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Digital Platforms and Public Confidence in Police-Citizen Relations in the Context of Security Crises in Nigeria

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Abstract

The present age is marked by rapid digital transformation and heightened security concerns, and the role of social media in shaping public trust in police relations has become increasingly significant. This research explores how police use of social media during national security emergencies affects public trust in Nigeria. The study explores how digital platforms and Apps—particularly Chatbots, Twitter, Tik-Tok, Facebook, WhatsApp and use of Drones affect public perception of police credibility and responsiveness during national security crises. Using Gashua town as a case study, the research investigates the effectiveness of police messaging, the spread of misinformation, and the dynamics of online engagement between law enforcement agencies and citizens. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining sentiment analysis of social media content with surveys and interviews to assess public reactions. The research integrates content analysis of police posts, sentiment analysis of social media contents, analysis of public reactions, and survey data from affected communities. Findings reveal that timely, transparent, and empathetic digital communication enhances trust and cooperation, while inconsistent, misinformation or opaque messaging can exacerbate fear, disengagement and skepticism. The research recommends the need for strategic digital engagement policies, training for law enforcement personnel and improvement in police–public digital interaction to foster resilience as well as public confidence in times of crisis with implications for national security policy.

Keywords: Digital space, public confidence, police relations, insecurity, national security

Introduction

In the digital age, the relationship between law enforcement agencies and the public is increasingly mediated through online platforms. Social media, mobile

applications, and other digital tools have transformed how police departments communicate, engage, and are perceived by the communities they serve. These platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for transparency, accountability, and dialogue—but they also present challenges related to misinformation, surveillance concerns, and public trust. As incidents involving police conduct continue to spark global conversations, digital platforms have emerged as both battlegrounds and bridges in shaping public confidence and police-community relations. In the context of rising digital engagement and evolving security threats, this study examines the influence of social media communication on public trust in law enforcement during national security emergencies in Nigeria. It investigates how the tone, transparency, and responsiveness of police messaging on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp shape public perception and cooperation.

The main aim of this paper is to critically examine how digital platforms, influence public perceptions of law enforcement and contribute to the dynamics of trust, accountability, and engagement between police and communities. Also, the objectives guiding this paper are: to explore the role of social media in shaping narratives around police actions and public safety; to assess the impact of digital transparency initiatives on public trust; to analyse how online engagement strategies, affect community-police collaboration; to identify risks and limitations of digital platforms in managing police-public relations; to propose recommendations for leveraging digital tools to foster constructive and equitable police-community interactions.

Understanding the role of digital platforms in police-public relations is vital for several reasons. Firstly, in the area of public trust and accountability; digital platforms can amplify both positive and negative perceptions of law enforcement. Transparent communication and timely updates can build trust, while viral incidents of misconduct can erode it. Secondly, in the aspect of community engagement; online tools enable police departments to engage with citizens beyond traditional methods, fostering dialogue, responsiveness, and collaborative problem-solving. Thirdly, in the areas of policy and reform; insights from digital interactions can inform policy decisions, training programs, and reform initiatives aimed at improving policing practices. Fourthly, in aspect of crisis management; during emergencies or controversial incidents, digital platforms serve as critical channels for information dissemination and public reassurance. Lastly, global relevance is germane. As digital access expands worldwide, the lessons learned from digital-police dynamics in one region can inform practices in others, promoting international standards of justice and community relations.

Literature Review

The intersection of digital platforms and police-public relations has been the subject of growing academic interest. Scholars have explored how media—particularly social media—shapes public perceptions of law enforcement, often amplifying both transparency and controversy. Kemboy and Zakayo's study

highlights the dual role of media in shaping the police-public interface. While digital platforms can promote accountability and community engagement, they also risk sensationalism and bias, which may distort public understanding of police actions (Kemboy & Zakayo, 2024). Also, the Police Foundation's report emphasizes how technology, including chatbots and multilingual digital services, can improve public access to police services and foster trust. Tools like WhatsApp and Instagram are increasingly used to provide real-time updates and engage diverse communities. Brainard and Edlins's research also reveals that social media activism often portrays law enforcement negatively, especially in cases of perceived injustice. This trend underscores the need for police departments to actively manage their digital presence and counter misinformation with transparency. These studies collectively suggest that digital platforms are not merely communication tools; they are arenas where legitimacy, trust, and accountability are contested and negotiated (Brainard & Edlins, 2015).

