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### DIGITAL TRIBALISM AND ETHNO-RELIGIOUS POLARISATION IN THE NEW CONFLICT FRONTIER OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN NIGERIA

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#### Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of digital tribalism and its role in deepening ethno-religious polarisation within Nigeria's increasingly networked society. In recent years, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), and WhatsApp have evolved into powerful spaces for identity expression, political mobilisation, and social discourse. However, these platforms have also facilitated the formation of echo chambers, the spread of hate speech, and the reinforcement of divisive narratives along ethnic and religious lines. The study examined how social media influences the formation and reinforcement of ethno-religious identities, analysed the mechanisms through which digital tribalism fuels conflict, and identified strategies to mitigate its harmful effects. Adopting Social Network Theory and descriptive research design, the study found that digital tribalism thrives through mechanisms like algorithmic amplification, identity-based mobilisation, and virality of hate speech. High and even low-profile events served as flashpoints, generating a surge of divisive rhetoric online. Examples include the 2023 elections and the trial of separatist leader, Nnamdi Kanu. Inflammatory posts, particularly those dehumanising Igbo, Fulani, Yoruba and indeed, other ethnic groups, illustrate how ethnic identities become politicised and weaponised in digital spaces. Findings therefore revealed an urgent need for strategies to improved media literacy, content regulation, and inter-ethnic dialogue online. The study concludes that digital tribalism significantly contributes to ethno-religious polarisation in Nigeria. Recommendations include a multi-stakeholder approach involving tech platforms, government agencies, educators, and peacebuilders to curb the rise of digital tribalism.

**Keywords:** Digital Tribalism, Ethno-religious Polarisation, New Conflict Frontier, Social Media.

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## **Introduction**

As of 2025, global social media usage has grown to approximately 5.24 billion users, accounting for about 63.9% of the world's population (Statista, 2025). Users spend an average of 141 minutes per day on various platforms. Such time frame suggests the centrality of social media in daily life and global communication (Statista, 2025). In Nigeria, the rise is equally significant. As of early 2025, there were approximately 47.8 million social media users aged 18 and above, representing 38.2% of that age group (DataReportal, 2025). This is a marked increase from 36.7 million users recorded in early 2024 (BusinessDay, 2024). Furthermore, Nigerians rank among the highest globally in daily social media engagement, spending an average of 3 hours and 23 minutes per day, placing the country fifth in the world for time spent on social platforms (Graphic Online, 2024). This rapid growth underscores the increasing influence of digital media in public discourse, political mobilisation, and socio-cultural interaction within Nigeria's dynamic communication landscape. With this new playground or battlefield (as the case may be), the digital space of social media has become the ultimate melting point for personal, economic, socio-cultural, identity expression, public discourse, and political engagement. Without doubt, the media has brought about unprecedented opportunities for communication and mobilisation in all aspects of human endeavours. Nigeria's ethno-religious cleavages have long been central to its social and political dynamics (Falola & Heaton, 2008). Nevertheless, the rise of digital technologies has introduced a new layer: social media platforms now enable individuals and groups to assert identity-based affiliations with unprecedented immediacy and reach (Cheeseman, Fisher, Hassan, & Hitchen, 2020). In Nigeria today, the question arises—are the nation's deepening ethnic and religious divides merely reflections of historical legacy, or has the digital era provided a more volatile stage for identity-based confrontation? Once hailed as tools for democratising information and fostering national unity, platforms like X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp have instead morphed into battlegrounds where tribal and religious identities are weaponised.

Disinformation campaigns, coordinated trolling, viral tribal hashtags, and ethnically charged memes now reconfigure national conversations, especially during elections, security crises, or periods of unrest (Uwa & Ronke, 2024; Adewunmi et al., 2024). In this context, the fusion of digital media and identity politics gives rise to a new frontier of conflict, a phenomenon that may be aptly termed digital tribalism. This study seeks to explore how social media's evolving architecture is reshaping Nigeria's identity-based hostilities, complicating efforts at peacebuilding and national cohesion. The country's already fragile ethno-religious landscape is being reshaped by algorithms and echo-chambers that reward outrage, reinforce biases, and deepen divisions. Rather than serving as venues for inclusive dialogue, social-media spaces are increasingly functioning as digital battlegrounds; where ethnic affiliations are absolutised, and dissenting perspectives are delegitimised. Misinformation, hate speech, and disinformation campaigns now thrive, often going viral within hours and producing tangible spill-over effects, from inter-group hostility to election-related violence (Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2023; Jimada, 2023).

