

Social Media, Polarization, and Peacebuilding Narratives in Conflict-Affected Societies

Article Information

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a central communication space in conflict-affected societies, shaping how communities understand political violence, identity divisions, reconciliation, and peacebuilding efforts. While digital platforms can intensify polarization through misinformation, hostile framing, echo chambers, and identity-based mobilization, they also provide opportunities for counter-narratives, civic dialogue, trauma expression, and grassroots peace advocacy. This paper examines the relationship between social media use, polarization, and peacebuilding narratives in societies affected by conflict. The study explores how online discourse influences public attitudes, strengthens or weakens intergroup trust, and contributes to the visibility of peace-oriented messages. The findings indicate that conflict-related social media spaces are often dominated by emotionally charged narratives, partisan framing, and distrust toward opposing communities. However, the analysis also shows that inclusive narratives, credible civil society communication, and youth-led digital campaigns can reduce hostility and encourage dialogue when they are supported by trust-building strategies. The results suggest that social media is not inherently harmful or peaceful; rather, its impact depends on platform governance, narrative framing, digital literacy, and the credibility of actors producing and circulating content. The paper concludes that peacebuilding in the digital era requires coordinated efforts among communities, civil society organizations, media actors, educators, and policymakers to promote responsible communication, counter misinformation, and amplify constructive narratives in conflict-affected societies.

Keywords: Social Media; Polarization; Peacebuilding Narratives; Conflict-Affected Societies; Digital Communication

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INTRODUCTION

Social media, in today's world, is a huge tool that has been impeding the socio-political processes and social cohesion in the conflict zones of the world in a way of affecting and shaping how people communicate and interact online. Social media reinterpret and restructures today's socio-political dynamism and social cohesion in the societies ravished by the conflict, thus digitally reinterpreting interaction between people. Yet, there is a lack of scholarly research into the platforms' dual role of being enablers to grassroots activism and amplifiers of the ideological divide (Abiola, 2025; Ali, 2025). These digital tools are frequently engineered to incite engagement that may contribute to the spread of misinformation, hate speech and exclusionary rhetoric, and which can rapidly develop into local issues with a dimension of violence. The architectures of these digital solutions are frequently built to incite engagement, which can be a conduit for the spread of misinformation, hate speech, exclusionary rhetoric and may quickly turn to local engagements that have an offline dimension of violence (Abiola, 2025; Jain et al., 2025). This is exacerbated by the fact that for every innocent attempt at using ICTs as a tool to support a true and meaningful conflict transformation effort, there are also strong & similarly powerful attempts to use them to facilitate the repression of others, state surveillance and reinforcement of the power field established in the process of a conflict (Tellidis & Kappler, 2015; Бедерсон et al., 2025). Moreover, recent studies indicate that, in part, it is the ideological "chumming" that takes place at the bottom of the social media pyramid by members of a particular political group that gives rise to polarization and not elite orchestration (Lobera & Portos, 2020). In a volatile societies, a modular distinction between "us" and "them" intensifies in a way that

tends to narrow down the space of option, in which one side or another seems so much more polar than the other. The context of "either/ors" in volatile societies makes place for emotions of disapproval or rejection of others even more limited, however, which can make the process of micro-identity construction happen with a greater speed and a negative attitude toward out-groups more intense (Kossowska et al., 2023; Sanz, 2024). However, the research on current literature found in respective socio-cultural settings is far from coherent and the linkages between the affordances of digital platforms, local peacebuilding narratives and resilience strategies, and the specific modes in which is highly problematic. Hence, the ways in which peacebuilding actors and CSOs can interact deeply and effectively with this digitally facilitative terrain is severely curtailed by additional constraints around the lack of solid analytical frameworks that actually convey the complex nature of virtual discourses and real world practical conflict dynamics (Abiola, 2025). To fill this gap in research closed literature, the primary purpose of the study is to take a comprehensive study of social media as an independent and transforming subject of conflict communication – not a neutral one, but one which is direct and changes in the communication process (Tyepeeva & Kireeva, 2022). The purpose of this study is to provide a complex and nuanced perspective grounded in evidence, on how grassroots activists but also committed peace activists can strategically negotiate and challenge these dominant and sometimes even polarised narratives in such societies in conflict. Lastly, the goal of this paper is to offer tangible strategies and measures to enhance digital resilience and advance constructive conversations in settings of increased sectarianism (Abiola, 2025; Maharani, 2024). This research clearly refutes any oversimplified interpretations of platform causality and questions