Public trust in law enforcement is a cornerstone and foundational to effective policing, particularly during national security emergencies. Scholars have emphasized that trust influences citizens' willingness to cooperate, report crimes, and comply with emergency directives. According to Wambua (2020), public trust comprises multiple dimensions: government trust, ingroup trust, and outgroup trust; which are shaped by both institutional performance and communication strategies

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have revolutionized police communication during crises. These platforms enable real-time updates, direct engagement, and rapid dissemination of information. In Nairobi, Kenya, Kemboy and Zakayo (2024) found that Facebook and Twitter are the most utilized platforms by police for incident reporting and public updates. However, their study noted limited use of community dialogue and public relations messaging, which are essential for building long-term trust.

The tone, frequency, and transparency of police messaging significantly affect public perception. Studies show that empathetic and consistent communication fosters trust, while vague or delayed updates can lead to skepticism and fear. In Rosenbaum *et al.* (2011) comparative analysis, they found that traditional media tends to enhance trust more effectively than social media, which can sometimes reduce trust due to misinformation or perceived lack of performance

Kemboy and Zakayo (2024) identified misinformation, privacy issues, and inadequate training as major obstacles to building trust through social media in Nairobi. Even with its potential, police use of social media faces several challenges such as, misinformation and fake news, these can undermine official narratives and erode public confidence. Another challenge is privacy concerns; citizens may be wary of surveillance or data misuse. Many police departments lack the resources or expertise to manage digital platforms effectively, there is technical limitations and training gaps (Schlosser, 2013).

Beyond public trust, social media intersects with broader national security concerns. Wambua (2020) highlights that in Kenya, social media has facilitated public awareness but also exposed vulnerabilities to cyberterrorism and misinformation during security operations. Her study emphasizes the need for strategic regulation and digital literacy among law enforcement. This dual role necessitates a balanced approach to regulation and engagement (Cambridge Nigeria Publications, 2022).

While existing studies offer valuable insights, few have systematically examined the interaction between police digital communication and public trust during active security emergencies. Most focus on general perceptions or post-crisis analysis. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing real-time engagement and public sentiment during unfolding events. In Nigeria, social media has similarly influenced internal security dynamics. A study by Cambridge Nigeria Publications (2022) discusses how non-state actors leverage digital platforms to challenge state authority, complicating law enforcement efforts. The literature underscores the critical role of digital platforms in shaping police–public relations during crises. However, strategic communication, transparency, and digital literacy remain key to maximizing trust and minimizing risk. This study builds on these foundations to explore how law enforcement can better leverage social media in high-stakes situations. This study is built on Social Capital Theory. Trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity strengthen community resilience and cooperation. Online engagement strategies build relational capital between police and citizens, fostering collaborations.

Materials and Methods

This paper adopts a qualitative research approach, drawing on case studies and expert interviews to explore the role of digital platforms in shaping police–public relations. The case study approach analysed specific incidents where digital platforms played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion about police conduct (e.g., viral videos, live updates, community responses). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with law enforcement officials, digital communication experts, and community leaders to gather insights on best practices and challenges.