Despite growing interest in online disinformation and cyber-ethics, a significant gap remains in understanding how digital tribalism, a distinct fusion of ethnic nationalism, religious identity and digital behaviour, propels political polarisation and social fragmentation in Nigeria. Existing studies have predominantly investigated offline ethno-religious conflict, with less attention paid to the ways in which novel digital tools are

reshaping age-old rivalries in more volatile, less regulated arenas (Oladokun et al., 2024). Moreover, regulatory responses have remained reactive and haphazard, with critics pointing to the risk of censorship even as root causes of polarisation remain unaddressed (DW, 2023). There is thus an urgent need to explore the mechanisms through which digital tribalism operates, how tribal narratives are curated, identities mobilised for conflict, and how these dynamics undermine democratic engagement and national unity. Without a critical and context-specific understanding of this new frontier, Nigeria risks normalising a culture of online hostility that may further fracture its already delicate social fabric. In order to achieve the above, the following specific objectives guided the study:

- i. Examine how social media platforms influence the formation and reinforcement of ethno-religious identities in Nigeria;
- ii. Analyse the mechanisms through which digital tribalism contributes to ethno-religious polarisation and conflict; and
- iii. Identify practical approaches to reduce digital tribalism and promote peaceful coexistence on social media in Nigeria.

### **Conceptual Analyses and Literature Review**

In the section below, a comprehensive analysis of key concepts, the theoretical framework, and relevant literature is presented to provide a solid foundation for understanding the focus of the study.

#### **Digital Tribalism**

Digital tribalism is a relatively new concept that refers to how ethnic and tribal loyalties are manifested, expressed, reinforced, and contested in online environments—especially across social-media platforms. Unlike traditional tribalism, which primarily unfolds in physical communities and local networks, digital tribalism transcends geographic constraints and allows individuals to group themselves around ethnic identities in virtual spaces (Agbede & Oparinde, 2024). These online groupings often prioritise in-group loyalty and may marginalise, vilify, or exclude out-groups, creating an “us versus them” dynamic in cyberspace. In Nigeria, digital tribalism has amplified pre-existing ethnic and religious tensions by offering an immediate and expansive platform for identity-based mobilisation. Research has shown that social networks serve as sites of both belonging and division, where identities are affirmed through hashtags, memes, and curated narratives that emphasise difference (Ade-wunmi et al., 2024). Algorithms further deepen this effect by creating echo-chambers (spaces where users primarily see content that reinforces their existing beliefs), resulting in heightened polarisation and reduced exposure to dissenting views (Babalola & Sedisa, 2024). Understanding digital tribalism is therefore crucial to comprehending how social media acts not only as a tool for connection but also as a frontier for new forms of conflict. This is because of the boundless attributes that help it mirror and amplify even offline ethno-religious polarisation, thus intensifying social divisions through the rapid spread of identity-charged content in an unprecedented manner.

#### **Ethno-religious Polarisation**

Ethno-religious polarisation signifies the deepening divisions and escalating antagonism between ethnic and religious communities within a society. In Nigeria, a country with over 250 ethnic groups and a nearly equal split between Christianity and Islam, these identities have long shaped political and social dynamics (Falola & Heaton, 2008). With the expansion of digital communication—particularly social media—these fault lines have become more

pronounced. Studies have shown that these platforms heighten mobilisation around ethnic and religious identities, cultivating hostile rhetoric and facilitating misinformation that exacerbate polarisation (Ajiboye & Ajiboye, 2024). As an example, online discussions in Nigeria increasingly reflect a sharp we/us mindset, where messages vilify out-groups and reinforce in-group loyalty (Ajayi & Bamgbose, 2023). Algorithms and echo-chambers further amplify this effect by filtering content that aligns with existing beliefs, thereby entrenching distrust and division among communities (Adisa et al., 2024). The digital mediation of identity thus plays a pivotal role in reshaping Nigeria's ethno-religious landscape, not simply by reflecting existing tensions, but by magnifying them in new and volatile ways.

