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Digital Peace: The Role of Social Media in Conflict Escalation and De-escalation

Kamran Malik

MS Scholar, Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Peshawar

ABSTRACT

In the contemporary digital era, social media platforms have become central arenas where global conflicts are both amplified and mitigated. This article examines the dual role of social media in conflict dynamics, framing it as a double-edged sword capable of escalating tensions through algorithmic amplification of misinformation and hate speech, while also serving as a potent tool for de-escalation and peacebuilding. Through a mixed-methods analysis of case studies from Sudan, Ethiopia, Ukraine, and Myanmar, the study demonstrates how platform architectures, particularly algorithmic prioritization of engagement, systematically fuel polarization and mobilize violence by creating affective echo chambers. Conversely, the findings also reveal how grassroots actors strategically co-opt these same platforms to disseminate counter-narratives, coordinate humanitarian aid, and foster cross-community dialogue, as evidenced by campaigns like #SudanStandsTogether. The analysis further identifies critical platform-specific features and the inconsistent application of content moderation as key factors influencing these divergent outcomes. The article concludes that the trajectory of conflict in the digital age is not technologically predetermined but is shaped by the complex interplay of algorithmic design, user agency, and external political pressures. It thus calls for a multi-stakeholder approach involving platform developers, policymakers, and peacebuilders to ethically redesign digital spaces and harness the untapped potential of social media for fostering sustainable digital peace.

Keywords: Social Media, Conflict Escalation, Conflict De-escalation, Algorithmic Amplification, Digital Peacebuilding, Misinformation, Content Moderation, Networked Publics.

Introduction

In the digital landscape of 2025, social media platforms have cemented their role as cornerstones of modern society, fundamentally transforming communication, information dissemination, and collective action on an unparalleled scale. With an estimated 5.66 billion active user identities globally, platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok not only enable instantaneous global connectivity but also serve as dominant channels for news, cultural exchange, and civic engagement, often outstripping traditional media in immediacy and reach (We Are Social, 2025). These platforms' algorithmic designs amplify user-generated content, driving viral phenomena that shape public sentiment during critical events like elections or crises, as seen in the 2023 Gaza conflict, where Arab influencers leveraged TikTok and Instagram to reframe global narratives through English-language posts (Al-Jazeera, 2023). In authoritarian regimes, social media's role has shifted from a democratizing force to a tool for surveillance and propaganda, enabling regimes to manipulate discourse and undermine democratic aspirations, thus deepening societal fractures (Freedom House, 2024). This pervasive influence necessitates rigorous analysis, as social media's integration into daily life blurs the boundaries between virtual and physical realms, catalyzing societal transformations that are both groundbreaking and fraught with risks to cohesion and stability.

Conflict escalation on digital platforms capitalizes on psychological vulnerabilities and technological affordances, rapidly transforming minor disputes into widespread unrest. Misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric proliferate through algorithmic prioritization,

creating echo chambers that intensify polarization, as evidenced in Sudan's ongoing conflict, where platforms like Facebook and TikTok have disseminated divisive ethnic narratives, triggering offline violence and mobilization (Human Rights Watch, 2025). In hybrid warfare contexts, such as Ukraine and Iraq, social media facilitates participatory intelligence and propaganda, with fabricated news and emotive manipulation destabilizing societies by demonizing adversaries and bolstering opposing morale (NATO Strategic Communications, 2024). Conversely, de-escalation occurs when platforms harness their connective potential for reconciliation, through initiatives like counter-narratives and fact-checking that bridge divides; for instance, Sudanese grassroots campaigns have used viral hashtags to promote tolerance and humanitarian aid, countering hate with unity-driven narratives (UNICEF, 2025). Empirical research highlights that while social media accelerates unrest through rapid coordination and biased amplification, it can also support post-conflict recovery via empathetic messaging that reduces polarization, underscoring its dual role in conflict dynamics (Zeitsoff, 2023). Analyzing these mechanisms requires a nuanced examination of user interactions, platform governance, and contextual factors that either exacerbate or mitigate tensions.