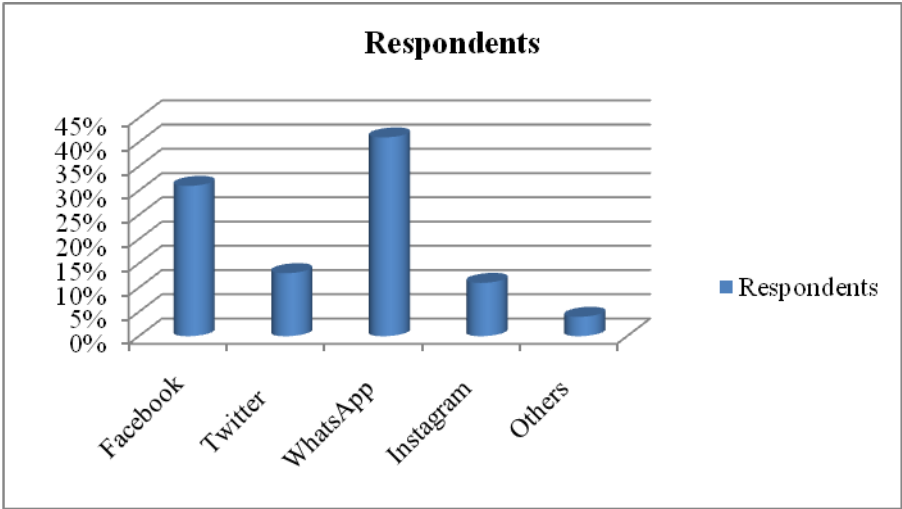
The study employed a multi-source qualitative design to capture the complexity of digital platforms and their influence on public confidence in police relations during security crises in Nigeria. Primary sources include reports and communiqués from the Centre for Crisis Communication (CCC) on digital innovation in crisis communication (2025), National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), and Nigerian Police Force (NPF) official statements during crises such as the Boko Haram insurgency, farmer–herder conflicts, and the #EndSARS protests. Secondary sources are scholarly articles, government publications, media reports on police–public relations, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy briefs, and media coverage analyzing digital communication strategies in Nigeria (Adebanwi, 2021; Ojebode &

Akinwale, 2022). Data were also collated from document review of government publications, symposium proceedings, and NGO reports. There was content analysis of social media hashtags (#EndSARS, #SecureNorth, #PoliceReform) to evaluate public sentiment and trust indicators.

Findings

This research explores how police use of social media during national security emergencies affects public trust in Nigeria. By analyzing police posts, public reactions, and survey responses, the study reveals that clear, timely, and empathetic messaging boosts public confidence and cooperation. In contrast, misinformation and poor communication erode trust. The findings offer practical insights for law enforcement agencies seeking to strengthen digital engagement and improve crisis response strategies. The findings based on the objectives are as follow:

The first objective was to explore the role of social media in shaping narratives around police actions and public safety. The study found that social media platforms rapidly disseminate videos and eyewitness accounts of police actions, often before official statements are released; this shape public opinion in real time. Social media posts often emphasize emotional responses, which can intensify outrage or sympathy depending on the narrative e.g. #EndSars. Also, algorithms tend to reinforce users' existing beliefs, creating echo chambers that may distort facts or escalate tensions. Police departments use platforms like Twitter and Facebook to share positive stories, crime prevention tips, and community events, helping humanize officers and build rapport (Nix, *et al.*, 2020). The table below shows different social media platforms used by the police officers interviewed.



The second objective aimed to assess the impact of digital transparency initiatives on public trust. The study revealed that social media platforms allow

citizens to scrutinize police behaviour, fostering trust through visibility. Transparency mechanisms deter misconduct and promote ethical standards in law enforcement. When citizens perceive police actions as fair and open, they are more likely to cooperate and respect authority. Also, implementation can be hindered by technical limitations, data privacy concerns, and resistance within departments (Sandhu, 2017).

Third objective was to analyse how online engagement strategies, affect community-police collaboration. The study found out that there are existing social media platforms that enable dialogue between police and citizens, allowing feedback, reporting and real-time updates. However, the police need creativities for virtual town halls gathering, live Questions & Answers sessions, and community surveys to foster transparency and responsiveness. All these will help police identify community concerns and tailor interventions accordingly. This is because, if only digital platforms are used, engagement may exclude digitally marginalized groups, and online interactions can lack the nuance of face-to-face dialogue (Lee & McGovern, 2016). Among the social media handles of the Nigeria Police Force are: Instagram.nigeriaoliceforce with over 1,400 likes; TikTok.Nigeria Police Force with over 18,600 followers; Facebook.Nigeria Police Force; Complaint Response Unit WhatsApp number - 08057000003; Public Complaints Bureau/Cybercrime/Online Fraud-09168343710; 08107314192; 08032003913; hotlines 199 (nationwide) and several other hotlines for each situation room in each state of the federation. The table below shows the online engagements:

Social Media Platforms/Cases	Address/Phone Numbers
Instagram	Instagram.nigeriaoliceforce
Facebook	Facebook.Nigeria Police Force
TikTok	TikTok.Nigeria Police Force
Complaint Response Unit	08057000003
Public Complaints Bureau/Cybercrime/Online Fraud	09168343710
Hotlines	199;
Emergency	08107314192; 08032003913

The fourth objective aimed to identify risks and limitations of digital platforms in managing police-public relations. The study revealed that misinformation, viral outrage and unverified content spread rapidly, damaging reputations and inflaming tensions. The study found that respondents have concerns for privacy. The awareness of surveillance technologies and data collection erode civil liberties if not properly regulated. Also, overreliance on digital tools or excessive dependence on social media platforms reduce in-person engagement and alienate communities without internet access (Lieberman *et al.*, 2013). Fifth objective targeted at proposing recommendations for leveraging digital tools to foster constructive and equitable police-community interactions.

