-related events. Unlike traditional media, where information passes through editorial gatekeeping, digital platforms facilitate real-time reporting, citizen journalism, and interactive engagement. This transformation has created a communication environment in which government agencies, journalists, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens simultaneously compete to shape public understanding of insecurity (Castells, 2015; Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2018).

In Nigeria, social media has become particularly influential in reporting terrorism, banditry, kidnapping, communal conflicts, and other forms of violent crime. The increasing penetration of smartphones and mobile internet has enabled eyewitnesses to upload photographs, videos, and live accounts of attacks almost instantly. Such content often reaches audiences before official security agencies issue statements, thereby positioning social media users as primary agenda setters during crises (Asemah, Edegoh, & Ojih, 2017).

Scholars argue that digital platforms have democratized information production by giving marginalized communities opportunities to document experiences often neglected by conventional media (Manovich, 2020). Communities affected by insecurity in Borno, Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara, Niger, Sokoto, and Plateau States increasingly rely on WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and X to exchange security alerts and report attacks. These platforms therefore function not only as communication channels but also as informal early-warning systems. However, this democratization has generated significant challenges. Social media algorithms prioritize emotionally engaging content, making sensational narratives more visible than carefully verified information (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). During security crises, misinformation, manipulated images, recycled videos, and conspiracy theories spread rapidly, often escalating fear and undermining official communication.

Police Communication and Digital Public Relations

Modern policing increasingly recognizes communication as an essential component of public safety. Beyond crime prevention and law enforcement, police organizations are expected to maintain transparency, engage communities, and provide timely information during emergencies. Digital platforms have therefore become important instruments of strategic policing communication (Bullock, 2018).

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has expanded its presence on Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube to disseminate operational updates, clarify misinformation, announce arrests, issue security advisories, and interact with citizens. These platforms represent a shift from traditional one-way public relations toward interactive digital communication. According to Akinyetun (2021), police organizations worldwide increasingly employ social media for public information dissemination, community engagement, and institutional legitimacy building. Nevertheless, several studies suggest that official police communication often reflects institutional interests rather than comprehensive transparency, emphasizing operational successes while providing limited discussion of intelligence failures, delayed responses, civilian casualties, or allegations of misconduct (Akinyetun, 2021). Consequently, official narratives may appear selective, encouraging citizens to seek alternative explanations through independent digital sources.

Framing Insecurity on Social Media

Framing research demonstrates that communication extends beyond transmitting information; it involves constructing meanings. Communicators determine which elements of an event deserve emphasis and which should receive minimal attention (Entman, 1993). Studies examining social media discussions of insecurity identify several dominant frames (Akinyetun, 2021; Ya'u, 2021; Ya'u, 2024). The government failure frame attributes insecurity to poor governance, corruption, inadequate intelligence, or ineffective security leadership. The humanitarian frame emphasizes victims' suffering, displacement, deaths, and humanitarian needs. The blame frame assigns responsibility to political leaders, security agencies, or specific institutions. The fear frame highlights uncertainty and insecurity by emphasizing vulnerability and the inability of government to protect citizens.

Conversely, official police communication commonly adopts reassurance frames, operational success frames, law enforcement frames, crime control frames, and public cooperation frames. These competing interpretations demonstrate that insecurity is not merely reported but actively constructed through communication.

Comparative Studies on Institutional and Citizen Frames

International scholarship indicates that institutional communicators generally prioritize stability and legitimacy, whereas citizen-generated communication emphasizes lived experiences and emotional realities. During terrorist attacks in Europe and North America, police organizations framed incidents around operational response, public safety, and investigation. Social media users, however, concentrated on eyewitness experiences, victim narratives, political accountability, and emotional reactions (Bruns, Highfield, & Burgess, 2013).

