TECHNOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE, MEDIA CONVERGENCE, YOUTH USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONFLICT TRIGGER: A STUDY OF ESCALATION OF THE 2017/2018 MAMBILLA PLATEAU CONFLICT IN NORTH EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

Social media as a product of technological convergence can be used positively or negatively by people, including youths. Positively, social media helps in opening the participation of everyone in sharing information without much hindrances. Equally, using social media negatively can plunge the society into chaos. This paper looks at youth usage of social media during the 2017/2018 Mambilla Plateau conflict in North East Nigeria, using FGD and In-depth Interview with Technological Determinant Theory and Peace Journalism Conflict Transformation Theory as theoretical framework. The paper revealed that youths wrongly used Facebook to fuel the escalation of the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau through dissemination of fake news and hate speech. This paper recommends that though youths can be allowed unhindered access to the use of social media, such access should be checked during crisis to avoid misuse that can lead to escalation of such crisis.

Keywords*: Technological convergence, Media convergence, Youths, Social Media and Conflict trigger*

Introduction

The intersection of technology, media convergence, youth usage of social media, and conflict escalation is a crucial area of study in understanding how digital platforms can impact conflicts involving young people. These are obtainable through the merging of traditional media (television, newspapers, radio) with digital technologies (internet, social media, mobile apps). This convergence has led to the creation of multimedia platforms that offer diverse contents to audiences.

Social media platforms provide voice to youths who may not have access to traditional media outlets. This can empower young people to share their perspectives, raise awareness about social issues, and advocate for change. However, the amplification of such voices can also lead to the rapid spread of misinformation, polarizing narratives, and inflammatory contents that can contribute to conflict escalation if not adequately checked. Youths often use social media to mobilize for social justice causes, organize protests, and raise awareness about human rights violations.

While online activism can be a force for positive change, it can also lead to confrontations with authorities, ideological clashes, and offline conflicts that can escalate due to the rapid dissemination of information

and calls to action. Youths are particularly susceptible to being trapped in social media echo chambers, where they are exposed to narrow and polarizing viewpoints that reinforce existing biases and beliefs. This can exacerbate tensions between different groups, promote us-versus-them mentalities, and fuel conflicts based on identity, ideology, or political affiliations. Peer pressure and social validation dynamics on social media can influence young peoples' behavior, attitudes, and perceptions of conflicts.

Youths may feel pressured to conform to group norms, participate in online debates, or escalate disagreements to maintain social status or garner likes and shares, contributing to conflict escalation.

Mambilla Plateau is situated in Taraba State. It was originally a German Trust Territory and it is one of the major flash points of conflicts in Nigeria. History reveals that series of conflicts have occurred on the Mambilla Plateau of Taraba State. These conflicts were often caused by dispute over land, ethnicity or political factors. The political factor started at the twilight of the plebiscite of 1959 and 1961when the then German Trust Territory (Mambilla Plateau) voted to be part of

Nigeria. The plebiscite conflict was as a result of each ethnic group's struggle to gain political relevance over others. The 1979 politic also brewed political and ethnic tension on the Plateau. The later elections were also believed to be causes to some of the crises. The last elections (both presidential and gubernatorial) in Taraba State also contributed to the 2016, 2017 and 2018 conflicts between herders and farmers on the Mambilla Plateau.

For land conflicts which is often between herders and farmers, it was observed that the earliest conflicts around the 1970s were as a result of the uncontrolled growth of livestock followed by high competition for land between grazers and farmers. The conflicts were mostly between herders and farmers dating back to 1923 (Lenshie and Johnson, 2012).

But such conflicts escalated with high casualties in 2016, 2017 and 2018 resulting in many deaths and displaced persons which is continuously threatening peaceful coexistence on the Plateau. In all the conflicts on the Plateau, communication has been a critical element that help to escalate or control the conflict (Bello & Pate, 2021).

Many factors have been identified as causes for these conflicts. One of them is that spread of rumours, gossip information and falsehood in a community due deprive credible sources of public information. This situation can lead to hate speech which could lead to misunderstanding, hence, conflict. The social media was accused of playing major roles in the crisis through spread of fake news and hate speech through sensational reportage of the conflict. That informs the reason for this paper.

Aim/Objectives of the Study

The aim of this paper is to find out the extent to which the level of increase of casualties during the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau could be linked to the rise in the use of social media platforms on the Plateau by youths while the specific objectives include:

1. To find out the level of increase of casualties during the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau.
2. To find out the extent to which the level of increase of casualties during the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau could be linked to youths' usage of social media platforms as products of technology on the Plateau.

Conceptual Clarification

Concepts like technological convergence, media convergence, social media, conflict, increase in casualties, conflict escalation and Mambilla Conflict are clarified as used here.

