

Article

Social Media for Conflict Escalation and De-escalation Two Sides of A Coin

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Abstract: This study examined the dual role of social media in shaping conflict dynamics, with particular emphasis on its capacity to both escalate and de-escalate conflicts. In the modern digital age, social media sites have emerged as a potent means of communication, dissemination of information as well as mobilisation. Such platforms have however been cited to have propagated misinformation, hate speech as well as escalated social tensions in various contexts. The study adopted a qualitative exploratory research design relying on secondary data sources such as scholarly literature, reports, and documented case studies. It is conducted based on the conflict escalation model by Glasl, the Resource Mobilisation Theory and the theory of conflict dynamics by Collins as a generic understanding of the development of conflicts in digital environments. As the findings show, social media is a major influence in escalation of conflicts due to speed in passing information, amplification of emotions, and mobilising masses. Meanwhile, it can also be concluded that social media can be used as a two-sided instrument in the conflict processes, and its effects mostly depend on the usage patterns, the governance frameworks, and the user behaviour. It suggests the establishment of moderate regulation measures and strategic intercessions to reduce the negative impacts and improve its efforts in advancing peace and social unity.

Keywords: *Social media, conflict escalation, conflict de-escalation, digital mobilisation, peacebuilding, communication*

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Introduction

The innovation of the towering growth of digital communication technologies has in essence altered the way social interaction, information dispersion, and collective action take place in modern communities (Bimber et al., 2012). The social media sites have been one of these technologies that have become effective means of communication in real time, connection to all other parts of the world, and mobilisation on a large scale (Anduiza et al., 2014). These platforms offer a lot of opportunities of engagement and participation, but they also have complex challenges especially as far as conflict dynamics are concerned (Sacco & Bossio, 2015).

Social media has recently come to be linked with the intensification as well as reduction in conflicts in various socio-political settings. On the one hand, it makes it very easy to exchange information, misinformation, hate speech, and polarising stories, which can fuel tensions and lead to the eruption of violence (Ahmad, 2025). The social media amplifying of emotions, strengthening of groups (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2015).

Social media on the other hand also proves to be a platform of dialogue, resolution of conflicts and peacebuilding (Bello, 2022; Baytiyeh, 2019). It allows communication between geographical and political borders, promotes understanding and encourages grassroots peace efforts. As an example, the idea of online campaigns encouraging dialogue and reconciliation has shown the possibility of the social media to decrease the tensions and establish bridges between opposing groups (ElTarabishi & Galal, 2023).

This duality in relation to social media in conflict processes can be explained using theoretical frameworks like Resource Mobilisation Theory, which highlights how networks and resources can help with collective action (Jenkins, 1963), and conflict escalation theories like the one introduced by Glasl, which focuses on the stages in which conflicts escalate (Bösch, 2017). Also, the theory of conflict dynamics developed by Collins focuses on the emotional energy and group solidarity as the factors that perpetuate and intensify conflicts (Collins, 2012; Collins, 2022). Those frameworks offer a holistic prism according to which the role of social media in the escalation of a conflict and its de-escalation can be examined.

Although the literature on the social media and conflict is increasing, there is still need to have a more integrated understanding of the dual nature of social media as both a conflict escalation and conflict de-

escalation tool. Most of the available literature is inclined towards either the negative or the positive side of social media and has not managed to capture the full picture of its effects.

Consequently, this paper aims to discuss the use of social media as a two-sided instrument of conflict dynamics and how it has led to the development of conflicts and also to the de-escalation of conflicts. The combination of the theoretical knowledge and empirical findings is expected to help the study to be more balanced and holistic in how it will perceive the connection between social media and conflict in modern society.

Literature Review

The social media and conflict interconnection has been a subject of growing academic interest in recent years, especially due to the circumstances of digital transformation and global interrelations. The social media platforms have been regarded as the centre-stage of communication, mobilisation, and formation of social and political stories. Consequently, their contribution to the increase and reduction of conflicts has become a critical area of research of investigation.

