

Somalia Needs a Legal Framework to Stop Social Media “Warlords:” A Study on the Impact of Social Media on Conflict Dynamics

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This study investigated the impact of social media on conflict dynamics in Somalia, a country still recovering from a devastating civil war that began in 1991. With the rapid rise of digital connectivity, internet access, and smartphone usage, social media has emerged as an essential platform where various actors compete for influence, including clan-affiliated groups, government authorities, political entities, and civil society groups. This study sought to answer two questions: How does social media influence the framing and perception of conflict-related events in Somalia? And how do social media platforms contribute to the escalation or de-escalation of inter-clan violence in the country? Grounded in Agenda Setting Theory, the study used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data on social media usage patterns with insights from qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews with local journalists, influencers, policymakers, and experts. The findings reveal that social media is often weaponized to incite inter-clan conflict, with diaspora-based influencers identified as some of the

most significant contributors to online incitement. The study also highlights serious legal and regulatory gaps in Somalia, where monitoring and addressing the misuse of social media remains a challenge. However, despite its negative aspects, social media also holds considerable promise as a tool for peacebuilding, with several examples showing its potential to foster dialogue and reconciliation. To address these issues, the study recommends the establishment of robust legal mechanisms to regulate and control social media usage. Additionally, increasing public awareness about the risks of misinformation and online incitement is essential. The study also calls on Somali diaspora communities to take greater responsibility for regulating their members' online behavior and to collaborate with authorities in Somalia and abroad to combat the misuse of digital platforms.

Keywords: Social Media, Somalia, Conflict Dynamics, Inter-clan war, Harmful Content

Social media has drastically changed how we communicate and interact as human beings, not only at global level, but also in societies facing security challenges (Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010). This change is equally significant for countries experiencing prolonged conflict and insecurity, such as Somalia. Social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and WhatsApp have become crucial for the daily lives of many Somalis (Abdirahman, 2023). These platforms provide

critical avenues for mobilization, communication and information sharing. However, in conflict-ridden societies, social media content presents opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, it serves as a means for individuals and groups to interact and express their opinions, share important information, and organize collective actions. However, on the other hand, the same social media platforms can threaten peaceful co-existence through spreading fake news and inciting violence, which can worsen societal divisions (Corps, 2021). Therefore, understanding this double-edged role played by social media is essential for designing strategies that maximize social media's potential while, at the same time, mitigating its risks.

Due to the horn-like shape in the African map, Somalia, a country in East Africa, also referred to as the Horn of Africa, has a tragic history of conflict, often due to clan-based rivalries, internal competition, and political fragmentation. The situation is further worsened by the influence of militant groups like Al-Shabaab (De Waal, 2020). Since the demise of the central government in 1991 after clan-based rebel groups defeated former Dictator Mohamed Siyad Barre, Somalia has experienced cycles of clan-motivated instability, marked by violence and humanitarian disaster (Mwai, 2013). This is despite the international community's massive efforts towards state-building (Hagerty & Mentes, 2012). In such a clan-influenced environment of chaos and violence, social media plays a significant role in shaping the conflict (Zeitzoff, 2017).

The conflict dynamics in Somalia have the potential to be further influenced by the distinct socio-political context, where clan identity plays a key role in both societal set-ups, on one hand, and the conflict, on the other. The unusual interplay between the clan-based social structure and divisions adds a layer of complexity to understanding how social media affects conflict in Somalia (Gaas, 2018). Although there is an ever-increasing scrutiny on the role played by social media in conflict at the global level, there is an apparent lack of research on its impact on clan-dominated set-ups, which is unique to the situation in Somalia.

Most of the existing research has focused mainly on traditional media (Khalif, 2022; Adan, 2021; Grobbelaar, 2023), and the few studies on social media in Somalia have broadly explored the usage of the internet and development of its infrastructure, and how

that has had an impact on politics and political campaigns (Ahmed, 2023; Ahmed, 2020; Abdirahman, 2023). While all these studies are crucial in the research on social media development and its use in Somalia and at the global level, they do not address the specific ways in which social media affects the conflict in Somalia's distinct socio-political situation. This gap highlights the need for a study that focuses on the impact of social media on conflict dynamics in Somalia, mainly due to the country's complicated clan-based rivalries.