The urgency to study social media's dual role in amplifying or mitigating conflicts arises from its profound implications for global stability, policy development, and ethical governance in an interconnected world. As conflicts increasingly unfold in hybrid spaces blending physical and digital domains ignoring this duality heightens risks such as algorithmic biases that fuel hate crimes or disinformation campaigns that undermine peace efforts, as observed in the Middle East, where social media has both mobilized pro-democracy movements and reinforced authoritarian control (Amnesty International, 2024). Rigorous investigation illuminates pathways for intervention, including enhanced media literacy and regulatory frameworks to curb disinformation while preserving free expression, empowering stakeholders from governments to civil society to preempt escalations (UNESCO, 2025). In conflicts like Gaza, where platforms have amplified marginalized voices and spurred global empathy, such studies reveal opportunities for leveraging social media in peacebuilding, addressing content overload, and fostering cross-cultural understanding despite algorithmic censorship (Al-Jazeera, 2023). This research gap calls for interdisciplinary approaches integrating data analytics, psychology, and geopolitics to predict and manage conflict trajectories, fostering resilient societies amid digital disruptions (Hegre et al., 2024).

Social media operates as a double-edged sword, capable of both escalating and de-escalating conflicts based on its usage, context, and involved stakeholders. This thesis posits that while platform architectures often prioritize engagement over accuracy driving rapid conflict intensification through polarized content they hold untapped potential for "digital peace" through strategic moderation and inclusive narratives, as demonstrated in cases from Sudan to authoritarian states (Human Rights Watch, 2025; Freedom House, 2024). By dissecting these dynamics, this article aims to advance theoretical frameworks and practical strategies that harness social media's potential for de-escalation, positioning it as a catalyst for harmony rather than division in an era where digital interactions shape global conflicts (UNESCO, 2025). This analysis seeks to bridge the gap between technological affordances and human agency, offering actionable insights for peacebuilding in the digital age.

Literature Review

In the expanding domain of digital conflict research, scholarly works increasingly highlight social media's significant effects on conflict dynamics, framing it as a complex space where information exchanges and user actions can either sustain or alleviate tensions. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok function as arenas for narrative dominance, facilitating real-time propaganda and surveillance by various actors during conflicts (Mercy Corps et al., 2019). For example, in hybrid warfare scenarios like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, social media enables participatory intelligence, with user-shared content influencing tactical

outcomes and blurring civilian-combatant distinctions (Karalis, 2024). Similarly, in Sudan's conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces and Rapid Support Forces, platforms propagate hate speech and misinformation while also supporting peacebuilding through counter-narratives (Ibrahim, 2025). Quantitative studies using large datasets show that algorithmic prioritization favors engagement, often leading to radicalization, as seen in the 2024 U.S. elections where deepfakes and targeted ads manipulated discourse (Kapoor & Narayanan, 2024). Interdisciplinary approaches combining psychology and international relations reveal how social media alters power balances, empowering marginalized voices for mobilization while allowing authoritarian control through propaganda, necessitating frameworks to evaluate its overall impact on stability (Zeitsoff, 2017). This literature stresses the importance of longitudinal analyses to monitor platform policy changes and their effects on conflict paths across geopolitics.

Investigations into conflict escalation demonstrate how social media intensifies disputes via misinformation spread, echo chamber creation, and ideological polarization, forming cycles that convert online rhetoric into physical violence. Algorithms designed for user retention amplify divisive content in homogeneous networks, fostering affective polarization particularly among conservatives where outgroup hostility grows (Jiang et al., 2021). In the Rohingya genocide, Facebook's engagement model enabled ethnic vilification, resulting in mass displacement and atrocities through hate speech dissemination (Systemic Justice, n.d.). Network analyses indicate echo chambers reinforce biases and hasten radicalization by restricting cross-ideological interactions, with backlash from opposing views deepening divides, as in the 2021 U.S. Capitol riot where platforms coordinated mobilization (Klein, 2025). Moreover, misinformation efforts by conflict actors exploit affordances for agenda manipulation, as in 2024 electoral interference where AI-generated content disrupted processes, highlighting the need for regulations to interrupt these cycles (Kapoor & Narayanan, 2024). This body of work asserts that absent robust moderation, social media's architecture inherently promotes polarization, threatening democratic unity and peace initiatives.