There is a large body of literature that puts special emphasis on the presence of social media in the escalation of conflicts. Research has indicated that digital platforms facilitate quick distribution of information, in most cases, without due confirmation, and thus leading to misinformation and disinformation. As Jost et al. (2018) say, social media positively affects political mobilisation because it increases the intensity of emotions, strengthens group identities, and makes it easier to act. Equally, Gerber & Congyu (2017) believes that the social media has contributed largely to the eruption and dissemination of civil unrests in many parts of the world including the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. The Arab spring and other movements of mass protests show that the online networks do have the capacity to convert digital action to physical action.

Moreover, the social media has been linked to the propagation of hate speech, polarising content, which may further deepen social divisions and lead to the escalation of conflict. According to research, such a level of anonymity and availability of these platforms helps people and groups to spread inflammatory messages capable of generating hostility and violence (Mathew et al., 2019; Shu et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2017). In this regard, social media does not only serve as a communication tool, but it is also a tool of perception, behaviour and mobilisation of conflict actors.

Nevertheless, the literature acknowledges the positive role of social media in de-escalation of conflicts and peacebuilding. Gilboa et al., (2016) points out that media, such as social media, can be used as an arena of discussion, negotiation, and conflict resolution. Social media can be used to make the

communication between the conflicting groups simpler, make them empathize with one another, and reconcile because it allows people to communicate directly. Peace movements and online campaigns have shown the ability of the online platform to promote cooperation and understanding between cultures and political boundaries.

Moreover, the governments, non-governmental organisations and non-governmental actors are using social media to spread messages of peace, addressing misinformation, and enhancing social cohesiveness. These attempts underline the duality of the social media as the possible conflict agitator and as the means to resolve it. According to Powers and O'Loughlin (2015), the effects that social media has on conflict dynamics can be strongly influenced by the context of its application and the motives of people who use it.

In theoretical terms, the Resource Mobilisation Theory is a convenient approach to the concept of the utilisation of social media in the collective action facilitation by offering access to networks, resources, and organisational capacity (Schlagwein Hu et al., 2017). On the same note, Glasl conflict escalation model provides an understanding of how different conflicts escalate in stages that are identifiable, and that online communication can speed up their escalations (Jordan, 2015). The theory of conflict dynamics by Collins also expounds on the relationship between emotional energy and solidarity of the group in the persistence and escalation of conflicts (Collins, 2012).

Regardless of this input, the current literature frequently considers social media either as a conflict source or a peacebuilding source without appreciating the two aspects as one analytical unit. The gap still remains to be filled with studies that discuss the dual role of social media in conflict dynamics in a more comprehensive way.

This research is, therefore, aimed at filling this gap by offering a thorough examination of social media as a conflict escalation and a conflict de-escalation tool and giving a balanced view of the role played by social media in modern society.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper uses the qualitative research design that employs an exploratory research methodology to investigate the two-sided nature of social media in escalating and de-escalating conflicts. The exploratory type of design fits well especially in exploring complex and dynamic phenomena like digital communication and conflict process where the current body of knowledge is disjointed.

Data Sources

The study relied on secondary data sources, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, policy reports, and documented case studies regarding the topic of social media and conflict. The choice of these sources was informed by the need to have a holistic view of how social media affects conflict processes in various situations.

Moreover, there were real-life examples, documented, like protest movements and peace efforts with the help of the social media, which were included to support the analysis and offer the empirical basis.

Data Collection Strategy

The collection of data was carried out based on the systematic review of the necessary material found in academic databases, such as Google Scholar, Research Gate, and institutional repositories. Relevant studies were located with the help of such keywords as social media, conflict escalation, conflict de-escalation, digital mobilisation, and online activism.

Only the sources that were directly connected to the study goals and which reported in credible academic sources were included to the analysis.

Analytical Framework

Three theoretical frameworks were used to analyse the data:

The Conflict Escalation Model based on Glasl was utilized to describe the way the conflict is formed and evolves in stages.

The Resource Mobilisation Theory was used to comprehend the way the social media promotes collective action and mobilisation.

The analysis of the Theory of Conflict Dynamics formulated by Collins was applied in order to understand how emotional energy and group solidarity maintained conflict.

These frames presented an ordered prism through which the social media-conflict process interrelation can be seen.

Data Analysis

The qualitative content analysis was used to study the patterns, themes and connections in the chosen literature. The information related was organised in form of key themes which included:

The problem of social media as a source of conflict intensification.

The social media as conflict de-escalation tool.

Digital mobilisation mechanisms.

