



Impact of social Media on Peace and Security in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This article reports part of a larger research project, which investigated the broader effects of social media on peace and security the world over. While social media has had broader effects on development, geopolitics, exposure of corrupt tendencies and opening of democratic space in general, this study focused on its effects on peace and security in Zimbabwe. The study establishes that social media has served as a double-edged sword in that while it promotes social, political and economic development, it also perpetuates some devastating conflicts, which have threatened national peace and security. Using the qualitative approach, the study revealed that social media has had positive and negative effects on the political and social landscape in Zimbabwe. Social media reopens old wounds, which are likely to threaten national peace and security. The study recommends that the state promotes the change of citizen mindset towards the use of social media and to have comprehensive cyber-crime legislation meant to curb the abuse of social media platforms in ways meant to promote peace and security.

Keywords: Social media; peace; security; social media.

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Introduction

This study explored the impact of social media on peace and security in Zimbabwe. As pointed out by Hove and Chenzi (2020), social media has been the most celebrated technological invention in the 21st century. It is a social communication custom in industrialized and unindustrialized countries. By social media we refer to internet-based applications that enable people to communicate and share resources and information from diverse corners of the world. Some renowned examples of social media include Blogs, YouTube Channels, LinkedIn, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, to mention just but a few. Social media is accessed through computers, smart and cellular phones and mobile phone text

messaging among many other communication gadgets.

It is quite interesting to understand the evolution of media and how social media has taken a stronghold in today's society, with the penetration of information becoming very common (Muhambe 2025). Since the introduction of electronic media and the expansion of print media, social media has introduced varied opportunities while serving as a huge challenge to peace and security globally. It is the most frequented platform, not only by the youth but by the elderly as well Mario (2017), a scenario which has exposed humanity to inappropriate and fabricated information. Social media platforms have also left humanity prone to challenges, such as cyberbullying, exposure to

glaring falsehoods and pornography Mario (2017). This negative exposure could fetch undesirable outcomes, such as insatiable love for war and the use of guns by the youth, which could threaten national peace and security.

The progression witnessed in the technological world has transformed how people carry out their communication. The advent of social media on the communication stage serves as an exhibition of development in technology, which has profoundly impacted how people are communicating in this contemporary era. This study is of the view that while social media has been studied by numerous scholars in connection with its contributions towards social and economic development and how it has revolutionized the media sector and other spectrums, it has however overlooked its impact on peace and security (Mugari 2020; Lump 2014; Hove & Chenzi 2020; Moyo, 2019; Mujere & Mwatara 2015). This study focused on how social media has impacted peace and security in Zimbabwe between 2017 and 2019 when the country had experienced new leadership under President Dr. Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa.

There has been a strong wave of politicking and activism during the period under study, a feature which we attribute to the people's easy access and participation on numerous social media podiums, such as Facebook and WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter- now X (Walsh & O'Connor 2019). Various scholars concur that social media has incontestably transformed media systems in all dimensions (Nyoni, 2017; Magaisa, 2020; Barnes, 2006; Sengere 2018). Social media has impacted the political, economic, social and cultural fabrics of human life. The dawn of social media has brought about many noteworthy changes in the socio-economic life of the modern world, which are both beneficial and unbeneficial to humanity, the environment and the political domain (Verma, 2013). Social media has facilitated both economic and social integration across diverse geographical contexts. It has also penetrated the political landscape, disrupting the monopoly over information traditionally held by established actors and state-linked institutions, particularly in African countries, including Zimbabwe (Alterman 2017).

Social media has intensified civic awareness of political processes by diversifying perspectives and enabling less prominent actors to participate in both global and local discourse (Barnes, 2006). It has

bridged gaps left by mainstream media by highlighting government development initiatives and publicizing achievements, such as devolution efforts, industrialization and innovation drives, village business units, major infrastructure projects, the modernized Beitbridge border post, and upgrades to the Robert Mugabe International Airport in Zimbabwe (NDS1, 2025).

However, the study notes a polarized media environment in Zimbabwe. State-aligned media houses are often criticized by some audiences as sympathetic to the ruling party and its programs while private and social media platforms are perceived by others as leaning toward opposition narratives, at times disseminating unverified or misleading anti-government content (Rusero, 2022).