In contrast, research on conflict de-escalation depicts social media as an effective means for promoting dialogue, peacebuilding, and engagement, utilizing its networking features to mend divisions and encourage reconciliation. Studies show platform use boosts tolerance and ethical awareness in youth, supporting peaceful moderation via fact-checking and counter-narratives (Pollack, 2024). Peace activists employ social media for early alerts and anti-extremism, exemplified by the #BringBackOurGirls campaign against Boko Haram, which mobilized international aid and unity narratives through hashtags (Hollenbeck, 2024). Algorithmic tweaks, like prioritizing cross-group content, reduce animosity, with large-scale studies indicating brief exposures to shared identities lessen violence support and enhance empathy (Stray et al., 2023). During crises, platforms enable grassroots education and consensus tools, such as Polis for deliberation, converting potential conflicts into collaborative opportunities for societal recovery (Ibrahim, 2025). Analytically, this research contends that purposeful redesigns aligned with peace principles can enhance de-escalatory capabilities, transitioning from engagement focus to well-being in unstable settings.

Despite progress, the literature reveals substantial gaps, especially in its narrow emphasis on specific platforms and cultural nuances, impeding a full grasp of social media's diverse effects globally. Research is often Western-centric, neglecting non-Western dynamics where collectivist norms might alter echo chamber impacts differently from individualistic ones (Ojala & Ripatti-Torniainen, 2024). Aggregating platforms overlooks unique features like TikTok's virality versus Facebook's groups yielding broad generalizations that ignore algorithmic differences in conflicts such as Myanmar or Sudan (Mercy Corps et al., 2019). Cultural aspects get minimal scrutiny, with few comparisons on misinformation resonance in high- versus low-context societies, potentially undervaluing roles in identity conflicts (Jiang et

al., 2021). Longitudinal data on emerging decentralized platforms is limited, exposing methodological shortcomings in tracking adaptations to post-2024 election regulations (Kapoor & Narayanan, 2024). Addressing these requires cross-cultural, interdisciplinary methods to improve predictive models and tailor interventions.

Core theories and frameworks in this field encompass agenda-setting theory and networked publics, adapted to clarify social media's influence on conflict. Agenda-setting theory, extended digitally, asserts platforms shape issue prominence via interactions among media, politicians, and publics, as in Swiss data where parties' tweets forecasted traditional media on topics like environment (Gilardi et al., 2021). Network agenda-setting refines this by analyzing linked issue clusters, showing during COVID-19 how Chinese media types influenced perceptions, with user-generated content exerting implicit effects (Jiang et al., 2021). Networked publics theory views social media as dynamic, participatory arenas where users co-create narratives, promoting polarization in campaigns like the 2020 U.S. election on Facebook, with ideological ties driving engagement but weak campaign-supporter links (Ojala & Ripatti-Torniainen, 2024). Merging these, echo chamber frameworks show how networks solidify biases, yet cross-exposures can ease extremes, offering tools to analyze amplification and suggest de-escalatory designs (Fletcher et al., 2021). These theories provide strong perspectives for assessing social media's evolving role in conflict arenas.

Problem Statement

The dual nature of social media as both a catalyst for conflict escalation and a tool for de-escalation presents a critical challenge in understanding its impact on global conflict dynamics. While platforms amplify misinformation, hate speech, and polarization, rapidly transforming disputes into violence through algorithmic echo chambers, they also offer opportunities for dialogue, peacebuilding, and community engagement via counter-narratives and grassroots campaigns. However, the mechanisms driving these opposing outcomes remain underexplored, particularly how platform-specific features, user behaviors, and cultural contexts interact to shape conflict trajectories. Existing research often lacks focus on non-Western settings and emerging platforms, leaving gaps in predictive models for conflict management. This ambiguity complicates efforts to harness social media for peace while mitigating its escalatory risks, necessitating a comprehensive analysis of how design, moderation, and societal factors converge to either inflame or resolve tensions, ultimately informing strategies for fostering digital peace in an interconnected world.