Technological convergence: This refers to universal digital code across telecommunications and electronic mass media, for common protocols (IP), which are used for different technological (hybrid)

platforms/networks (fixed-wire and mobile) and lead to service-integrating devices, such as TV-capable smart phones like social media. In this context it refers to its product social media.

Media Convergence: This is the integration and interoperability and the coming together of computing networks, information and communication technologies, and digital forms of information that are inherently adaptable, delivered via intelligent online platforms, applications and devices. In this context it refers to the result of the convergence which is social media.

Youths: In this context refers to age group bracket between 15 and 35 that that published media content about the 2017/2018 Mambilla Plateau herders/farmers conflicts.

Social media: is conceptualized as digital Social and online new media, specifically Facebook that published media content about the 2017/2018 Mambilla Plateau herders/farmers conflicts.

Conflict Trigger: This is conceptualized here as the increase in casualties 2017/2018 Mambilla Plateau herders/farmers conflicts.

Review of Literature

This section deals with review of relevant literatures about technological convergence, media convergence, youths, conflict, social media as well as theoretical framework.

Technological Convergence

According to Latzer (2013), Technological convergence stands for a universal digital code across telecommunications and electronic mass media, for common protocols (IP), which are used for different technological (hybrid) platforms/networks (fixed-wire and mobile) and lead to serviceintegrating devices, such as TV-capable smart phones with internet apps. These changes are also referred to as network convergence and terminal convergence.

Media Technology

Holliman (2010) defined media technologies, such as social media platforms, digital communication tools, and online news outlets. They play significant roles in shaping how conflicts are portrayed, disseminated, and understood by the public. These technologies can amplify voices, spread information rapidly, and influence public opinion, potentially fueling conflict escalation or promoting peace-building efforts.

Media Convergence

Holliman (2010) defined media convergence from technological sense, as integration and interoperability the coming together of computing networks, information and communication technologies, and digital forms of information that are inherently adaptable, delivered via intelligent platforms, applications and devices.

According to him, from an end user perspective, media convergence involves digital technologies that encode and decode multiple streams. This can involve (linked and aggregated) text, (galleries of) still images, moving pictures, digital simulations, sounds, music, or any combination thereof, to one or more devices and platforms for end user's choice.

Social Media and Conflict Mobiliation

Gire & Sabiha (2015) linked the sharing of violent pictures of killings on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to the cause and spread of the Arab spring in the Middle East. Bello and Pate (2021) study of social media and conflicts on the Mambilla Plateau: A Review revealed that online media were used to share fake news that instigated the spread of conflict during 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflicts on the Mambilla Plateau. This, according to them may be due to lack of gatekeeping process

New Media, Youth and Conflict

Adi (2014) study on the usage of social media and Arab Spring accused youths of using social media to propel conflicts through conflict initiation, recruitment, propaganda messages and mobilizing violent

attacks as the uprising spread very fast like bush fire. This informed how ICTs affected violence in civil wars like in Syria, Iraq, and Ukraine. They all recommended the need for censoring conflicts escalation related messages.

He went further to link youths to triggering and fuelling the spread of the Arab Spring crisis through wrongful use of social media. He therefore recommended that there is need for technology companies to apply direct effects of platform influence on new media messages on conflicts, by censoring conflicts escalation messages.

Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney (2017) study on social media as a catalyst and trigger for youth violence found that young people are daily exposed to online violence that display or incite serious violence in real life. This, according to them can influence youths to aid in escalating existing societal conflict through sharing of violent pictures and videos.

Bello and Pate (2022) Social media and conflict during 2017/2018 Mambilla Plateau conflict in North East Nigeria indicated that youths between the age bracket of 15-35 years posted most of the bloody wordings, pictures, videos and audios on Facebook/WhatsApp during 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Plateau which helped in escalating the crisis. Youths used some online media to share fake news that instigated the spread of conflict during 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflicts on the Mambilla Plateau. This, according to them may be due to lack of gatekeeping process.

According to The Nation (2018) youths are the major users of the social media positively and negatively. Positively, youths use social media for interaction and education. Negatively, youths can be prone to social vices like moral decadence.

Theoretical Framework

This paper used Technological Determinism Theory and Peace Journalism Conflict Transformation Theory as its theoretical framework. Technological Determinism Theory, according to Sergel (2020); Paragas & Lin (2016) and Hauer (2017) technology is the principal initiator of the society's transformation. They linked the emergence of this theory to the American Sociologist, Thorstein Veblen, who formulated the causal link between technology and the society.