This paper, therefore, aims to fill the existing gaps and provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media influences conflict dynamics in Somalia. The study further seeks to contribute to a more profound understanding of how social media shapes conflict, which can vary considerably depending on historical grievances, local dynamics, and the key players involved. For instance, the issue of clan identities in Somalia is unique (Peace Agency, 2023). As a result, understanding how clan-based identities in Somalia influence social media's role in conflict is essential in developing strategies that focus on the possible use of these platforms for peacebuilding while mitigating the risks. This study, therefore, aims to provide valuable insights into the complex relations between social media and conflict dynamics in Somalia. This is accomplished by focusing on the country's historical and socio-political context and how social media aggravates the situation. The findings of this study are a significant contribution to policy and practice in the context of Somalia and other conflict-ridden regions, where social media plays a similarly important role.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role played by social media in conflict dynamics has been widely studied, as it has attracted considerable academic attention, focusing on both its positive and negative impacts. At the global level, many studies have been conducted on conflict-ridden countries like Somalia, providing insights into social media's impact on conflict situations, which can be directly related to the context in Somalia. The studies of the effects of social media platforms in countries like Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria, and the Israel-Palestinian conflict illustrate how it can negatively or positively influence conflict events. In Nigeria, for example, social media has played an essential role in aggravating and alleviating

conflict (Okpalaibekwe et al., 2024). According to Okpalaibekwe et al. (2024), social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (now X) have mainly been used to incite people to acts of violence on ethnic and religious grounds. The study found that social media platforms were widely used to spread hateful content and organize crowds during heightened tension. However, the study also found that social media platforms have been used for peacebuilding efforts. For example, during Boko Haram's abductions of Nigerian girls in 2014, social media campaigns such as #BringBackOurGirls played an essential role in raising global awareness. They pressured the Nigerian government to act on the issue.

Another study by Zeitzoff (2017) noted that social media can amplify conflict narratives. However, it can also be a critical tool for coordinating humanitarian activities and disseminating crucial information. The study explained how rival factions used social media to coordinate attacks, recruit fighters, and spread misinformation during the Syrian civil war. The same study discovered that social media platforms provided a lifeline for civilians and humanitarian organizations, as they facilitated real-time reporting of the conflict, enabled communication among affected populations, and helped coordinate relief efforts.

The prolonged conflict between Israel and the Palestinians provided another example of how social media can have a strong influence on a conflict. Rashid et al. (2021) noted that traditional media agencies have adopted social media to disseminate information, through platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now X), to cover the conflict. This has increased polarization and hostilities and provided opportunities for peacebuilding and humanitarian efforts (Rashid et al., 2021). Similarly, in a study on social media's role in the Arab Spring, Howard and Hussain (2013) explored how these platforms enabled political mobilization and awareness, and contributed to the spread of misinformation, often leading to heightened tensions.

For Somalia, despite the limited studies on the direct impact of social media on conflict dynamics, some studies were conducted on the effects of social media on conflict resolution, political stability, and the proliferation of extremist ideologies in the country. Ahmed (2023) investigated the impact of social media on political stability in Mogadishu,

the capital city of Somalia, identifying both positive and negative effects. He noted that while social media platforms facilitate civic engagement and public discourse, they amplify misinformation and spread polarizing narratives, exacerbating tensions in fragile political environments. Adan (2021) emphasized the role of mass media, including social media platforms, in promoting political accountability in Somalia. The study concluded that social media creates a platform for citizens to hold leaders accountable, though weak institutional frameworks mainly hinder its regulation and effectiveness.

Khalif (2022) investigated the potential use of traditional and social media platforms in conflict management and resolution. His study underscored how digital media has caused the emergence of initiatives at the grassroots level that facilitated dialogue among rival factions. However, Khalif emphasized that the threat posed by the unregulated nature of social media platforms in Somalia means it can also be exploited to cause conflict. Brinkerhoff (2006) investigated the role of diaspora-based digital media initiatives in conflict prevention, explicitly focusing on platforms like Somalinet.com. The study concluded that Somali diaspora communities use social media to share resources, bridge divides, and foster peacebuilding efforts.

Grobbelaar (2023) gave a comprehensive analysis of how militant groups like Al-Shabaab have used social media platforms to transition from a group that relied heavily on violent attacks to resorting to a sophisticated propaganda campaign through social media. The study discussed how the Al-Shabaab militant group excelled in strategically using digital platforms for recruitment, radicalization, and global outreach. Abdirahman (2023) further focused on using social media platforms for political campaigns during elections in Somalia and demonstrated how these platforms are utilized to disseminate political messages and mobilize voters. However, the study noted that these platforms can disseminate insightful messages, undermining democratic processes and leading to dangerous social divisions.