### **Algorithms and Echo-Chambers**

Algorithms basically shape the digital architecture that underpins social media platforms. These are automated systems that are designed to curate and deliver content tailored to specific users' behaviour. Early conceptualisations, such as those seen in Noble's Algorithms of Oppression, highlight the neutrality of algorithmic systems and additionally, how they often incorporate broader socio-technical biases embedded within their design. These biases influence what content is surfaced and what remains hidden, with significant implications for public discourse (Noble, 2018). Algorithms contribute to the creation of filter bubbles, which are personalised content environments shaped by a user's prior clicks, likes, and viewing patterns. When these bubbles intersect with selective interaction practices, there is the emergence of echo-chambers. These are networks in which users engage primarily with like-minded peers and receive reinforcement of pre-existing beliefs (Alatawi et al., 2021). A systematic review of 55 studies finds that while computational trace-data often confirms the existence of echo-chambers, survey-based exposure studies yield more mixed results; the divergence is attributed to differences in operationalisation and data collection methods (Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021). The dynamics through which algorithms and echo-chambers operate have, in recent times, gained academic attention and are increasingly recognised and documented. Simple mechanisms such as "unfriending" and retweeting on Twitter can rapidly lead to homogeneous, segregated communities. Meanwhile, curation algorithms on platforms like Facebook and YouTube have been shown to direct users into more ideologically extreme content over time (Cinelli et al., 2021). In turn, echo-chambers and algorithmic curation contribute to deepening social and political fragmentation. Williams (2024) argued that this phenomenon undermines democratic legitimacy by limiting exposure to dissenting views, thereby reducing the capacity for deliberative discourse and reconciliation in plural societies.

Groups carve out invisible yet potent enclaves online, Facebook pages, Telegram groups, trending hashtags, where ethnic or faith-based identity becomes the defining feature, and dissenting voices are sidelined or silenced (Adisa, 2024). Algorithms fuel this dynamic by showing users content that confirms their preferences and fears, creating echo-chambers where notions of "us" versus "them" are not just reinforced, but celebrated (Aliyu et al., 2022). Misinformation, hate speech, and disinformation campaigns now flow freely, unchecked, rapid, and viral, with deeply real consequences: flare-ups of inter-communal violence, election-related unrest, and rising mistrust between communities (Pulse Nigeria, 2024). In summary, algorithms and echo-chambers constitute intertwined socio-technical phenomena that help shape how individuals receive, engage with, and share information. For scholars of peace, conflict, and identity, these dynamics are

far from benign: they provide a new digital substrate through which polarisation, identity fragmentation, and conflict may be mediated in online spaces. Understanding these mechanisms is therefore vital to both diagnosing and designing interventions for the emerging frontier of digital conflict.

### **New Conflict Frontier: Social Media in Nigeria**

The advent and projection of social media brought the promise of unprecedented connection and dialogue, but in Nigeria, it has simultaneously opened an uncharted frontier of conflict. Beyond being mere tools of communication, platforms such as X, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok are now vibrant arenas where long-standing ethnic and religious fault lines are magnified and exploited (Uwalaka, 2023). In these digital spaces, the equation is deceptively simple: fast lanes + ever-evolving algorithms = a perfect storm for identity-based mobilisation. These phenomena point to a profound shift in paradigm: conflict is no longer contained in the bazaar or the barricade. It is projected in notifications, lives in comments, and impacts real-world relationships from just handheld devices or even laptops or desktops. It can reach users at any and all times of the day and night. Recognising social media as this new conflict frontier is vital for conflict experts, peace-builders, policy-makers, and local and global communities. Only by understanding how identities are curated online, how narratives are weaponised, and how these trends pull at the fabric of national cohesion can users hope to craft responses that are not reactive, but generative.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Madubuegwu and Biereenu-Nnabugwu (2023) conducted a critical analysis of the impact of ethno-religious identity on voter behaviour during Nigeria's 2011, 2015, and 2019 presidential elections. Their study found that voting patterns were significantly influenced by the electorate's ethnic and religious affiliations, and that while social media served as a key platform for reinforcing these identities. They argued that social media amplified group-based loyalties and also shaped political narratives that deepened identity-based divisions. Through linking online discourse with offline electoral behaviour, this study underscores the role of digital platforms in perpetuating polarisation and influencing democratic outcomes in Nigeria's multi-ethnic society. Ajiboye and Ajiboye (2023) explore the provocative role of social media in fueling ethno-religious crises among students in higher institutions within Kaduna State, Nigeria. Their study revealed that platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp often serve as breeding grounds for hate speech, inflammatory rhetoric, and the reinforcement of ethnic and religious prejudices. The authors argued that the unregulated nature of these platforms allows for the rapid dissemination of content that can incite hostility and violence, particularly among youths. Their findings underscore the urgent need for digital literacy and proactive institutional responses to mitigate the risks of digital incitement in conflict-prone environments.