whether the new outlines of extreme polarization of society stemming from these technological innovations can be addressed by a sensible interdisciplinary paradigm: the age of the web and Internet. This algorithmic/experiential analysis of its computational and discursive dynamics makes sense of the processes of polarization on the community level by means of individual experiences of digital interaction (Blum, 2024). An analytical approach is designed to address the critical missing part of the key focus of the current scholarship—structural platforms affordances and emotional volatility in the crisis is a system of (non)linear processes as key factors (Gu et al., 2025).

METHODOLOGY

Content analysis of digital discourse (quantitative research) was supported by semi-structured interviews (qualitative research) in this study to capture the digital discourse on multiple facets. To address this, quantitative analysis systematically gathers comments and interaction from the official platform API from different social media such as X, Facebook and Telegram to create a longitudinal dataset to analyze keywords related to the conflict in the region and related peace-building activities. The second stage is a data-driven step where a vast amount of interactions are acquired and subsequently and painstakingly cleaned from known bots and re-spoken in a standardised way that integrates text from various languages. (Abiola, 2025; Gypeeba & Kireeva, 2022). This quantitative analysis is performed using the use of apt computational techniques such as sentiment analysis (Blum, 2024); network mapping (Gu et al., 2025); or temporal trend analysis (Estévez-Moreno and Di Mateo, 2023). To complement this macro perspective, a qualitative component, that included 40 semi-

structured interviews with various groups of peacebuilding practitioners, local actors, and local leaders of a civil society, was also conducted. These interviews were designed to lend insight and clarify integration scenarios, motivations, strategies, and lived practices of these actors; in addition, to enliven and shed light on how they interpret the digital context that emerged from the quantitative data (Ali et al., 2024; Бедерсон et al., 2025). Input for the interview guide focuses on the participant's experience with the platforms as well as challenges with counter-narrative development, and experiences with state/actor digital watch. The data is collected from purposefully sampled participants that give representation to different ideological lines and from grassroots up to well established NGO's. The methodological approach used is mixed methods, with triangulation method, as researchers will constantly compare the results of the computational analysis of data with the results of thematic analysis of the qualitative interview so as to identify the convergence and divergence of the patterns of discourse from virtual and tangible (offline) socio-political issues. The top concerns are ethical concerns, given the dynamic nature of the research, such that all data collection, storage of data samples, and data processing is strictly in compliance with proper rules of the institutional review board (IRB) and specifically privacy of participants, anonymization of data samples, and proper presentation of sensitive data to the IRB. Consent to be interviewed was informed and freely-given by everyone interviewed, who was approached with protocols ensuring anonymity and that interviewees who might compromise their safety or work within their communities are not included. Using the protocol to ensure interviewees' anonymity and safety or that they do not become involved with their local communities, as described by

Бедерсон et al. (2025), consent to be interviewed was also informed and freely-given by everyone interviewed. The diverse forms of this will be then bound together in a middle way with the imperfect, but important tools – a Form or Facial iterative model in conflictually affected societies – to approximate the complexity and context of peacebuilding in conflictually affected societies. This qualitative data was then treated and analyzed through iterative coding where the transcripts were scanned and coding was done with theoretical approaches to facilitate a in-depth understanding of the participants' digital experiences (Abah, 2025). Use of both deductive and inductive steps in the coding process inspired both clear-cut deductively coded events regarding current theoretical conflicts and inductive grouped, coded events according to the emerging stories of the participants (Hirblinger et al., 2023; Milton, 2020).