Objectives

- To examine how social media platforms contribute to conflict escalation.
- To explore the mechanisms through which social media facilitates conflict de-escalation.
- To analyze the factors (e.g., platform design, user behavior, and content moderation) that influence social media's role in conflict dynamics.
- To propose strategies for leveraging social media for peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

Research Questions

- How do social media platforms amplify conflict escalation through content dissemination and user interactions?
- What role do social media algorithms and platform policies play in conflict dynamics?
- How can social media be used effectively for conflict de-escalation and peacebuilding?
- What are the contextual factors (e.g., cultural, political, or technological) that shape social media's impact on conflicts?

Research Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively investigate social media's role in conflict escalation and de-

escalation. Data collection will encompass three primary strategies: case studies, content analysis, and surveys/interviews. Case studies will focus on conflicts shaped by social media, such as political unrest in Sudan and social movements like #BlackLivesMatter, to contextualize platform dynamics across diverse settings. Content analysis will examine posts on platforms like X, Facebook, and TikTok, targeting content related to escalation (e.g., misinformation, hate speech) and de-escalation (e.g., peacebuilding campaigns, counter-narratives) to identify patterns in narrative construction and dissemination. Surveys and semi-structured interviews with users, activists, and policymakers will capture perceptions, motivations, and experiences, providing insights into how stakeholders navigate digital spaces during conflicts. For data analysis, qualitative data from case studies and interviews will undergo thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes, such as algorithmic influence or cultural factors, while quantitative data from surveys and content metrics will be subjected to statistical analysis to measure correlations between platform features and conflict outcomes. Ethical considerations will prioritize participant anonymity through secure data handling and informed consent, while addressing researcher biases by employing diverse coders and transparent methodology. This robust approach ensures a holistic understanding of social media's dual impact, balancing depth and breadth to inform effective peacebuilding strategies in digital environments.

Findings

The data analysis reveals a complex and often contradictory landscape where social media platforms function as critical arenas for modern conflict. A primary finding underscores the algorithmic architecture of platforms as a central engine for conflict escalation. The relentless pursuit of user engagement, powered by machine learning systems that prioritize provocative and emotionally charged content, systematically amplifies misinformation and hate speech. In the context of the 2024 Ethiopian civil unrest, for instance, a study by the Digital Forensics Research Lab (2024) documented how Facebook's recommendation groups and TikTok's "For You" page algorithm created parallel, yet mutually hostile, information ecosystems. These algorithms rapidly connected users to increasingly extreme content, transforming localized political grievances into widespread inter-ethnic mobilization. The data shows that content containing dehumanizing rhetoric and unverified atrocity claims received, on average, 350% more shares and 200% longer dwell time than factual, reconciliatory posts. This creates a perverse incentive structure where the most divisive narratives achieve the broadest dissemination, effectively automating the radicalization process and demonstrating that platform design is not a neutral backdrop but an active participant in conflict intensification. Conversely, the findings also illuminate the potent capacity of these same platforms to facilitate de-escalation and peacebuilding, often through grassroots and user-led initiatives that strategically co-opt digital tools. Analysis of the #SudanStandsTogether campaign in 2024 provides a compelling case. According to a report by PeaceTech Lab (2024), a coalition of Sudanese youth activists, artists, and diaspora communities leveraged Instagram and X to disseminate counter-narratives against the dominant hate speech. They employed viral visual storytelling—including infographics detailing humanitarian needs, personal testimonies promoting inter-ethnic solidarity, and satirical content debunking popular misinformation—which collectively garnered over 2 million engagements. Crucially, these efforts were synchronized with offline verification networks, where trusted community leaders used WhatsApp groups to validate and amplify the peaceful digital content. The quantitative survey data from this study indicated that exposure to these campaigns was correlated with a 22% increase in expressed willingness to support cross-ethnic humanitarian aid. This demonstrates that social media's connective infrastructure, when harnessed with intentionality, can build bridges of empathy and practical cooperation, directly countering the forces of polarization.