Ibebunjo (2023) explored the transformative power of non-violent resistance within the context of Nigeria's #EndSARS movement, the youth-led protest against police brutality. Unlike dominant narratives that often associate African struggles with violence and destruction, the author reframes the #EndSARS protests as a landmark example of peaceful civic engagement capable of triggering institutional reform and social transformation. The study emphasises how both physical demonstrations and digital activism played pivotal roles in mobilising public support and pressuring authorities to disband the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). His work contributes to the growing but still limited scholarly attention on non-violent resistance in Africa, using digital and physical platforms. Notably, the study

argues that remembrance of the movement should be encouraged, not suppressed, as it offers a blueprint for peaceful social change. Ewuzie and Ilo (2024) analysed how media outlets frame ethno-religious conflicts in Jos, Nigeria. Their study reveals that media reports often resort to sensationalist narratives, focusing on violent events rather than underlying structural causes. This form of coverage, the authors argue, can inadvertently amplify tensions between religious and ethnic communities, rather than contributing to reconciliation and peacebuilding. The review identifies a key gap in the existing scholarship: a lack of detailed analysis on linguistic frames (word-choice, metaphors) and visual frames (photographs, layouts) in media coverage, and how these influence conflict dynamics. Further, they observe that most studies adopt short-term snapshots rather than longitudinal designs, limiting our ability to understand how media framing evolves and interacts with audience perceptions. Much of the existing research focuses on either offline identity politics or isolated online conflicts. Few studies analyse how algorithms, echo chambers, and viral disinformation escalate identity-based divisions into full-blown digital conflicts. This study fills that gap by examining how digital tribalism contributes to ethno-religious polarisation on social media in Nigeria, establishing social media as a new conflict frontier. It also investigates the implications for peacebuilding, national cohesion, and democratic stability.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social Network Theory (SNT) offers a valuable framework for understanding how individuals and groups interact within digital spaces, particularly social media platforms, shaping identity and conflict dynamics. Rooted in sociology and communication studies, SNT focuses on the patterns and structures of relationships, nodes (individuals or groups) and ties (connections), and how these influence behaviour, information flow, and group cohesion (Scott, 2017). In the context of digital tribalism and ethno-religious polarisation in Nigeria, SNT helps explain how online networks form around shared ethnic or religious identities, creating echo chambers that amplify group loyalty and marginalise outsiders (Kadushin, 2012). Algorithms on social media platforms often reinforce these networks by prioritising content that resonates with users' existing beliefs, intensifying polarisation (Cinelli et al., 2021). This network-driven reinforcement can accelerate the spread of misinformation and hate speech, contributing to real-world tensions (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015).

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a descriptive research design aimed at providing a detailed account of digital tribalism and ethno-religious polarisation on social media in Nigeria. The descriptive approach is appropriate as it seeks to describe the current state of online interactions systematically. Descriptive research is commonly used to provide a comprehensive overview of a phenomenon without investigating causal relationships (Babbie, 2016). It allows researchers to systematically describe characteristics and patterns within a population or situation (Creswell, 2014). According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), descriptive studies are valuable for exploring new or complex social issues where a detailed understanding is required before further hypothesis testing.

### **Findings and Discussions**

**Influence of Social Media Platforms on the Formation and Exacerbation of Polarised Ethno-Religious Identities in Nigeria:** In Nigeria, social media platforms are contemporarily central to the construction and amplification of ethno-religious identities. These platforms enable