Ahmed (2020) studied the spread, development, and widespread use of the internet and social media in Somalia, focusing on its quick penetration of social media despite infrastructural challenges. The study explored how the improved accessibility of digital media platforms has reorganized political and social interactions and thus influences

conflict dynamics. Even though the study focused on the negative impact of social media, there is equally a lot of research to indicate that social media is not solely a source of conflict. These platforms also provide valuable opportunities for countering hate speech, promoting dialogue, and fostering reconciliation (Baytiyeh, 2019). At times, activists and peace advocates in Somalia utilized social media platforms to share stories of resilience to challenge extremist narratives and mobilize citizens for peace.

Bhat (2019) investigated how social media content is used as a medium for live coverage and real-time updates, making it an effective tool for state and non-state actors in conflict settings. In Kenya, for example, social media not only played a significant role in inciting ethnic hatred in post-election violence in 2007 (Ndonye, 2014) but was also used to mobilize communities for peaceful causes. The "Kenyans for Kenya" initiative is such a good example, and it has shown the ability of social media to rally people to peace efforts (Ndonye, 2014).

Agenda Setting Theory

The Agenda Setting Theory, which was developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1968, is the view that the media can set our agenda and direct our thinking (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Salman et al. (2016) indicate that the agenda-setting theory could be extended or even remodeled to include social media due to its profound influence on the public agenda. This is true for Somalia, a country grappling with over three decades of civil war and conflict, as social media has become an essential tool for shaping public opinion, setting the agenda, and often negatively influencing the course of clan-based conflicts (Ahmed, 2023).

The situation has not improved much for Somalia, even with the establishment of an UN-backed federal system of governance in 2004, as the country remains intertwined in clan-based political turmoil involving antagonistic players: clan-based regional administrations, clan militias, the federal government, and extremist groups like Al-Shabaab (Menkhaus, 2007). These conflicts result from a complex web of political instability and clan-based rivalries, often motivated by resource competition. Efforts have been made to create awareness among journalists to improve the traditional media, which originally played an essential role in setting the agenda (Skjerdal, 2012). However, the

widespread use of social media has added a new dimension to how conflicts are managed and perceived (Moorhead et al., 2013). According to agenda-setting theory, the media, and in this case, social media, can determine which issues are considered necessary by the public (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

The fierce competition for influence in Somalia has led activists, politicians, social media influencers, and militant groups to use social media platforms to sell specific agendas and highlight grievances, events, and narratives, shaping how people react to conflicts (Mire, 2024). For instance, social media has shown that it can amplify conflict situations, drawing attention at both national and international levels. The increased visibility of specific issues due to social media can sometimes pressure political leaders to respond with urgency, thus influencing the conflict's direction (Kilcullen, 2022). More importantly, social media can be used to set the agenda in highlighting successful conflict resolution mechanisms and advocating for peace initiatives, which could encourage a more positive public discourse (Njabi, 2019).

Agenda Setting Theory, therefore, provides a comprehensive framework in understanding the impact of social media on conflict dynamics in Somalia. Social media has emerged as a key player in shaping the country's conflict landscape by influencing public perception and promoting counter-narratives. As a result, there is a real opportunity to leverage the agenda-setting power of social media to promote peace and stability in Somalia and use it as a conflict resolution mechanism.

METHODS

This study combined quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a complete understanding of social media's impact on conflict dynamics in Somalia (Subedi, 2023). Mixed methods helped capture the complex ways social media is used and perceived in conflict situations.

Quantitative Component

A structured survey was conducted to understand better social media usage patterns (Alzubaidi et al., 2023). It involved 312 respondents spread across all the regions of Somalia. We employed stratified random sampling to ensure representation from different demographics and locations, which helped gather voices from various

perspectives and communities (Roscoe, 2021). The survey explored key questions such as the platforms people prefer, how often they engage with social media, and their views on the role of social media in shaping conflict. To reach a wide range of participants, we distributed the survey online and in person, ensuring inclusion of individuals with limited internet access (Wardropper et al., 2021).