Methodology

This is a qualitative study solely based on the analysis of available literature on the nexus between social media, peace and security. The study used the critical text analysis; this approach helps iron out inconsistencies and ambiguities related to the field of study under discussion. Materials that were sourced in this study were acquired from published books, articles and journals. More materials were acquired through the web employing different information bases, which included: ELIN, LIBRIS and Google scholar. Official government sites were utilized just as other legitimate sources like the official site of the United Nations, scholarly foundations and local media distributing houses.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study is underpinned by the Diffusion Theory, which is centered on the concept that new technology makes it possible for people around the globe to communicate and engage from different points. The theory deals with a large component of the social network. It states that social movements are not self-contained and as such, they influence each other. Social media serves as an alternative method of information diffusion in a much faster way over large areas. This theoretical underpinning tallies well with this study, which explored the role of social media in peace and security in Zimbabwe (Alexander 2016; Baasanjav, 2013). The theoretical underpinnings lead to the argument that seeing uprisings and other violent acts happening in other countries could inspire people to take similar actions in their societies, a scenario witnessed in Zimbabwe between 2016 and 2019.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings and discussions; the section includes discussions on the role of social media and the global perspective, social media in the Zimbabwean perspective, positive developments proffered by social media as well as social media threats to peace and security in the country.

Social Media on the Global Perspective

Social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Twitter, have additionally become the “starting and spreading” apparatuses of revolutionary and democratic thoughts across regional and national boundaries. The short stint between January and April 2011 saw the quick spread of revolutionary furor for political change spreading quickly utilizing social media platforms from Tunis to Cairo and afterward into Sana, Amman and Manama (Mugari, 2020). The 2020 protest in the United States of America, which was dubbed “#Blacklivesmatter” serves as another example of how social media can influence events. The global network was able to unite people across the globe in a manner that was able to build power, bring justice, healing and freedom to Black people across the globe (Kumar, 2013). Comparable social media revolutionary passion, which saw people agitating for protest marches also prevailed in Zimbabwe throughout 2016, 2018 and 2019 in a manner that threatened national peace and security (Walsh, 2020).

Social Media in the Zimbabwean Perspective

Apart from the fact that Zimbabwe is regarded as a developing country, it has followed the world-wide movement of embracing social media as a key communication platform. There has been an undeniable upsurge in the use of social media in Zimbabwe (Rusero, 2022). While the news media traditionally plays an important role in information dissemination, changes in technology have ominously transmuted the media landscape, making social media a more critical space of information dissemination than ever before. The majority of social media usage is accessed through mobile phone technology with slightly above 96 percent of internet subscriptions coming through that medium (Magaisa 2020). This development implies that more Zimbabweans are now resorting to various social media platforms for news and information dissemination in manners that have threatened peace and security in the country at times. Call for military interventions in the country, pictures of

dead bodies after accidents, inflammatory tribal sentiments, partisan views, wishing other fellow Zimbabweans death, are just some of the examples in which social media has been embraced and used by the general public, opposition entities and other non-governmental groupings in Zimbabwe (Musvipa & Lunga, 2021).

For the opposition and civil society, social media provides a space in which there is freedom to articulate views and distribute information in a cost-effective way (Magaisa 2020). Until recently, the Zimbabwean government, especially under the leadership of the late Robert Gabriel Mugabe was openly hostile to the use of social media but now the government has since embraced and called for the responsible usage of social media platforms to disseminate information and government policies, such as Vision 2030, the Covid-19 vaccination program and the National Development Strategy 1 (Rukuni et al., 2019).

Rusero (2022) notes that mobile internet makes up for most of the internet accessed in the country, with the bulk of its users being on social media applications. The increase in social media usage could be attributed to a rise in mobile telecommunication as pointed out by Mugari (2020). Studies carried out by Sengere (2018) revealed that about 32.5% of Zimbabweans have embraced social media as a reliable source of news. Subsequently, that development has seen the Zimbabwean mainstream media- the radio, newspaper, and television being overtaken by social media platforms (Nyoni, 2017). The limited media options in Zimbabwe, which are characterized by a single state-owned television station, several state-owned radio stations and just a few independent community radio stations, have made social media platforms a requisite alternative source of information for Zimbabweans (Nyoni, 2017). The massive transition by Zimbabweans to social media usage came at a cost that has threatened peace and security in the country. The government and its various institutions have, on copious occasions contended with the threats posed by social media usage to the country’s peace and security (Musvipa & Lunga, 2021). This study provides context-specific data on an emerging threat posed to national peace and security by the immense usage of social media platforms by Zimbabwean citizens. Whilst some studies (Almond & Verba, 2003) have been carried out on the threat of social media in other countries across the globe, there is restricted focused

pragmatic research on its contemporary threat to peace and security in Zimbabwe.