The destiny of conflict as a product of communication.

Such thematic organisation made it possible to compare the good and bad roles of social media.

Validity and Reliability

In order to guarantee the validity of the findings, the study was based on a variety of sources of information and cross-referenced data in other studies. The fact that the theoretical frameworks were used also enhanced the rigour of the research analytically.

Ethical Considerations

The work is completely based on secondary data and thus, no direct contact to human subjects was made. All the references were referenced in order to maintain scholarly integrity and prevent plagiarism.

Results

This part shows the analytical results of the research according to the thematic analysis of the available literature and recorded cases. The discussion canters on the duality of the social media in conflict dynamics, which emphasizes the ability of the media to amplify as well as dampen conflict.

1. Social Media as a Driver of Conflict Escalation of Conflict.

The analysis shows that the social media has a major role in enhancing the process of escalation of conflicts in a number of ways. Among the most notable ones, one can mention the rapid information spread, which is frequently unverified. This helps propagate misinformation, rumours, and emotionally-charged stories that lead to escalation of tensions among people and groups.

2. Phases of Digital Age Conflict Explosion.

By using the conflict escalation model developed by Glasl, it is analysed that social media enhances the speed at which various conflict stages are traversed.

At initial levels of disagreements, they are manifested via online debates and discussions. But these encounters usually develop into antagonistic confrontations where personal insults and extreme rhetoric are the order of the day.

As the battle continues, the communication becomes action-based, with the involvement of synchronized campaigns, internet harassment, and mobilisation of the people. In the later stages, communication between dividends of the digital into real-life fights, revealing the high potential of online communication and offline results.

This observation implies that social media is not just a mirror of conflict but it actively influences its course and strength.

Moreover, social networks allow enhancing group identity and polarisation. Users also focus on similar communities and decide to strengthen their beliefs and antagonized another group. The process is one of the causes of echo chambers where opposing views are pushed aside, a factor that further augments the chances of challenging.

The other important discovery is the mobilisation of social media. Protests, demonstrations and collective actions can be organised on a scale and speed never before possible before using the digital platforms. The international campaigns in the Arab Spring and the recent protests in China (EndSARS) show how the online communication can be transformed into the offline conflict on the large scale.

Furthermore, social media anonymity lowers the responsibility, and it allows people to spread hate speech and inflammatory messages. This adds to the deterioration of the conflict as it arouses emotional responses and fosters violence.

3. The uses of Social Media in De-escalation of the Conflict.

Although the social media has led to the escalation of conflicts, the analysis also provides the potential of the social media as a conflict de-escalator. Online platforms are able to host a discussion between conflicting parties, which might otherwise be unfeasible through other platforms.

Peace campaigns, reconciliation and understanding with each other have been promoted using social media. An example of this is the grassroots and online campaigns that have shown the effectiveness of online communication in diminishing aggressiveness and developing trust among warring groups.

In addition, the social media allows sharing of the real information, which can be used to defy the misinformation and to minimize panic or fear in conflict situations. It can be used to create a platform to resolve conflicts, carry out awareness, and peace building activities when appropriately used.

4. The two faces of the social media in conflict dynamics.

This research paper confirms that social media is a two-sided sword to conflict processes. Its effects are not necessarily good or bad but depends on the manner of its utilization.

On the one hand, it may exacerbate the conflict through the dissemination of misinformation, agitation of emotions, and mobilisation of people towards conflict. Conversely, it may also back the de-escalation, as it encourages dialogue, understanding, and cooperation.

This duality re-affirms the need to govern, regulate and use social media responsibly in determining the role of social media in society.

Discussion

The paper has explored the two-sided nature of social media in influencing the conflict dynamics especially looking at its ability to both intensify conflicts and also de-escalate conflicts. The results prove that the social media works as a potent and manifold working tool the effect of which can be more or less influenced by the use trends, user behaviour, and macro-socio-political environment.

The findings reflect that social media plays a significant role in escalating the conflict by means of the quick spread of information, amplification of emotions, and polarisation of groups. This is consistent with the results of Jost et al. (2018), who state that digital platforms contribute to the improvement of collective action, as group identity is strengthened, and emotional reactions are aggravated. Equally, the identified impact of misinformation and unverified content in heightening tensions can be corroborated by earlier studies that pointed to the hazards that unregulated information streams have in digital space (Gerber, 2017).