According to the supporters of Technological Determinism, any social change in the society is influenced by technology, technological development, communications technology and the media. However, since society can be influenced by technological products like social media, these effects could be both positive and negative.

This explains the choice of this theory as the negative usage of social media were believed to have been responsible for the escalation of the 2017/2018 herders/farmers crisis on the Plateau.

Galtung,& Ruge. (1965); Peleg,(2006) see Peace Journalism and Conflict Transformation Theory as focusing on promoting conflict-sensitive reporting, ethical storytelling, and solutions-oriented narratives that highlight constructive responses to conflicts and promote dialogue, reconciliation, and peace-building. This theory believes that by reframing conflicts through the lens of peace and inclusivity, media practitioners can contribute to conflict transformation efforts and challenge dominant narratives that perpetuate violence and division. This promote peace, dialogue, and address the root causes of conflicts in the digital age. That makes the choice of this theory relevant to this paper.

Methodology

This study used FGD and In-depth Interview as research methods. This researcher used In-depth Interview against Questionnaire because majority of the respondents in the affected area are not highly literate to be able to answer questionnaires effectively and accurately.

According to Wimmer and Dominick (2011); Creswell and Creswell (2018) qualitative research method helps researchers to understand the complex relationships of social phenomenon. Using qualitative methods

allows the participants to speak in their own voices and for an understanding that multiple interpretations of these concepts were expected and welcomed.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD) is another form of qualitative research method which according to Wimmer and Dominick (2000); Wimmer and Dominic (2011) is an interview conducted with 6 – 12 people as a group simultaneously and a moderator who leads the discussion about a specific topic. But Creswell and Creswell (2018) further explained that FGD is an interview conducted with 2-8 people and that any number above 8 makes the interview to be rowdy.

The population of North East Nigeria as per 2006 National Population Census is 18,984,299 while that of Sardauna Local Government, according to National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) (2019) is 299,800

The sampled population was thirty-six (36) with three (3) rounds of six (6) participants, making eighteen (18) participants for FGD, five (5) people each drawn from the major actors of the conflict which included Fulanis and Mambilla people using both multi-stage sampling techniques. Equally, one each were judgmentally sampled from Kaka, Panso, Kambu, Local Government Information Office and Gembu Divisional Police Office, NTA, Jalingo, Taraba State Broadcasting Service (TSBS) and Taraba Television Corporation (TTV), respectively.

The above was achieved through multi-stage sampling techniques. These were used to pick 36 respondents for FGD and In-depth Interview. The sampling process started with Purposeful sampling to pick 36 respondents that were knowledgeable in the trends of conflict on the Mambilla Plateau. Then, the names were drawn from each of the five divisions of Mambilla Plateau that were knowledgeable in the trends of conflict, Sardauna Local Government Information Office, Gembu Police Divisional Office, NTA, Jalingo staff, Taraba State Broadcasting Service (TSBS) staff and Taraba Television Corporation (TTV) staff using cluster sampling while the supplied names were subjected to random sampling that picked the 36 people that participated in both FGD and In-depth Interview respectively.

For FGD, three (3) rounds of six (6) participants were used, making 18 participants. The 18 participants were made up of nine (9) Fulanis and nine (9) Mambillans because these were the ethnic groups involved in the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau. For In-depth Interview five (5) participants each from the two major actors of the conflict (Fulani and Mambilla ethnic groups) were sampled using multi-stage sampling techniques where 20 names were supplied using judgmental sampling and the 20 names were subjected to random sampling where 10 names that participated were selected. One participant each were selected from other ethnic groups from the area like Kaka, Kambu and Panso, Sardauna Local Government Information Office, Gembu Divisional Police Office, NTA, Jalingo, Taraba State Broadcasting Service (TSBS) and Taraba Television Corporation (TTV) respectively.

Equally, independent persons were used as anchor for the FGD to serve as one of the validity of the instrument while mixed methods of FGD and In-depth Interview also added to the validity of the instrument. This study was organized in patterns by constructing, reorganizing and grouping the data into comparable categories and/or themes, from which coding scheme for the FGD and interview guide was used to draw data from themes like Increase in casualties, Escalation of the conflict and Linking increase in casualties to the rise of youth usage of social media while the collated data was analyzed using narration of themes as themes can be analyzed by narration method.

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

    i.   Increase in casualties

All the 18 participants of the three sessions of FGD, representing 100% were of the view that there were increase in casualties during the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau compared to the previous conflicts. Therefore one can infer that there were increased casualties during the conflict as a result of Facebook posts of bloody killings of victims.

ii.   Linking increase in casualties to the rise in youths usage of social media as product of technology on the Plateau

The data retrieved from the majority of the 18 participants of the three sessions of Focus Group Discussions (15 of them), representing 83.33% revealed that the rise in usage of social media by youths was directly linked with the increase in casualties during the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau compared to the previous conflicts.