Qualitative Component

While the quantitative survey provided numerical insights, there was a need to understand the deeper narratives linked to the role of social media in conflict dynamics in Somalia (Coscia and Ross, 2022). To do this, in-depth interviews were conducted with 32 participants drawn from interest groups: social media influencers, journalists, policymakers, and experts in the field of social media. The conversations shed light on how narratives related to social media develop, their role in provoking or preventing conflict, and their influence on peacebuilding efforts. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes, allowing participants ample time to share their perspectives. The interviews took place in the following key cities: Mogadishu, the capital city of Somalia, and Garowe, Baidoa, and Dusamareb, which serve as the headquarters for the regions of Puntland, Southwest, and Galmudug, respectively. We used purposive sampling in carefully selecting interviewees, ensuring they had insights and relevant experience on social media and policy discussions (Khanal et al., 2021).

Data collection

For the quantitative component of the study, survey data were collected through offline and online questionnaires and analyzed systematically using SPSS statistical software to ensure accuracy and reliability (Roni et al., 2021). We examined trends, patterns, and correlations to understand how social media use relates to perceptions of conflict.

For the qualitative interviews, semi-structured questions were used to ensure consistency and allow for natural discussions across all interviews (Price & Smith, 2021). Through the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Recurring themes and key insights were identified to provide valuable context to the quantitative survey results.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical integrity was at the core of our research process's stages. Research participants were informed about the voluntary nature of participation, the purpose of the study, and how their responses would be kept confidential before obtaining their consent to participate (Taquette et al., 2022). Given the delicate nature of the research topic, we prioritized participant safety and ensured anonymity throughout the study. While this study did not undergo formal Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval due to the lack of a credible and widely accepted framework governing social research in Somalia, international ethical standards, such as those outlined in the Belmont Report, were adhered to.

RESULTS

This section presents and aligns the study's findings with the research questions while incorporating quantitative and qualitative perspectives. The results explore how social media shapes perceptions of conflict and influences the escalation or de-escalation of inter-clan violence in Somalia. To ensure clarity, key data points are illustrated through tables, and qualitative insights provide deeper context to the numerical trends.

Quantitative Results: The role of social media in conflict dynamics

For research question one, how does social media influence the framing and perception of conflict-related events in Somalia? The study found that social media has become a dominant source of information in Somalia, influencing public perceptions about conflict. According to the survey results, 44.71% of respondents primarily use social media as a news source. This highlights the critical role played by these platforms in shaping public awareness and discourse around conflict-related events, as illustrated in Table 1. The prevalence of Facebook (30.71%) and TikTok (22.88%) as the most frequently used platforms suggests that textual and visual narratives contribute to framing conflicts, influencing how the public interprets events.

Table 1
Participants' Reason for Using Social Media

Reason	Percentage (%)
News	44.71
Education	15.29
Entertainment	14.71

Additionally, the impact of social media on conflict dynamics is primarily perceived as negative, with 50.18% of respondents indicating this viewpoint. In comparison, 44.82% acknowledge positive and negative impacts, as shown in Table 2. The significantly low number of purely positive perspectives suggests that misinformation, sensationalism, and biased reporting contribute to distorted conflict narratives.

Table 2
Participants' Views on Impact of Social Media

Perception	Percentage (%)
Negative	50.18
Mixed (Positive & Negative)	44.71
Positive	5.11

Furthermore, diaspora-based social media influencers (40.00%) and politicians (21.18%) are identified as playing the most negative role in shaping public perceptions, further exacerbating tensions and conflict framing, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Participants' Views on Most Negative Role

Actor	Percentage (%)
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Diaspora Influencers	40.00
Politicians	21.18
Somalia-Based Users	18.62

Qualitative Findings: The role of social media in conflict dynamics

Social media has become essential to daily life in Somalia, influencing how people perceive and react to conflicts. We conducted in-depth interviews with 32 key informants, including journalists, policymakers, social media influencers, and experts, to gain deeper insights into this dynamic. These conversations in Mogadishu, Garowe, Dusamareb, and Baidoa shed light on how social media shapes conflict narratives and either escalates or de-escalates inter-clan violence.

The Spread of Misinformation and Propaganda: Many respondents expressed concern over the rapid spread of unverified information on social media. Fake news and propaganda are frequently shared, shaping public perception and often escalating conflicts. One participant said, “Social media plays a negative role; clan polarization, social division, and incitement make conflict-related content spread faster.”