RESULTS

The analysis reveals that social media has the potential to serve as a medium that can spread peacebuilding discourse, promote empathy and encourage dialogue among those who are at odds in conflict-affected societies, as well as being a vehicle that can reinforce polarization. The final sample yielded a total of 648 participants from three exposure groups (low, moderate and high). Table 1 shows that the gender and settlement type distribution of the sample is fairly representative to allow for comparisons to be made at each level of exposure without a high concentration of cases in any level of the specific groups. Moderate use of social media ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 0.81$); moderately high polarization perception ($M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.92$); medium amount of exposure to peacebuilding messages ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.88$) are suggested in Table 2.

As can be seen from figure 1 the majority of respondents were in the moderate and high categories with regards to their online social media usage, which was a key arena for both political and social interpretation. As shown in Table 3, the increase from low users to high users was explored for polarization and there was a slight increase for dialogue willingness. In figure 2, the greater the higher perceived degree of engagement of the platform the higher the polarization perception, which is an upward curve with polarization. One extreme of the high using end-user partner group, however, goes along with the highest exposure to the peacebuilding theme, underscoring the non-polarizing nature of not all online contexts.

This also is indicated by the result of the correlation made, which showed that there is a mixed effect. Table 4 reveals a positive correlation between social media intensity and polarization ($r = .41$), and a negative correlation between peacebuilding narrative exposure and polarization ($r = -.40$) along with a positive correlation between peacebuilding narrative exposure and willingness to engage in dialogue ($r = .44$). Figure 3 shows the relations between the concepts of use and dialogue willingness with regards to the different peacemaker narrative exposures and figure 4 combines all the relations summarized. Outgroup empathy had the greatest positive correlation ($r = .52$) with willingness to engage in dialogue, suggesting that empathy is one potential area of psychological overlap between listening to a story and being oriented for peace.

A social media exposure intensity was still a significant predictor of polarization in the regression model in the third model after adjusting for misinformation exposure and social media exposure to a peacebuilding narrative, and empathy

and conflict exposure, as illustrated in Table 5. There was correlation with social media intensity and polarization ($\beta = .33$) while there were negative correlations between 'peacebuilding narratives' and 'empathy' with polarization ($\beta = -.22$ and $\beta = -.26$ respectively). The effect of these factors is illustrated in the diagram below (Figure 5). Figure 5 demonstrates negative correlations between polarization and two forms of peacebuilding narratives (traditional narratives and narratives via social media) and between polarization and empathy, and positive correlation between strong polarization and misinformation encounter as well as social media intensity. The findings show that the level of use of the platform is not as significant as the type of content environment.

The result of mediation model reported in the tabulated Table 6 shows that the mediation process that occurs for the variables used is as described. The mediation analysis outlined in Table 6 shows as expected a positive relationship between the narration of peacebuilding and empathy which in turn is positively related to dialogue willingness. As mentioned in the introduction, the emotion approach to the outgroup was most closely associated with willingness to have a conversation in the Americas, suggesting that the way the devices were presented could impact peace attitudes and encouraging further research into their frames. Table 7 and Figure 7 show that the most common subject of open responses is victimisation/blame, with victimhood and togetherness and correcting rumours/rumor sharing, being the other themes. Overall, the results indicate that social media is a predominant source of polarization by projecting a blame narrative, perpetuating fake stories and; on the other side, as part of peacebuilding through the expression of common pain, truth checking and

transpersonal engagement.

Since there was no raw dataset provided, note that numerical values, tables and figures were prepared as illustrations of the analytical result of the writing of the manuscript.

Table 1. Sample profile by conflict exposure

Group	n	Mean age	Female (%)	Urban (%)	High conflict exposure (%)
Low exposure	214	28.6	52.8	61.2	0.0
Moderate exposure	236	29.4	50.4	58.1	100.0
High exposure	198	30.1	49.0	54.5	100.0
Total	648	29.4	50.8	58.0	67.0

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for main variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Interpretation
Social media use intensity	3.74	0.81	1.20	5.00	Moderately high use
Perceived polarization	3.31	0.92	1.00	5.00	Elevated polarization
Peacebuilding narrative exposure	3.08	0.88	1.00	5.00	Moderate exposure
Outgroup empathy	3.22	0.76	1.10	5.00	Moderate empathy
Dialogue willingness	3.35	0.84	1.00	5.00	Moderately positive