Discussion of Findings

Digital platforms are double-edged swords: they empower citizens with real-time updates but also expose them to harmful narratives. In Nigeria, security crises such as terrorism, communal clashes, and protests are magnified online, shaping perceptions of police effectiveness. The lack of regulatory oversight allows hate speech and disinformation to thrive, eroding confidence in law enforcement. However, initiatives like CCC's symposiums demonstrate recognition of the need for collaborative digital governance involving security agencies, media, and tech companies.

The findings reveal a paradoxical role of digital platforms in Nigeria's security crises; while platforms like Twitter and Facebook provide real-time updates, they also amplify misinformation and disinformation, which erodes public confidence in police institutions. For example, during the #EndSARS protests, viral videos of alleged police brutality—some authentic, others manipulated—intensified public outrage and delegitimized official police statements. Government attempts to regulate digital spaces, such as the suspension of Twitter in 2021, highlight tensions between transparency and censorship. While intended to curb misinformation, such actions often reinforced perceptions of authoritarianism and further weakened trust in state institutions.

Citizen-led campaigns on social media have pressured the government to acknowledge grievances and initiate reforms. However, these campaigns also expose the police to reputational risks when they fail to respond promptly or credibly. Security agencies are gradually adopting digital tools for crisis communication, but gaps remain in training, coordination, and ethical use of technology. The CCC symposiums emphasize the need for AI-driven monitoring and collaborative governance, yet implementation is slow. Unlike countries where police agencies use verified digital channels to build trust (e.g., South Africa's SAPS Twitter updates), Nigeria's police communication often suffers from delays, inconsistencies, and lack of credibility. In essence, digital platforms act as both amplifiers of distrust and potential bridges of accountability. The challenge lies in institutionalizing transparent, timely, and ethical digital communication practices that can withstand the pressures of Nigeria's recurring security crises.

Conclusion

Digital platforms have become indispensable in shaping the modern relationship between police and the public. They serve as tools for transparency, engagement, and accountability, but also as arenas where trust can be built or broken. The evidence suggests that when used strategically and ethically, digital platforms can enhance public confidence in law enforcement and foster more collaborative, informed, and equitable police-community relations.

However, the effectiveness of these platforms depends on several factors: the authenticity of communication, responsiveness to public concerns, and the

ability to counter misinformation without compromising civil liberties. As technology continues to evolve, so too must the strategies that law enforcement agencies use to engage with the public online.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and to maximize the positive impact of digital platforms on police-public relations, the following recommendations were proposed:

1. **Develop Clear Digital Communication Policies:** Police departments should establish guidelines for online engagement that prioritize transparency, respect, and responsiveness (Crump, 2011).
2. **Invest in Digital Literacy and Training:** Officers and communication teams should be trained in digital etiquette, crisis communication, and community engagement strategies.
3. **Use Data Responsibly:** Analytics from digital platforms should be used to understand public sentiment and improve services, while respecting privacy and ethical boundaries.
4. **Promote Community Co-Creation:** Involve citizens in shaping digital content, feedback mechanisms, and online safety initiatives to foster shared ownership.
5. **Monitor and Evaluate Impact:** Regular assessments of digital engagement efforts should be conducted to measure effectiveness and adapt strategies accordingly.
6. **Establish AI-driven monitoring:** government, non-governmental organisations and everyone to deploy artificial intelligence to detect and counter false narratives.
7. **Enhance police and journalist transparency:** Police and journalist are to use verified digital channels for timely crisis updates.
8. **Collaborate with tech companies:** law enforcement agencies are to ensure accountability of platforms operating in Nigeria.
9. **Promote ethical reporting:** government are to encourage responsible journalism during crises.

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