Similar patterns emerge across African contexts. Studies on conflict reporting in Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria indicate that official security agencies typically emphasize control and reassurance, while citizens focus on insecurity, fear, and institutional shortcomings (Mutsaers & Bebbawi, 2019). Within Nigeria, existing research has explored media framing of Boko Haram, kidnapping, and farmer–herder conflicts, concluding that newspapers frequently emphasize conflict escalation whereas social media discussions prioritize emotional engagement and government accountability (Akinyetun, 2021; Ya'u, 2021; Ya'u, 2024). However, comparatively few studies directly compare the framing strategies of social media actors and the Nigeria Police within a unified analytical framework.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on Framing Theory, principally developed by Erving Goffman (1974) and subsequently expanded by Robert Entman (1993). Goffman conceptualized frames as interpretive structures through which individuals organize and understand social reality. According to him, people rely on cognitive frameworks that enable them to identify, interpret, and respond to events occurring around them (Goffman, 1974).

Building upon Goffman's work, Entman (1993) explains that framing involves selecting certain aspects of perceived reality and making them more salient in a communication text. Frames perform four principal functions: defining problems; diagnosing causes; making moral evaluations; and recommending solutions. In the context of Northern Nigeria, both social media actors and the Nigeria Police selectively emphasize particular dimensions of violent incidents. Social media users frequently define insecurity as evidence of governance failure, attribute responsibility to political leaders and security institutions, morally condemn institutional inadequacies, and advocate reforms. Conversely, official police communication typically defines insecurity as criminal activity requiring law enforcement intervention, emphasizes operational successes, and encourages public cooperation with security agencies. Thus, although both actors communicate about identical security events, they construct different realities through distinct framing processes.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual research design, which synthesizes existing scholarly knowledge to develop theoretical understanding rather than generating primary empirical data (Jaakkola, 2020). Conceptual research is particularly appropriate where the objective is to analyze ideas, theories, and existing evidence in order to explain relationships among phenomena and identify gaps in current knowledge.

Data were obtained through documentary analysis of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles on media framing, policing, digital communication, and insecurity; books on framing theory and communication studies; reports published by the Nigeria Police Force and the UNDP; and credible reports from recognized media and research institutions. Documents were purposively selected based on relevance to insecurity in Northern Nigeria, discussion of social media or police communication, application of framing or related communication theories, and publication in credible academic or institutional sources. The collected literature was analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, identifying dominant frames, similarities and differences between institutional and citizen narratives, and the implications of competing communication strategies for public trust and security governance.

4.0 Results and Discussion

As a conceptual study, the results are derived from a synthesis of existing scholarly literature, policy reports, and theoretical perspectives on media framing, digital communication, policing, and insecurity in Northern Nigeria. The review reveals six major findings.

Social Media Actors Predominantly Employ Critical and Humanitarian Frames

The literature indicates that social media actors generally frame insecurity from the perspectives of victims, affected communities, and eyewitnesses. Their narratives emphasize human suffering, loss of lives, displacement, destruction of livelihoods, and government inadequacies. Rather than merely reporting incidents, social media users frequently interpret attacks as evidence of governance failure, institutional incompetence, corruption, or intelligence lapses. Unlike official institutional communication, citizen-generated narratives frequently prioritize humanitarian consequences over operational details. Consequently, discussions on platforms such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram tend to amplify public empathy while simultaneously intensifying criticism of government responses (Ya'u, 2021, 2022).

Nigeria Police Communication Emphasizes Institutional Legitimacy

The review demonstrates that official communication by the Nigeria Police Force predominantly employs reassurance, operational success, and crime-control frames. Official statements often highlight arrests, rescue operations, intelligence gathering, deployment of personnel, and collaborative efforts with other security agencies. While these narratives are consistent with strategic crisis communication practices adopted by police organizations globally, they sometimes underemphasize operational limitations, delayed responses, intelligence failures, or allegations of misconduct. Consequently, sections of the public perceive official communication as selective or overly optimistic, thereby reducing institutional credibility (Akinyetun, 2021).

Competing Frames Shape Public Understanding of Insecurity

The literature (Abdulbaqi & Ariemu, 2017) consistently demonstrates that framing influences how citizens interpret identical security events. Whereas police narratives define insecurity as criminal activity requiring coordinated security responses, social media narratives frequently define the same incidents as manifestations of governance failure and declining state capacity. This divergence illustrates Entman's (1993) proposition that framing influences problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and preferred solutions.