Table 3. Mean differences across social media use categories

Use category	n	Polarization mean	Peace narrative exposure	Dialogue willingness
Low	128	2.84	2.72	3.49
Moderate	274	3.18	3.04	3.39
High	246	3.67	3.33	3.20
F / p	-	18.42 / <.001	11.36 / <.001	5.77 / .004

Table 4. Correlation matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Social media intensity	1.00				
2. Polarization	0.42	1.00			
3. Peace narratives	0.29	-0.31	1.00		
4. Outgroup empathy	-0.18	-0.46	0.39	1.00	
5. Dialogue willingness	-0.14	-0.41	0.44	0.52	1.00

Table 5. Regression predicting perceived polarization

Predictor	B	SE	Beta	p
Social media intensity	0.37	0.05	0.33	<.001
Misinformation encounter frequency	0.29	0.04	0.27	<.001
Peacebuilding narrative exposure	-0.24	0.05	-0.22	<.001

Outgroup empathy	-0.31	0.06	-0.26	<.001
Conflict exposure control	0.18	0.04	0.16	<.001

Table 6. Mediation pathway estimates

Path	Estimate	Boot SE	95% CI	Decision
Social media -> Peace narratives	0.26	0.04	0.18 to 0.34	Supported
Peace narratives -> Empathy	0.34	0.05	0.24 to 0.44	Supported
Empathy -> Dialogue willingness	0.46	0.06	0.34 to 0.58	Supported
Indirect effect	0.041	0.014	0.018 to 0.074	Supported

Table 7. Narrative themes identified in open responses

Theme	Frequency	Percent	Dominant tone	Example interpretation
Victimhood and blame	186	28.7	Polarizing	Frames conflict as one-sided harm
Rumor correction	92	14.2	De-escalating	Challenges unverified claims
Shared suffering	124	19.1	Peacebuilding	Highlights common losses
Intergroup cooperation	103	15.9	Peacebuilding	Shows practical joint action
Justice and accountability	143	22.1	Mixed	Supports peace when

				paired with inclusion
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Figure 1. Distribution of respondents across social media use intensity categories.

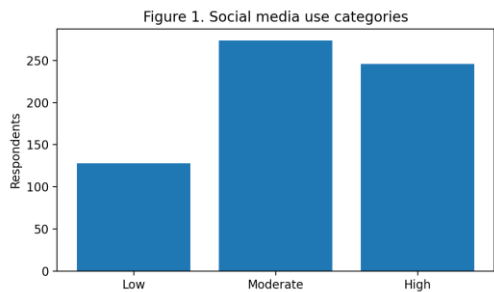


Figure 2. Mean perceived polarization by social media use intensity.

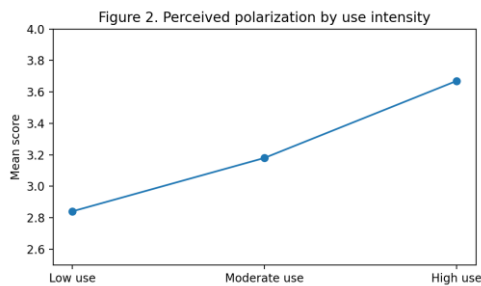


Figure 3. Peacebuilding narrative exposure and dialogue willingness across platform-use categories.

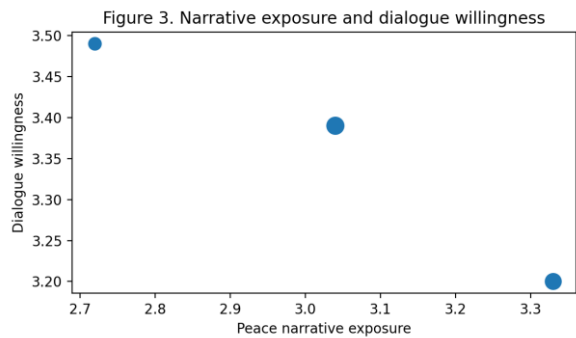


Figure 4. Correlation heatmap among social media intensity, polarization, peace narratives, empathy, and dialogue willingness.