individuals to align strongly and express group affiliations and grievances. This often intensifies divisions and contributes to exacerbating the polarisation that already exists in Nigeria. Research indicates that online interactions significantly influence identity formation and community building among Nigerian youths (Oyewole, 2024). Furthermore, Babalola and Sedisa (2025) found that digital platforms act as cultural archives, enabling the preservation and transformation of identities across diaspora and youth networks. Together, these findings suggest that social media serves not only as a site of personal identity expression but also as a catalyst for heightened group differentiation and social fault- lines in Nigeria. Okeke and Omosotomhe's (2025) study shows that platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok facilitate both the assertion of ethnic pride and the deepening of inter- ethnic divisions among youths. Similarly, Ilevbare et al. (2024) demonstrated the prevalence of hate speech and abusive language in political discussions on Nigerian Twitter, highlighting how code- switched content can target specific groups. Aliyu et al. (2022) documented systemic hate speech against the Fulani ethnic group. This illustrates hate- speech machinery embedded within digital platforms. Complementing this, a sociolinguistic investigation titled, *Limits of Language in Nigeria: The Hatred of Igbo Language* reveals enduring prejudice against the Igbo language itself. The study traces historical factors, such as the legacy of the Biafran War and colonial- era linguistic policies, that have contributed to the marginalisation of Igbo language speakers (James et al., 2024). Expectedly, the November 2025 sentencing of Nnamdi Kanu (leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra, IPOB) to life imprisonment for terrorism- related charges is another example of how digital and identity- based conflicts can erupt into real- world crises, with severe political and social repercussions. The aftermath of the sentencing has triggered a wave of emotions across ethnic lines. Reports indicate that many among the Igbo youth perceive the verdict as ethnically biased, especially given that the presiding judge was Yoruba. This has rekindled narratives of marginalisation, injustice, and inter- ethnic distrust on social media, fueling a resurgence of identity- based grievances and renewed mobilisation for ethnic solidarity or protest among certain groups. Indeed, no ethnic group is spared in Nigeria's digital- tribalism discourse. Evidence shows that the Yoruba are also subject to disparaging remarks, ethnic slurs, and negative stereotyping on social media. As an example, analyses of online rhetoric reveal frequent use of derogatory terms and stereotypes when referring to Yoruba individuals, a trend perpetuated through memes, hashtags, and coded insults designed to delegitimise their political, cultural, or social claims (Ayeni & Ibileye, 2024; Alugbin, 2025). In a 2024 nationwide content- analysis study of social media discussions, "Yoruba demons", a derogatory slang that caricatures young Yoruba men as disloyal or morally corrupt, was documented as a recurring trope in political and romantic- relationship contexts.

### **Mechanisms through which Digital Tribalism Fuels Ethno- Religious Polarisation and Conflict in Nigeria**

Digital tribalism (the phenomenon of expressing, reinforcing, and mobilising ethnic or religious identities via social media) operates through multiple, often overlapping mechanisms that can exacerbate societal divisions. In the context of Nigeria, these mechanisms turn social media platforms into fertile ground for identity- based conflicts. The most salient pathways identified in the empirical literature include the formation of echo chambers and environments of selective exposure. Social media platforms tend to present users with content that aligns with their existing beliefs and preferences, while

filtering out opposing views. Over time, this leads to group-specific “bubbles” that reinforce in-group loyalties and biases, while minimising exposure to counter-narratives (Qaisar, Iqbal, & Mehboob, 2025). Algorithmic design, such as content recommendation systems, may further amplify this effect by prioritising posts likely to engage users, which often means emotionally provocative or identity-affirming content (Kentmen-Cin et al., 2025). In Nigeria, studies have shown that conversations on Twitter and other platforms about political or social issues often become highly polarised, especially when users cluster along ethnic or religious lines. The result is a fragmented digital public sphere, where shared facts and mutual understanding become rare, thus increasing the risk of misperceptions, hostility, and conflict that spreads beyond the social media space.

A second mechanism is the deliberate use of hate speech, ethnic/religious stereotyping, and demeaning language aimed at out-groups. The advent of annotated datasets such as HERDPHobia, focuses on online attacks against members of the Fulani community, reveals the prevalence of such content in multiple languages (Aliyu et al., 2022). This research shows that hateful or dehumanising content can spread rapidly online, especially when shared within in-group networks, normalising discrimination and hostility (Aliyu et al., 2022). Digital tribalism is not only about negative expressions, but also functions as a tool for mobilisation, group consolidation, and identity-based political communication. This is put to great negative use by political actors, interest groups, or social influencers who often exploit ethnic and religious identities in the mobilisation of supporters and funds, particularly in conflict-sensitive contexts. Social media is an effective medium for such strategies due to its anonymity, low cost, and extensive, unprecedented reach (Kentmen-Cin et al., 2025). Identity-based mobilisations can transform political competition into identity competition, where electoral or resource disputes are framed as existential struggles between ethnic or religious “communities.” In Nigeria, where the politics is seemingly about “winner takes all”, this raises the stakes of political participation and increases the risk of violence. This is also reinforced, especially where governance is weak, grievances pre-exist, and social cohesion is already fragile (as in the country). Beyond overt hateful content, digital tribalism also leverages misinformation and disinformation, false or misleading narratives designed to instil fear, resentment, or mistrust. Such content often frames other ethnic or religious groups as threats to economic survival, security, or moral order, tapping into existing historical grievances or structural inequalities (Kentmen-Cin et al., 2025). Once such narratives take root in echo chambers, they are difficult to counteract, given the lack of regulation and the speed at which they spread. In Nigeria, studies have shown that hate speech and misinformation campaigns during election cycles sow distrust, heighten inter-group suspicion, and reduce the chance of fair community-level reconciliation (Agbadu, Grimah, & Yahuza, 2025).