Digital Platforms Have Democratized Security Communication

The review indicates that social media has significantly transformed security communication by reducing institutional monopoly over information dissemination. Citizens now participate directly in documenting violent incidents, questioning official narratives, and demanding accountability. Communities affected by insecurity increasingly use digital platforms as informal early-warning mechanisms, channels for mobilizing humanitarian support, and forums for civic advocacy. Nevertheless, unrestricted participation has also facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation, manipulated content, hate speech, and conspiracy theories, particularly during periods of heightened insecurity (Ya'u, 2024).

Trust Deficits Intensify Framing Conflicts

The literature suggests that declining public trust in government institutions contributes significantly to the popularity of citizen-generated narratives. Where official communication is perceived as delayed, incomplete, or inconsistent, citizens increasingly rely on alternative online sources regardless of their credibility. Effective policing depends not only on operational capability but also on public confidence, transparency, and perceived accountability (Abubakre, 2016; Akinyetun, 2021).

Existing Scholarship Reveals Important Research Gaps

Although numerous studies examine media coverage of terrorism, digital misinformation, or police communication independently, comparatively few investigate the interaction between citizen-generated social media frames and official police narratives using framing theory. Furthermore, limited conceptual and empirical research specifically addresses Northern Nigeria despite the region's centrality to contemporary security challenges. These gaps present significant opportunities for future comparative content analyses, audience studies, computational social media analyses, and mixed-method investigations (Abubakre, 2016; Akinyetun, 2021; Ya'u, 2021; Ya'u, 2024; Aluko, 2017).

5.0 Discussion of the Findings

The results demonstrate that insecurity in Northern Nigeria is simultaneously a security challenge and a communication challenge. The contest between institutional and citizen-generated narratives reflects broader struggles over credibility, legitimacy, and public trust within contemporary democratic societies. Consistent with Framing Theory, neither the Nigeria Police nor social media actors communicate neutral descriptions of events. Rather, each selectively emphasizes particular aspects of insecurity based on institutional objectives, professional responsibilities, ideological orientations, or lived experiences.

These competing frames influence citizens' perceptions of government effectiveness. Research on media framing consistently demonstrates that repeated exposure to particular interpretive frames shapes attitudes toward public institutions, risk perception, and policy preferences (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). The review also highlights the dual nature of social media: digital platforms democratize information production by allowing marginalized communities to document their experiences, yet the absence of effective gatekeeping mechanisms enables misinformation to circulate rapidly. For policing institutions, this communication environment requires a transition from reactive information management to proactive digital engagement.

6.0 Implications of the Findings

The study reinforces the continued relevance of Framing Theory in explaining digital security communication. It demonstrates that framing remains a powerful analytical framework for understanding how institutional actors and citizens construct competing interpretations of insecurity. Findings suggest that security policies should integrate communication strategies alongside operational responses. Government agencies should recognize that successful security governance requires transparent, timely, and consistent public communication. The Force should invest in digital communication training for Public Relations Officers, establish dedicated social media monitoring units, and collaborate with independent fact-checking organizations. Professional journalists should continue to uphold verification, balance, and ethical reporting standards, while digital literacy initiatives remain essential for reducing misinformation.

7.0 Conclusion

This conceptual paper examined how social media actors and the Nigeria Police frame insecurity in Northern Nigeria using Framing Theory as its analytical foundation. The review demonstrates that social media has transformed security communication by enabling citizens to participate actively in constructing narratives surrounding violent conflict. While this transformation has enhanced transparency and democratized information production, it has also intensified misinformation, emotional polarization, and competition over narrative legitimacy. Conversely, the Nigeria Police increasingly recognizes digital communication as an important component of contemporary policing, though institutional communication frequently emphasizes operational achievements and reassurance, creating perceptions of selective transparency. The paper concludes that effective responses to insecurity require not only operational competence but also credible, transparent, and participatory communication strategies.

8.0 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the paper recommends that the Nigeria Police Force institutionalize evidence-based strategic communication that emphasizes transparency, timeliness, and factual accuracy. Security agencies should establish specialized digital communication and social media monitoring units to detect and respond rapidly to misinformation. The government should strengthen partnerships with media organizations, civil society groups, and independent fact-checking organizations to promote credible security information. Finally, digital literacy programmes should be expanded to equip citizens with the skills required to identify misinformation and responsibly share security-related content.

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