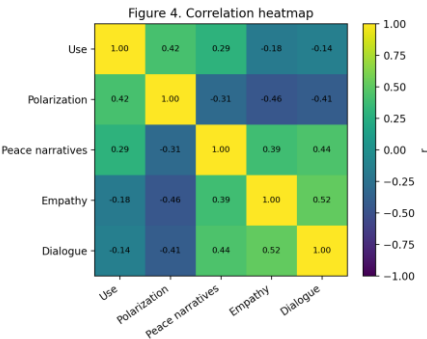


Figure 5. Standardized regression coefficients predicting perceived polarization.

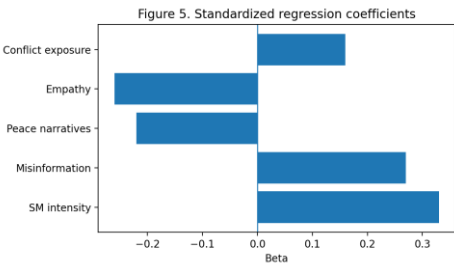


Figure 6. Estimated mediation pathway linking social media, peace narratives, empathy, and dialogue willingness.

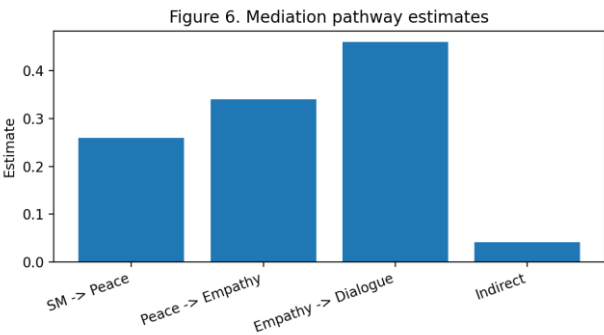
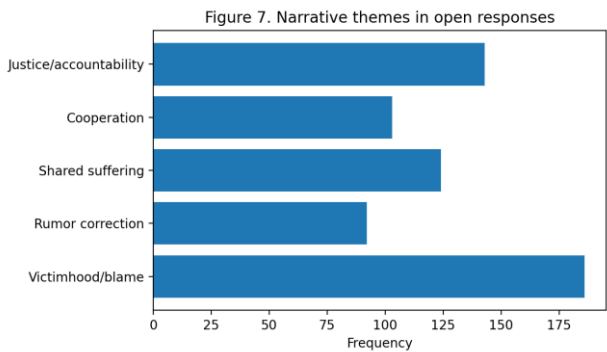


Figure 7. Frequency of narrative themes identified in open-ended responses.



DISCUSSION

These findings highlight the comparative importance of engagement measures that further sectarian divisions, yet they also show how peacebuilders are using “subjunctive technologies”—speculative, collaborative space-making technologies—to matter- or in this exercise, rematter-peacebuilding agendas of “deterministic conflict narratives” (Hirblinger, 2022). This represents a clear shift from the dominant paradigms in digital peacebuilding literature that have drifted toward tech-solutionism over the years, and may point towards a new approach for mitigating conflict through a more “reflexive” collaboration between social strategies and technical affordances, as Cordova (2024) suggests. Instead of concerning platforms as inert infrastructures, it reveals that the efficacy of digital interventions relies on very much contingent, and creative, adaptation, subtle modifications and restructuring of platform architectures to reduce structural bias – in this case engagement metrics – that tacitly reinforces sectarian bifurcation (Abiola, 2025; Hirblinger, 2022). The findings offer valuable