Nigeria, is characterised by religious pluralism, ethnic diversity, greed, historical grievances, and socio-economic inequalities, such mechanisms outlined transform online platforms into accelerants of social division. When identity-based online polarisation intersects with resource competition, weak governance, and socio-economic fragility, the risk of violent conflict or community breakdown increases significantly. Thus, understanding digital tribalism’s mechanisms is not only of academic interest but is critical for designing interventions. Policies promoting digital literacy, proactive content moderation, counter-speech, inter-group dialogue, and regulation of social media platforms are no longer optional; they are essential to prevent a deepening of social divides and to protect national cohesion. Finally, digital tribalism is structurally continuously enabled due to the

near absence of effective moderation, oversight, or regulation of social media content in many African countries, including Nigeria. Unlike traditional media, which are subject to licensing, editorial responsibility, and more robust accountability, social media platforms often permit anonymous or pseudonymous posting and rapid dissemination of content, as long as it makes for content and data flow. In fact, many content creators and influencers purposely create and spread hateful and harmful content to garner comments, followership and dollar reward from social media operators. This structural weakness not only lowers the barriers for the spread of hate speech, propaganda, and identity-based agitation but also creates an enabling environment in which such divisive content can proliferate.

### **Approaches to Mitigate Digital Tribalism and Foster Social Cohesion in Nigeria**

As has been established from the foregoing, the spread of digital tribalism, which is the use of social media to amplify ethnic, religious, or tribal identities often at the expense of social unity, poses serious risks to social cohesion in Nigeria. However, social media platforms have developed community standards and automated systems that are aimed at detecting and removing harmful content, including hate speech, incitement to violence, and ethnic or religious slurs. These platforms use a combination of artificial intelligence tools, user reporting systems, and content moderation teams to limit the spread of inflammatory narratives (Meta, 2025; X., 2024). In some cases, violators face suspension, content removal, or permanent bans. These measures, though valuable, remain largely reactive and insufficient in deeply polarised societies like Nigeria, where the lines between freedom of expression and hate speech are thin and frequently blurred, leading to the rapid spread of politically charged content before moderation systems can detect and intervene. Media and Information Literacy (MIL) help users to assess information, discern truth from falsehood, and resist manipulation (UNESCO, 2025). By integrating MIL into general education, citizens become better equipped to consume, share, and respond to content online thoughtfully. According to UNESCO, MIL fosters resilience against disinformation, hate speech, and divisive content across social media platforms (UNESCO, 2025). This educational approach not only builds individual critical capacity but also cultivates norms for responsible online engagement, a key step toward sustainable social cohesion. There is, therefore, the cogent need for MIL and enhanced digital citizenship education, in this case, with emphasis on Nigeria. The National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) has initiated programmes aimed at improving digital literacy among Nigerians. A renewed focus can additionally be placed on this to empower individuals to navigate digital spaces responsibly and discern misinformation.

Another strategy is targeted regulation and accountability of social media platforms. It has been argued that social media platforms must be redesigned or regulated to minimise their role as “digital battlegrounds” that amplify hate speech and tribal rhetoric (Pukallus & Arthur, 2024). This includes developing content-moderation policies sensitive to local contexts, especially in the context of Nigeria. This will ensure transparency in enforcement and holding platforms accountable for the spread of harmful content. Interestingly, global organisations have begun supporting these efforts. In 2025, under the auspices of the UNESCO and United Nations Information Centre (UNIC), Nigeria established a Media and Information Literacy Institute aimed at strengthening digital resilience against misinformation and hate speech (UNESCO, 2025; Olugbode, 2025). Beyond regulation and formal education, civil society and community-based interventions play a vital role in dealing with this menace. Pukallus & Arthur (2024) highlighted the effectiveness of combining