The remaining three out of 18 participants, representing 16.67% argued that the increase in casualties during the conflict cannot be linked to youths wrong usage of social media alone because people had the urge to fight and therefore they were not necessarily propelled by the usage of conflict information disseminated through Facebook.

From the above revelations, it can be deduced that youths usage of Facebook played significant role in fostering the escalation of the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau as per the views of the majority of FGD participants.

iii.   The extent to which the increase in casualties could be linked to the rise in youths Usage of social media as product of technology on the Plateau

Fifteen (15) out of the 18 participants, representing 83.33% from the FGD acknowledged the fact that youths postings of pictures, videos and audios of bloody killings of victims on Facebook during the conflict generated reactions, counter reactions and reprisal attacks, hence, the escalation. But the remaining three out 18 participants, representing 16.67% argued that the increase in casualties cannot only be linked to increase in youths' wrong usage of social media alone because that people have the urge to fight/.

From the above revelations, one can infer that youths' wrong usage of Facebook played significant role in fostering the increase in casualties of the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau as affirmed by majority of the FGD participants above.

iv.   The extent to which the escalation of the conflict could be linked to the role played by youths during the conflict on the Plateau

All the 18 participants, representing 100% from the FGD acknowledged that youths postings of pictures, videos and audios of bloody killings of victims on Facebook during the conflict generated reactions, counter reactions and reprisal attacks which aided in the escalation of the conflict. From the above revelations, one can infer that youths' wrong usage of Facebook played significant role in the escalation of the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau as affirmed by majority of the FGD participants above.

In-Depth Interview

i.   Increase in casualties

All the 18 respondents of the In-depth Interview, representing 100% were of the view that there was increase in casualties in the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau compared to the previous conflicts.

This means that there was increase in casualties in the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau compared to the previous conflicts which is dangerous sa casualties are increasing.

ii.   Linking increase in casualties to the rise in youths' usage of social media as product of technology on the Plateau

All the respondents, representing 100% acknowledged that youths' usage of Facebook played significant role in fostering the increase in casualties during the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau through posting of bloody killings on Facebook.

From the above revelations, it is clear that youths' usage of Facebook played significant role in fostering the increase in casualties during the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Plateau.

iii.   **The extent to which the increase in casualties could be linked to the rise in youth usage of social media as product of technology on the Plateau**

All the respondents of the In-depth Interview, representing 100% acknowledged that youths' postings of pictures, videos and audios of bloody killings of victims on Facebook during the conflict generated reactions, counter reactions and reprisal attacks which contributed to the increase in casualties. That the increase in casualties was directly linked to the rise in the usage of Facebook by youths during the conflict. From the above revelations one can infer that the increase in casualties of the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau can be directly linked to youths' negative usage of postings of description of bloody killings, bloody pictures of killings, bloody videos of killings and bloody audio description of killings respectively.

iv.   **The extent to which the escalation of the conflict could be linked to the role played by youths during the conflict on the Plateau**

All the 18 respondents, representing 100% from the In-Depth Interview acknowledged that youths postings of pictures, videos and audios of bloody killings of victims on Facebook during the conflict generated reactions, counter reactions and reprisal attacks, hence, the escalation and spread of the conflict.

From the above revelations, one can infer that youths' wrong usage of especially Facebook played significant role in the escalation of the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau as affirmed by majority of the interview respondents above.

Conclusion

There was increase in casualties (death victims both human beings and animals) during the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau compared to the previous conflicts.

Youths' wrong usage of Facebook played major role in fostering the escalation of the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict through misinformation in form of fake news and hate speech. Youths posted irritating pictures of bloody killings of death victims (involving both humans and animals). The increase in casualties of the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict on the Mambilla Plateau can be directly linked to the negative use of social media by youths through posting misinformation in form of fake news posts that described bloody killings, bloody pictures of killings, bloody videos of killings and bloody audio description of killings respectively on Facebook.

Recommendations

1. There is the need for government to enforce youths to observe peace journalism conflict transformation theory in their dissemination of social media conflict messages. This will go a long way in de-escalating the spread of conflict in the society.
2. Government should come up with measures like gatekeeping process to control youths' excesses of the use of the new media during crisis.
3. There is the need for the people of Mambilla Plateau to always cross check social media messages before reacting to them.
4. Government should come up with measures to control excesses of the use of the new media during crisis, especially among the youths of this country to forestall them from posting wordings that vividly describe bloody killings of victims, pictures, videos and audios showing/describing bloody killings of victims that may likely ignite crisis escalation.

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