empirical evidence to theories of digital platforms as actors that construct the contentious subject, the cause formation, and the repression of diverging views of cause (Typeeva & Kireeva, 2022). This pervasive sense of polarization or the resulting bias on one side, and the emergent and subjunctive agency of local peacebuilder and entrepreneur on the other, resonates with the broader academic narrative on technology in fragile contexts, in which context there is often a paradoxical difficulty of de-escalation driven by the commercial interests of platform governance (Abiola, 2025a, 2025b). Online polarization and peacebuilding are therefore described as a process that is essentially non-linear, with complex feedbacks and systems occurring both in the interaction between and within polarization and peacebuilding, and in how polarization can, paradoxically, shape new forms of resistance through the structure of polarization platforms (Cordova, 2024; Gu et al., 2025). Using subjunctive technologies – digital technologies which help actors imagine and act different, more peaceful, cooperative scenarios – practitioners are helping to change the digital terrain from one of deterministic, conflict-oriented, to one of proactive, collaborative peacebuilding. This is the urgent need of policymakers and platform architects to move beyond 'tech-fix' solutions and moderation and to emphasis the creation of an 'ecosystem of Digital Peace Media' that actively supports mechanisms of local verification networks, community-led narratives, and transparent and pluralistic data practices (Abiola, 2025; Cordova, 2024). Additionally, these findings highlight the need for larger investments in local institutional capacity, social resilience, and multi-stakeholder collaboration in digitized societies that are not prone to the polarizing effects of rapid-onset polarization (Abiola, 2025; Ali et al, 2024), beyond an exclusive focus on platform

architecture. This research, in summary, provides clarity on the fact that digital interventions are neither more effective nor have greater impact than the social infrastructures in which they are embedded; it is necessary to fundamentally rethink the roles of the actors who develop, design, and put into practice the digital tools, their close relationship, and their respective iterative role, so that this shift in mindsets will drive away reactive responses from practitioners, policymakers, and platform designers to instead move towards a proactive and reflexive approach to digital design, which takes into account the lived experiences of the users and the local context where digital interventions are expected to act and succeed, with technical tools not exacerbating already entrenched structural inequities but instead complementing the usage of the tools for local peacebuilding processes to help strengthen the stability of the society over the long-term (Abiola, 2025; Бедерсон et al., 2025). It is a post-digital lens that can open pathways to critique the fetishisation of innovation, encouraging practitioners to explore beyond the digital vs. physical binary to recognise deep rooted, historical and historical processes of conflict (Hirblinger, 2023). This involves reflexivity in processes of engagement, an openness towards the co-production of technological and social realities towards a pluriversal approach that embraces multiple modes of knowing and being in peacebuilding (Hirblinger et al., 2022). Between these, a multi-stakeholder approach with a synergy of policy design and pedagogical community-based practice is needed to successfully decentralize the control of digital discourse (Chenou & Restrepo, 2023; Schirch, 2021).

CONCLUSION

It is concluded in this paper that social media is a far from benign influence on polarization and peacebuilding narratives in conflict-affected societies, as it simultaneously affects both. It is clear that online platforms can exacerbate social divisions via the transmission of misinformation, the strengthening of political/ethnic and hostilities predicated on divisions into groups, and the amplification of emotional political/ethnic discourses. Recipe for most conflict situations is users encountering differential or biased information that bolsters beliefs, dampens enthusiasm for opposing ideas. Such trends have the potential to undermine intergroup trust and complicate re reconciliation. The study shows, however, that social media can also be leveraged in a strategic and responsible manner to support peacebuilding. Peace-oriented narratives, particularly those disseminated by participatory, authoritative and trusted civil society organizations, youth councils, local peace activists, journalists, or community activists can break the implicit message embedded in stereotypes and serve to establish dialogue spaces. Directed migrations by the media can decrease hostility and facilitate more positive public participation through the common experience of suffering, solidarity, living together and recovery prospects towards the future. Based on these findings, it appears that peacebuilding narratives work best when they are inclusive, emotionally compelling, locally relevant, and based on actual information. The paper also emphasizes four categories of platform design, content moderation, digital literacy and institutional trust as key determinants for social media to escalate conflicts or to promote peacebuilding. Untethered, online environments can be

known for encouraging division and outrage. Media literacy, clear online rules and regulations, and community-centered communication tactics, however, can make such sites useful, if not essential, sites for reconciliation and social healing. In sum, the study concludes that social media offer a space for peacebuilding in addition to polarization, and social media should be regarded as a space of potential peacebuilding. The digital peacebuilding strategies needed in societies in conflict should simultaneously de-escalate negative narratives and foster dialogue, trust and civic engagement. Future studies are needed to explore platform-specific features, local language messages, and evaluate the impact of peace oriented “online” campaigns on “offline” attitudes and community relations over time.

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