Positive Developments through Social Media

The progression in innovation across the globe has revolutionized how individuals cooperate and do their correspondence and news dissemination business. The coming of online media serves as a sign of progression in innovation and has affected correspondence in both progressive and destructive ways as pointed out earlier. Social media has changed media frameworks, production and spread of information (Walsh and O'Connor, 2019). It has opened up access for new players in the media industry and created a new environment of news dissemination, which has taken Zimbabwe by storm (Pandalai, 2016).

Zimbabwean residents are currently engaged as subjects of correspondence and are enabled to straightforwardly shape public talk and assessment. Social media has allowed individuals around the world to associate and share information or news continuously in a comfortable manner. Besides, clients can follow or be trailed by others on platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook in ways that encourage the immediate spread of material and show "viral" characteristics, where data can quickly cut across networks (Yar, 2014). Another significant element of online media is their harmonious relationship with customary media (essentially TV), where conventional media are progressively depending on social media to channel their 24-hour reporting channels. The business has also taken advantage of the social media frenzy to engage in aggressive marketing while Human Rights promotional organizations have also used social media platforms to carry out advocacy outreach campaigns (Tesoriero, 2016).

Educational institutions have also embraced social media to reach out to their intended beneficiaries and proffer their academic goals and objectives through social media platforms. Another positive development associated with social media in Zimbabwe is that it has managed to showcase the philanthropic works carried out by non-profit making entities, such as the Angel of Hope and those carried out by local philanthropists, such as Strive Kudakwashe Regimond Tagwirei, Wicknell Chivayo and Scott Sakupwanya. More importantly, as exposed in NDS1 (2025), social media has served well in promoting the peace and tranquil that the country is experiencing.

Social Media Threats in Zimbabwe

The openness and accessibility of social media platforms and the freeness of their operations make social media permeable and amenable to all types of security threatening actions (Ackland, 2013). The amorphous huge data transactions carried out via various social media platforms have an overwhelming effect on users and the security of the nations the world over including Zimbabwe. Information overflow through social media has led to some form of disorder and some reasonable level of insecurity in Zimbabwe (Tsuma et al., 2014). Therefore, social media platforms may facilitate radicalization by promoting content with emotional appeals that tap into the grievances of users and reinforces their frustration, such as economic misery, unemployment and government failures (Ackland, 2013).

As highlighted by Musvipa and Lunga (2021), Zimbabwe has recently been faced with highly radicalized citizens and civil society organizations whose mode of political participation poses security threats to the state. While mainstream media was accused of monopoly in favor of incumbent governments and ruling political parties (Rusero, 2022), private media and social media platforms have not made the situation any better. Private media and social media have also gone hey wire supporting opposition political parties and perpetuating negative sentiments against the country in situations which expose the country's peace and security by disseminating falsehoods, hate speech, polarized statements and celebration of the country's demise (Rukuni et al. (2019).

There has been glaring evidence world over that most states have experienced security threats in one way or another stemming from the use of social media (Bafumi & Herron 2010). The occupation of Wall Street in American protest served as one of the first major pieces of evidence of the power of social media to communicate and mobilize for action without facing authorities and the regulations of the state. The protests which were perceived to be peaceful turned violent and security institutions had to intervene. The Zimbabwean protests, which were called and organized by civil society organizations, trade unions and opposition political parties have followed the Wall Street trend of ending up being violent. The Middle East and Arab regions also serve as examples of regions that have been impacted negatively by the use of social media in ways that threatened peace and security. In cases where

protests turned violent, instead of castigating the unlawfulness of the actions of violent protesters, social media platforms arm-twist the discourse into human rights issues where the illegality of action is brushed off by the claim of constitutional rights. This brings to mind the August 1 2018 and January 29 protest cases in Zimbabwe, which headlined global news.