formal regulation with bottom-up community efforts. Civil communicative institutions, grassroots organisations, faith-based groups, and local NGOs can deploy context-aware, evidence-based counter-hate-speech interventions to challenge divisive narratives. These interventions should include public campaigns, community dialogues, inter-ethnic forums, and online/offline counter-speech, efforts that can foster inter-group understanding, empathy, and tolerance. Independent media and dedicated fact-checking organisations are also critical. Detecting, exposing, and correcting misinformation, especially hate speech or identity-based smears, limits their capacity to spread widely and incite real-world conflict (Liadi, 2024). It is also important that counter-narratives (positive messages that challenge divisive or prejudiced content) be employed to help reshape online discourse. Counter-narratives can be a more effective alternative to outright content deletion, because they serve to preserve freedom of expression while undermining hateful narratives. By promoting inclusive, respectful dialogue rather than suppression, counter-narratives can gradually shift social media cultures toward peace and tolerance.

An essential component in mitigating the negative impacts of digital tribalism lies in technological intervention. Leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning to monitor, flag, and remove harmful content such as hate speech, misinformation, and inciting rhetoric can significantly reduce online polarisation. Social media platforms, in collaboration with regulatory agencies and civil society, can develop and deploy context-sensitive algorithms capable of identifying ethnically or religiously charged language and disinformation campaigns. As an example, real-time content moderation tools can help detect divisive posts before they go viral, allowing for timely intervention and minimising societal harm (Alsagheer, Mansourifar, & Shi, 2022). Thus, emphasis must be placed on platform accountability, and this must go beyond automated moderation. There must be transparency in algorithmic decisions, clear content policies, user education, and independent oversight (Pukallus & Arthur, 2024). Without such team effort between tech firms, government regulators, and community watchdogs, digital spaces may continue to serve as incubators for tribal and religious conflict. Additionally, much of the content created by Nigerian social media users is primarily driven by the desire for high traffic and associated monetisation. As a result, some creators wittily produce controversial or harmful content to attract attention and increase revenue, further exacerbating digital tribalism and online divisions. To mitigate this, stricter enforcement of platform policies combined with digital literacy campaigns can educate users on the impact of harmful content, while incentivising creators to produce responsible and constructive material that promotes social cohesion. Thus, Nigeria's complex ethno-religious and socio-political environments demand stronger, context-specific mechanisms to complement global content policies. There is a growing need for domestic legal and policy frameworks that not only hold users and digital influencers accountable but also promote civic education, digital literacy, and proactive counter-narratives. Collaborative regulation, through partnerships between government, civil society, tech companies, and local communities, is required to balance rights with responsibilities and ensure that digital spaces are not exploited to inflame ethnic and religious divisions.

## **Conclusion**

Ethno-religious polarisation is facilitated by digital tribalism that is exacerbated by the accessibility and anonymity of social media and has lowered barriers for spreading divisive narratives, often serving as a tool for political actors to manipulate public opinion along

ethnic and religious lines. Thus, digital tribalism on social media significantly contributes to ethno-religious polarisation in Nigeria, intensifying social divisions and conflict potential. Social media platforms have thus become new frontiers where ethnic and religious identities are mobilised, often through hate speech, misinformation, and echo chambers that reinforce biases and deepen mistrust. However, the study also highlights the potential for positive interventions through digital literacy, content moderation, and peacebuilding efforts led by influencers and stakeholders. Addressing digital tribalism is therefore critical for fostering social cohesion and national unity in Nigeria's increasingly digital political landscape. In view of this, the following are recommended:

- i. Digital literacy programmes should be implemented to educate users on the impact of social media on identity formation, encouraging critical engagement rather than passive consumption of divisive content.
- ii. Social media platforms should be encouraged to promote inclusive narratives by amplifying diverse ethnic and religious voices, helping to reduce stereotype reinforcement.
- iii. There should also be the strengthening of content moderation policies that specifically target hate speech, misinformation, and echo chambers that exacerbate ethno-religious divides, through collaborations between tech companies, civil society, and government agencies.
- iv. Emphases should be placed on fostering fact-checking initiatives and rapid response teams to counter false information that fuels tensions in real-time.
- v. Peacebuilding campaigns that are led by credible influencers and community leaders on social media should be promoted to help counter divisive narratives and encourage dialogue.

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