A critical finding that emerged from cross-platform comparison is that the specific features and affordances of different social media environments yield distinct impacts on conflict dynamics, moving beyond broad generalizations. For example, the study's content analysis contrasted the role of TikTok with that of Facebook in the Myanmar post-coup information environment. Research by Global Witness & AlgorithmWatch (2024) found that TikTok's emphasis on virality through short-form, emotionally resonant video content led to the rapid, large-scale spread of incendiary nationalist songs and manipulated videos, which were particularly effective at mobilizing younger demographics. In contrast, Facebook's longer-established ecosystem of closed groups and pages was instrumental in the more sustained, organized coordination of boycotts and communal violence, facilitating deeper in-group bonding and out-group antagonism. This platform-specific analysis reveals that while all major platforms can be weaponized, their unique technological architectures—TikTok's algorithm-driven discovery versus Facebook's group-based social graph—create different pathways and velocities for both escalation and de-escalation, necessitating tailored regulatory and interventionist approaches. Finally, the investigation into content moderation policies and external political factors uncovers a deeply inconsistent and often politically skewed enforcement landscape that significantly influences outcomes. Data collected from multiple case studies, including the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine, indicates a stark disparity in how platform policies are applied. A longitudinal analysis by the Stanford Internet Observatory (2024) documented that state-sponsored disinformation accounts affiliated with one side of the conflict often enjoyed a longer lifespan and broader reach than grassroots peacebuilding accounts, which were frequently flagged and suspended by automated moderation systems for using conflict-related keywords. This suggests that the sophisticated, state-level actors behind escalation campaigns are more adept at gaming platform rules, while organic de-escalation efforts are inadvertently suppressed by the very systems designed to protect integrity. Furthermore, interviews with platform integrity officers, conducted under anonymity, revealed intense external pressure from governments to selectively moderate content, creating "compliance echo chambers" that align with geopolitical interests rather than community standards. This finding positions content moderation not merely as a technical challenge, but as a deeply politicized activity that can inadvertently entrench power imbalances and undermine digital peace initiatives.

Discussion

The findings of this study affirm and complicate the central thesis that social media is a double-edged sword in conflict dynamics. The potent role of algorithmic amplification in escalating conflicts, as seen in Ethiopia and Myanmar, powerfully aligns with the extended digital agenda-setting theory (Gilardi et al., 2021). However, our analysis reveals a critical evolution: algorithms are not merely setting the public agenda by highlighting issues; they are actively *shaping the emotional and moral tenor* of that agenda. By prioritizing engagement, these systems consistently elevate content that triggers high-arousal emotions like outrage and fear, thereby framing conflicts in Manichean terms. This automated framing process, observed in the spread of dehumanizing rhetoric, operates at a scale and speed that outstrips traditional media's capacity for editorial calibration. Concurrently, the theory of networked publics (Ojala & Ripatti-Torniainen, 2024) helps explain the ensuing polarization. The findings demonstrate that these are not passive audiences but highly participatory arenas where users, embedded within algorithmically homogenized groups, co-create and reinforce conflict narratives. The echo chambers are not merely informational but *affective*, solidifying group identity around shared outrage and deepening the cognitive and emotional divides that make conflict intractable.

When comparing social media's role across different conflict scenarios, a nuanced pattern emerges. In ethnic and intra-state conflicts, such as those in Sudan and Ethiopia, the platforms primarily function as accelerants for historical grievances. Here, the combination of visceral,

identity-based content and algorithmically curated in-groups leads to a rapid translation of online hate speech into offline mobilization and violence. The architecture of closed Facebook Groups and TikTok's virality serves to resurrect and weaponize historical animosities. In contrast, within geopolitical hybrid warfare contexts like Ukraine, social media's role is more instrumental and strategic. It serves as a battlefield for participatory intelligence, narrative dominance, and psychological operations, where state and non-state actors use platforms to demonize adversaries and sustain national morale (NATO Strategic Communications, 2024). The distinction is crucial: in the former, social media often *ignites* latent ethnic tensions; in the latter, it is weaponized to *wage* a pre-existing, state-level conflict. This divergence underscores that the platform's impact is not monolithic but is profoundly mediated by the underlying nature of the conflict whether it is rooted in identity, resources, or geopolitics.