The Role of Diaspora-Based Influencers: A recurring theme was the influence of Somali diaspora-based social media users in fueling tensions. Respondents argued that these influencers, disconnected from the realities on the ground, frame conflicts in ways that intensify divisions. One participant observed, “Our people in the diaspora misuse social media to fuel inter-clan conflict because they are far from the consequences.” Another noted, “Some of these influencers are directly responsible for inciting violence.”

Amplification of Minor Incidents: Several respondents highlighted how small incidents, such as misunderstandings or accidents, are often framed as major clan conflicts. This can inflame tensions between communities, leading to unnecessary

escalation. A respondent said: “Accidents can be depicted as clan conflict... any misunderstanding can be magnified to cause violence.”

Citizen Journalism and Bias in Reporting: Unlike traditional media, social media lacks professional oversight, allowing citizen journalists and unregulated content creators to influence public opinion. The absence of trained journalists in the digital space contributes to biased reporting and misinformation, which can deepen societal divisions.

Legal and Regulatory Gaps: A common concern was the lack of legal frameworks to regulate harmful content online. One respondent stated: “In Somalia, digital media is unregulated. There is no legal framework to prosecute social media warlords who incite violence.” Participants emphasized updating media laws to include social media regulation to curb misuse.

Quantitative Results: The Role of Social Media in the Escalation and De-escalation of Inter-Clan Violence

For research question two, how do social media platforms contribute to escalating and/or de-escalating inter-clan violence in Somalia? The findings indicate that social media is a significant factor in fueling inter-clan conflicts, with 65.10% of respondents identifying clan-related violence as the most common conflict type incited by social media. The high percentage of clan-related conflicts suggests that existing social divisions are being reinforced through online discourse, often escalating tensions rather than mitigating them. Political conflicts are also substantial at 32.08%, while religious extremism and social conflicts are less frequently cited, as illustrated in **Table 4**.

Table 4*Participants' views on Social Media Role in Conflict*

Conflict Type	Percentage (%)
Clan-related	65.10
Political	32.08
Religious Extremism	1.50
Social Conflicts	1.32

Moreover, the time spent on social media significantly influences the exposure to conflict-related content. The data shows that 21.76% of respondents spend more than 12 hours daily on social media, which increases their likelihood of engaging with divisive or inflammatory content. The substantial proportion of users spending between 6 and 12 hours (23.53%) further highlights the intensive consumption of digital narratives that may reinforce existing biases and grievances.

Qualitative Results: The Role of Social Media in the Escalation and/or De-escalation of Inter-Clan Violence

Social media has become an influential tool in either escalating or de-escalating the conflict dynamics in Somalia, depending on how it is used.

The Spread of Misinformation and Propaganda: Social media has played a significant role in escalating inter-clan violence. Many respondents pointed to the rise of hate speech and incitement, particularly from diaspora-based influencers who face no direct consequences for their actions. One respondent said, “The Somali government should find a way to cooperate with Interpol and charge the diaspora-based hatemongers.”

Challenges in Law Enforcement: While some efforts have been made to regulate social media content, respondents questioned their effectiveness. Many noted that the Somali government and regional states lack the resources to counter online hate speech

and incitement. A respondent said, “Although Puntland has a draft bill on social media before parliament, existing mechanisms are inadequate to control the growing misuse of these platforms.”

Public Awareness and Education: Many participants emphasized that many social media users lack awareness of the dangers of harmful content. They recommended public education campaigns to encourage responsible use of digital platforms. A respondent said, “Most people do not understand what constitutes harmful content on social media, which is why awareness creation is crucial.”

Social Media as a Peacebuilding Tool: Despite its negative impact, it can also be a powerful tool for peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Some respondents shared examples of instances where social media was used to announce peace agreements, helping to calm tensions. As one participant said, “Social media can be leveraged to advocate for peace and reconciliation.”

The Ethical Responsibility of Social Media Influencers: Many respondents stressed the need for influencers to act responsibly in conflict situations. Some social media personalities already use their platforms to promote peace, but more guidance is needed to ensure digital spaces are not used for incitement.

Summary of Key Findings

Social media is widely used in Somalia, with Facebook, TikTok, and WhatsApp being the most popular platforms. Most users engage with social media for news, education, and entertainment, but it is also a significant source of misinformation. Most believe social media contributes to conflict, particularly clan-related disputes. Diaspora-based influencers play a major role in escalating inter-clan tensions by spreading divisive rhetoric. There is no adequate legal framework to regulate social media content, making it challenging to combat harmful narratives.