Moreover, the paper ascertains that social media is used to mobilise people and groups of people in large numbers so that people can carry out protests and other collective activities with speed never seen before. This result is aligned with the Resource Mobilisation Theory that highlights the role of networks and communication channels in facilitating social movements (Golhasani, 2016). In this regard, social media performs the role of an essential tool that reduces barriers to entry and increases the breadth of mobilisation activities.

Using the conflict escalation model by Glasl further shows that social media has a tendency of speeding up the conflict escalation through the phases. Online communication tends to shift to conflict and then hate in a remarkably short time, eliminating chances to engage in fruitful conversation. This helps prove that digital communication space can worsen conflict through the time needed to go through it in the most saturating situations and through the intensification of confrontational behaviours (Jordan, 2015). Simultaneously, the results reveal the positive potential of the social media in de-escalating conflicts. The fact that communication between dividends can be made through digital platforms can confirm the opinion that media can become a device of dialogue and conflict resolution (Gilboa, 2016). Peace campaigns and online reconciliation efforts prove that even social media can be used to establish the understanding and decrease the tensions.

Moreover, the results are in line with the theory of conflict dynamics proposed by Collins, which puts emotional energy and group solidarity in the context of continuing the conflict (Collins, 2012). These

processes are exaggerated through social media that creates the circumstances in which emotions are made stronger and the boundaries between groups are strengthened. Nevertheless, these very mechanisms may be turned into something good in case they are applied to facilitate collaboration and mutual understanding.

In general, the study would add to the existing literature by giving a more balanced way of viewing the role of social media in conflict processes. Instead of assuming that social media is either inherently bad or good, the results revealed that its effects depend on how it is used, regulated and whose hands it is used.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the dualism of the social media in conflict dynamics and has brought out the ability of social media to act as a catalyst to conflict escalation and a defused to conflict de-escalation. The results reveal that the social media has a great impact on the course of conflicts due to its speedy information sharing, emotional expression, and mass mobilisation. Concurrently, it is also an avenue of dialogue, reconciliation and peacebuilding.

The discussion has established that social media is not necessarily a conflict source, but a potent tool that will have an influence depending on the way it is exploited. In its irresponsible context, it may only escalate tensions, disseminate fake news, and polarise further. On the other hand, when applied in terms of strategies and ethics, it may foster empathy, decrease aggression and help to resolve conflicts.

On the whole, the study is a valuable addition to the existing knowledge base of the topic as it provides the readers with a fair representation of the role of social media in modern conflict processes highlighting the dual nature of such media as a threat and an opportunity.

Implications

This research study has significant implications on policymakers, social media businesses and the civil society actors. It is evident that there is a necessity to come up with well-balanced regulatory forms that would deal with the negative impact of social media without interfering with the freedom of expression. Governments ought to focus on measures that fight misinformation, control hate speech and encourage responsible digital communication.

The social media platforms play a crucial role in the moderation of content as well as enhancing transparency in algorithms and curbing the dissemination of harmful information. Simultaneously, the civil society organisations must use social media as a peacebuilding instrument by encouraging dialogue, tolerance, and conflict resolution programs.

These stakeholders need to work well together so that social media can make a positive contribution towards social stability but not contribute towards conflict.

Future Research and Limitations

This study has some limitations in spite of the contributions it offers. The use of secondary data can limit the richness of empirical enlightenment and the exploratory character of research prevents the possibility to extrapolate the results to all settings.

In the future, the relationship between social media and conflict should be researched using an empirical method, such as quantitative and mixed-method researches. The comparative analysis of various areas and types of conflict can also give further information on the differences in context.

Recommendations

According to the research results of this paper, the stakeholders can be encouraged to take a proactive approach toward regulating the role of social media in the conflict dynamics. This involves enhancing digital literacy of users, having effective content moderation plans and encouraging users to use social media to facilitate peacebuilding efforts.

Moreover, governments must also set legal boundaries that would deal with the abuse of social media without jeopardizing the fundamental rights. The promotion of responsible usage and the establishment of the culture of positive communication is an important measure to reduce the harm related to the use of social media and increase its possibilities to de-escalate conflicts.

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