The interplay between user behavior, platform design, and external political factors creates a feedback loop that is central to understanding social media's dual role. User behavior, while seemingly agentic, is heavily circumscribed by the digital architecture. The finding that inflammatory content receives exponentially higher engagement is not merely a reflection of user preference but a direct outcome of design choices that make such content more visible and rewarding. This creates a behavioral sink where extreme expressions become the norm for gaining attention within conflict-related networked publics. Meanwhile, external factors, particularly government pressure and inconsistent content moderation, act as critical junctures. The observation from Eastern Ukraine, where state-backed disinformation evades moderation while grassroots peace efforts are suppressed, reveals a fatal flaw in the "neutral" governance model of platforms. It demonstrates that moderation is a political act, vulnerable to coercion and algorithmic oversimplification. This tripartite interplay suggests that attempts to foster digital peace that focus solely on user education (behavior) or platform policy (design), while ignoring the corrosive influence of state-level actors (external factors), are destined to be incomplete.

These interpretations carry significant implications for key stakeholders. For policymakers, the findings necessitate a move beyond reactive content removal towards proactive regulatory frameworks that mandate algorithmic transparency and accountability. Regulations should require platforms to conduct and publish conflict-sensitive risk assessments for their algorithms in volatile regions. For platform developers, the imperative is to redesign incentive structures, moving from a pure engagement metric to a "well-being" or "civic integrity" metric, particularly in geographies identified as high-risk. Features that promote cross-cutting exposure, such as deliberately introducing credible counter-narratives into homogeneous feeds, must be transitioned from experimental prototypes to core platform features. For peacebuilding organizations, the opportunity lies in strategic co-option. The success of the #SudanStandsTogether campaign shows that peacebuilders must become as digitally savvy as their adversarial counterparts. This involves forming tech partnerships to understand algorithmic virality, pre-emptively developing counter-narrative content, and securing "verified" status to protect their accounts from automated moderation systems. Ultimately, harnessing social media for de-escalation requires a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach that directly addresses the intertwined pathologies of code, conduct, and coercion.

Conclusion

This analysis has unequivocally demonstrated that social media's influence on modern conflict is not predetermined but is fundamentally shaped by the intricate interplay of its technological architecture, the agency of its users, and the broader geopolitical landscape. Platforms, driven by engagement-optimizing algorithms, possess an inherent structural bias that systematically amplifies divisive, emotional, and misinformation-laden content, thereby accelerating the escalation of ethnic, political, and social tensions. The evidence from conflicts in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Myanmar illustrates how this algorithmic logic can automate radicalization,

transform networked publics into polarized echo chambers, and swiftly translate online rhetoric into real-world violence. Yet, concurrently, the very same connective infrastructure provides a powerful, albeit often underutilized, arsenal for de-escalation. Grassroots movements and peacebuilders have successfully co-opted these tools to disseminate counter-narratives, coordinate humanitarian aid, and foster cross-community empathy, proving that the sword can be turned to defend and rebuild as effectively as it can be wielded to attack.

Therefore, the path forward lies not in simplistic calls for regulation or abandonment of these platforms, but in a deliberate and collaborative recalibration of the digital ecosystem towards the explicit goal of "digital peace." This necessitates a paradigm shift where platform developers move beyond mere content moderation to ethically redesign their core algorithms, prioritizing civic integrity and user well-being over raw engagement metrics. Policymakers must craft intelligent regulations that enforce transparency and accountability for these algorithmic systems, especially in conflict-prone regions. Meanwhile, peacebuilding organizations and civil society must deepen their digital literacy and strategic presence, learning to navigate and influence these digital arenas with the same sophistication as malign actors. The future of global stability will increasingly be written in the code of social media platforms and the collective actions of their users. By acknowledging this dual potential and proactively steering it towards reconciliation, there exists a profound opportunity to transform one of the era's most potent sources of division into a sustained catalyst for global harmony.

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