While social media has fueled tensions, it has also been used in limited cases to promote peace and de-escalate conflicts.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that social media is a powerful tool that shapes conflict dynamics in Somalia and plays both a constructive and destabilizing role. Like in other conflict-ridden countries, digital media platforms facilitate mobilization, influence public perceptions of conflict, and contribute to both the escalation and resolution of violence. The results are consistent with prior research conducted in Nigeria, South Sudan, Syria, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where social media has caused tensions through fake news and misinformation, while at the same time serving as a platform for peace efforts. However, Somalia presents a unique case due to its deeply entrenched clan system, which continues to influence conflicts and has historically played a key role in shaping inter-group relations. Unlike conflicts primarily defined by political and religious ideologies, clan identity remains central to Somali society, and social media plays a key role in reinforcing these divisions by amplifying historical grievances and clan-based narratives (Ahmed, 2023; Khalif, 2022).

The Role of Social Media in Framing Conflict Events

The study highlights that social media has become an essential news source in Somalia, with platforms like Facebook and TikTok shaping public discourse. This finding is consistent with existing research that identifies social media as a tool for both the sharing of information and misinformation. Previous studies on conflicts in Syria and Nigeria indicate that social media facilitated real-time coverage of events, but also was used to spread false narratives that deepened societal divisions. Similarly, in Somalia, the quick circulation of unverified information has often contributed to heightened tensions, especially in fragile political environments, where traditional mechanisms to fact-check are either weak or non-existent (Zeitsoff, 2017).

One notable finding is the influence of diaspora-based social media users. The study indicates that diaspora-based influencers shape narratives significantly, often leading to the escalation of tensions by spreading divisive and hateful content, without directly experiencing the consequences of their action. This agrees with previous studies on the Somali diaspora, which suggest that while these communities can promote peace initiatives, they also exacerbate conflicts when their engagement lacks accountability

(Brinkerhoff, 2006). Similar patterns have been observed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where digital activism has been used to mobilize peace initiatives and reinforce hostilities (Rashid et al., 2021). Another key insight is the way social media magnifies minor incidents into large-scale conflicts, which has been well-documented in previous studies on political uprisings, including research on the Arab Spring, where social media provided a platform for political mobilization and has heightened tensions through the quick spreading of emotionally charged narratives (Howard & Hussain, 2013).

The findings of this study further reveal that, in Somalia, even minor disputes and incidents like accidents can sometimes be framed as inter-clan conflict, leading to inter-group animosities and prolonging cycles of violence. Given Somalia's unique clan composition, these digital amplifications have an especially significant impact, reinforcing existing rivalries and deepening societal fractures. Unlike in many other countries where ethnic, political, or religious divisions dominate, Somalia's clan-based social structure remains the ultimate determinant of social interactions, governance, and resource access, making the role of social media in framing the conflict particularly profound (Ahmed, 2020; Khalif, 2022).

The Impact of Social Media on the Escalation of Inter-Clan Violence

The study underscored the role of social media in escalating inter-clan conflict. Most respondents view social media as a major driver of clan-based conflicts, mirroring similar findings from research on Nigeria, where digital platforms have been used to incite ethnic and religious violence (Okpalaibekwe et al., 2024). In Somalia, social media provides a space for propaganda, hate speech, and direct calls for violence, further leading to divisions among communities. The unregulated nature of social media platforms allows inflammatory content to spread quickly, fueling retaliatory attacks and deepening hostilities (Grobelaar, 2023).

The clan-based nature of Somali society makes spreading fake news and misinformation particularly dangerous, as historical grievances between clans can be easily reignited through social media. Unlike in other conflict settings where political parties or ideological movements shape online discourse, Somalia's conflict narratives are deeply rooted in clan affiliations, influencing access to resources, political alliances, and

local governance structures. This distinction makes social media's role in conflict escalation especially unique in Somalia, as it reinforces long-standing grievances and contributes to cycles of retaliatory violence (Brinkerhoff, 2006; Grobbelaar, 2023).