Terrorism, which has served as the leading global threat to peace and security, has been proliferated on various social media platforms through renowned radical groups, such as ISIS and Boko Haram (Kimutai, 2014). Similarly, radical groups in Zimbabwe such as 'Tajamuka', 'Mthwakazi' and opposition parties have resorted to the use of social media platforms to announce their protest intentions, publicize lawlessness and coordinate violent ant-social behaviour in ways that instilled fear and panic amongst citizens, thereby threatening national peace and security (Borau & Wamba, 2019).

Zimbabwe, like any other global sphere, has its fair share of security dilemmas caused by social media. Information Communication Technology in Zimbabwe has served as a double-edged sword in the sense that while it promotes social, political and economic development, it has also increased opportunities for citizen radicalization, dissemination of falsehoods and pornography in ways that threaten national peace and security (Bafumi & Herron, 2010). The relationship between security and peace has made Berger (2016) conclude that since social media impacts on national security, it also indisputably affects national peace. Alberici and Milesi (2013) stated that the ever-increasing threats of civil unrest and overthrowing democratically elected leaders are a result of declining peace. On the other hand, Barnes (2006) suggested that social media has played a key role in perpetuating national threat to peace and security. According to Berger (2016), while lack of peace and security affects the levels of investments, peace promotes social harmony, which produces political cohesion and social stability, key features for economic progression.

Zimbabwe has witnessed national in-flow into the information arena. Since the relative economic recovery witnessed around 2010, access to technology has been high. Traditionally, in response to strict media restrictions and democratic deficits, Zimbabweans have used social media to challenge

dominant regime discourses and advance alternative narratives (Mugari, 2020). However, just like in literature Akande et al. (2021), social media has harmed the political development of the masses. Information credibility is seriously compromised as many actors can employ the dissemination of falsehoods in ways that threaten peace and security concerns (Berger 2016). Hate speech and incitement to violent actions have been placed beyond the regulatory capacity of law enforcement agents and this development has threatened peace and security in the country with the 2017 'Tajamuka' protests, August 1, 2018, and January 14, 2019, violent incidents coming to mind (Kimutai, 2014).

The advent of the social media platforms in Zimbabwe has contributed meaningfully to the spread of spurious and disruptive news to citizens, with some of the news intended to cause alarm and hopelessness in ways that threaten the peace and security of the country, a situation that has compelled the government to come in and dismiss such false news to re-establish calm to its citizens (Moyo, 2019). Zimbabweans have received false information on the perceived fall out between the president of Zimbabwe Dr. Emmerson Dambudzo Mnangagwa and his deputy Constantino Chiwenga on a series of occasions, the manufactured deaths of many government and military officials and the death of a nine-month-old baby mistakenly beaten by a police officer Nyoni (2017). Enforcing Covid 19 regulations and the purported ineffectiveness of the Chinese vaccine (Sino pharm) have all proved to be false but posed serious threats to national peace and security in the country Rukuni et al. (2019).

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study establishes that social media has functioned as a double-edged sword by both promoting peace and exacerbating security threats in the country through the dissemination of false information. Diffusion of Innovations Theory has significantly enhanced citizen participation, while also exposing individuals and communities to intensified processes of radicalization. The study shows that actors on social media do not always understand their actions and some abuse the concept of freedom of expression through the way they abuse the social media platforms.

This study, therefore, recommends the usage of social media platforms in mature and responsible ways without threatening national peace and security. The state must enhance its capacity by

having comprehensive cyber-crime legislation with well-equipped personnel to combat cybercrime to preserve national peace and security. Police and other security agents must undergo rigorous technology training to enhance their capacity when handling peace and security threats posed by the abuse of social media platforms. The study suggests the creation of an expansive legal framework by the state, that defines and press limitations on hate speech and incitation of violence through social media platforms. A proactive legal approach is recommended to place a useful limitation on the freedom of expression mostly relating to those issues of public security and peace. Finally, civil society organizations should take active roles in initiating responsible usage of social media platforms by the citizens.

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