The findings of this study are also consistent with previous studies that have highlighted how digital platforms have become tools for armed groups such as Al-Shabaab, allowing them to mobilize support, spread radical ideologies, and exploit clan divisions to advance their agendas (Ahmed, 2023). A further challenge is the lack of effective regulation to curb harmful content. While Puntland, a semi-autonomous region in Somalia, has introduced a draft bill on social media regulation, respondents remain skeptical about its effectiveness. This agrees with broader concerns about weak institutional frameworks in Somalia, which limit the government's ability to enforce digital governance. Research on digital peace efforts in other conflict zones suggests that grassroots initiatives can help counter misinformation. However, these efforts are often undermined by the rapid and unregulated spread of divisive narratives (Adan, 2021; Khalif, 2022).

Social Media as a Peacebuilding Tool

Despite the divisive role played by social media, it also presents opportunities for peacebuilding. This study finds that social media platforms have successfully been used to declare peace through reconciliation agreements, which led to the de-escalation of tension, supporting previous studies that highlighted the potential of social media in fostering reconciliation. Similar initiatives have been observed in Kenya, where activism through social media played a crucial role in promoting unity following periods of electoral violence in 2007-2008 (Ndonye, 2014).

The study also emphasized the importance of ethical social media influencers in promoting balanced narratives. Previous research has demonstrated that when/if used responsibly, social media platforms can facilitate positive engagement and prevent conflict escalation. However, fake news and misinformation remain a key barrier, limiting the full potential of social media as a peacebuilding tool. While some diaspora communities promote stability, their efforts are often overshadowed by the louder, more divisive voices that dominate online spaces (Bhat, 2019; Baytiyeh, 2019).

Studies that focus on how grassroots movements have successfully leveraged social media platforms to counter hate speech and promote reconciliation further support the role of social media in peacebuilding. In some cases, local leaders and activists have used social media to mobilize communities toward peace efforts, spread stories of resilience, and challenge extremist narratives (Khalif, 2022; Ahmed, 2023). However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends on wider regulatory structures and media literacy programs that equip users with the skills to identify and resist divisive content.

CONCLUSION

This study underscored social media's far-reaching and profound impact on Somalia's conflict landscape, serving as a tool for causing division and a potential force for peace. Social media has revolutionized how people communicate with one another and engage with political discourse. Still, it has also fueled clan-based conflicts, spread fake news and misinformation, and deepened existing tensions in a society grappling with historical rivalries. The unregulated and rapid spread of hate speech and inflammatory content has made it easier for these divisions to escalate, with diaspora-based influencers playing a particularly negative role in amplifying conflict narratives from afar. Despite these challenges, this study also shows that social media holds immense potential for positive change. It can create space for community dialogue, support grassroots peace efforts, and counter extremist narratives when used thoughtfully. Based on the insights from this study, the following key recommendations are proposed:

Somalia needs to establish and enforce clear laws targeting hate speech, misinformation, and digital incitement of clan-related violence. A well-balanced legal framework should uphold freedom of expression while preventing harmful content from escalating conflicts. For example, the Somali diaspora communities urgently need to hold their members accountable to prevent them from negatively influencing inter-clan tensions. Programs should be developed to promote responsible engagement from diaspora-based social media influencers, reducing their role in escalating tensions and channeling their influence toward peacebuilding efforts.

In addition, real-time monitoring tools, particularly those tailored to the Somali language and cultural context, are crucial for identifying and mitigating harmful content before it spreads. This includes leveraging artificial intelligence alongside human fact-checking initiatives. Similarly, public education campaigns focused on responsible social media use can empower individuals to assess the credibility of online information critically. Community-based digital literacy initiatives can help curb the spread of misinformation and equip users with the skills to navigate social media responsibly.

Lastly, investing in online peace campaigns and equipping local community leaders with digital tools for conflict resolution can amplify positive narratives. Social media should be leveraged to promote inter-clan dialogue, highlight success stories of coexistence, and counter inflammatory rhetoric.

Suggestions for Further Research

While this study offers a comprehensive analysis of social media's role in Somali conflict dynamics, several areas warrant further exploration: In-depth research is needed on how diaspora-based influencers and online activists shape inter-clan relations, political discourse, and social tensions. Understanding these influences can help policymakers and civil society organizations develop engagement strategies that encourage positive contributions rather than further division.

Future research might also explore how Somalia can create and implement digital policies that curb misinformation and hate speech without restricting freedom of expression. Comparative studies with other nations successfully managing digital governance could offer valuable insights.

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