

**IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST BANDITRY IN
THE
MIDDLE BELT, NIGERIA, (2010-2024).**

BY

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**DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
FACULTY OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF BENIN**

NOVEMBER, 2025

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**A PROJECT SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY AND
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, FACULTY OF ARTS, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN,
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THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS (B.A.) IN
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES AND DIPLOMACY**

NOVEMBER, 2025

CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **Malik Olalekan Babalola** in the Department of History and International Studies, University of Benin, under my supervision.

—
Dr. A. O. Onobhayedo
Project Supervisor

.....

....

Date

Professor J. C. Nwaka
Head of department

.....

Date

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God Almighty for His infinite grace and mercy upon my life.

His

loving kindness, protection and grace throughout my course of study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am especially grateful to God almighty for his mercy on my life. I would not have been able to achieve this without his constant presence and benevolence. I am very grateful to my project supervisor Dr. A. O. Onobhayedo, for his support, aid, feedback, boundless kindness and unfathomable patience. Without him I would have surely struggled to get to the end of this milestone.

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My sincere gratitude also goes to my parents, Mr and Mrs Babalola. Without them I wouldn't be here, without them I would have the courage to believe and the opportunity to learn. Without their stellar examples on capacity and being high achievers, I would not have become the person I am today, the person who would end up writing this project. I also want to thank my siblings; Tinuke, Bumi and Kola, for their valuable insights and contributions to this project. They really made the research go by much more easily, as well as encouraging me when I was at the brink of forfeit.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The Middle Belt of Nigeria has increasingly become a focal point of conflict and insecurity, primarily due to the alarming rise of banditry. This region, known for its rich cultural diversity and complex socio-political landscape, has faced a significant escalation in violent attacks, kidnappings, and other forms of criminality. Banditry is not merely a law enforcement challenge; it intertwines with historical grievances, economic disparities, and social dynamics that have developed over decades. The consequences of this violence are profound, leading to loss of life, displacement, and a pervasive atmosphere of fear that affects everyday life in the region¹.

Historically, banditry in Nigeria has evolved from a combination of socio-economic stressors, including poverty, unemployment, and competition for resources². In the Middle Belt, issues such as land disputes and struggles over access to grazing routes have intensified tensions among different ethnic groups. These historical conflicts, often exacerbated by a lack of effective governance and security, have created an environment where armed groups can thrive³. Communities are left vulnerable, often relying on traditional forms of conflict resolution that may no longer be effective in the face of modern criminal tactics.

In recent years, social media has emerged as a crucial tool in the fight against banditry. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have reshaped the way information is disseminated, enabling rapid communication and mobilization of community responses to threats. The immediacy of social media allows individuals to report incidents of violence and share updates on security situations, which is particularly vital in areas where traditional media coverage is limited⁴. This real-time information sharing has empowered communities to act swiftly in the face of danger, fostering a sense of solidarity and collective action.

Moreover, social media has catalyzed grassroots activism that challenges prevailing narratives surrounding banditry. Activists and community leaders leverage these platforms to raise awareness about the impacts of banditry on local populations, advocating for stronger government intervention and increased community engagement. Campaigns utilizing hashtags and viral content have garnered significant public attention, compelling authorities to take more decisive action against the crisis⁵. This digital activism represents a critical avenue for advocacy, showcasing the potential of social media to drive change and mobilize support.

As we consider the period from 2010 to 2024, the intersection of technology and grassroots activism becomes increasingly relevant. Communities navigating the complexities of banditry must understand how social media influences public perception and action. This understanding is essential for developing effective strategies to combat the persistent issue of banditry. While social media presents numerous opportunities for

engagement and mobilization, it is crucial to recognize its limitations. Misinformation, online harassment, and the digital divide pose challenges that can hinder the effectiveness of social media campaigns, complicating the landscape of advocacy⁶.

In summary, this introduction sets the stage for an exploration of the dynamics at play in the Middle Belt of Nigeria, highlighting the role of social media as both a tool for awareness and a platform for community resilience. By examining how social media influences responses to banditry, this study aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for affected communities. The subsequent chapters will delve deeper into the historical context, causes, and implications of banditry, ensuring a comprehensive analysis of this pressing issue.

Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study is to assess the role of social media in combating banditry in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. Given the multifaceted nature of banditry, this research seeks to understand how social media platforms can be effectively utilized as tools for awareness, mobilization, and advocacy in response to this pervasive challenge.

Objectives

1. To analyze the nature and impact of banditry in the middle belt of Nigeria: This objective focuses on looking into and dissecting the nature, origins and impact of banditry in the middle belt. It will look into the historic elements that characterize this dilemma, as well as the different manifestations.

2. To examine social media campaigns against banditry in the middle belt: The study will evaluate the effectiveness of specific social media campaigns aimed at raising awareness about banditry. This includes analyzing campaigns that have gained traction online, assessing their impact on public perception, and examining how they have influenced community and governmental responses to violence. By understanding what makes these campaigns successful or ineffective, valuable lessons can be drawn for future efforts.

3. To identify challenges and limitations associated with social media in the context of banditry: This objective aims to uncover the challenges and limitations faced by communities in utilizing social media for conflict resolution. Issues such as misinformation, online harassment, and accessibility barriers will be examined to understand how these factors hinder the effectiveness of social media as a tool for advocacy. Identifying these challenges is crucial for developing strategies to enhance community engagement and response efforts.

4. To explore the role of digital activism through social media platforms to combat banditry: The study will investigate how digital activism has emerged in response to banditry in the Middle Belt. This involves looking at the strategies employed by activists and community leaders to leverage social media for advocacy and mobilization. Understanding the role of digital activism will shed light on how social media can facilitate collective action and drive social change.

5. To analyze social media powered community mobilization efforts against banditry in the middle belt: This objective focuses on examining how social media facilitates

community mobilization against banditry. It will explore the ways local communities leverage platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to organize responses, share critical information, and coordinate actions in the face of threats from armed groups. Understanding these dynamics will provide insights into the effectiveness of digital communication in fostering community resilience.

By addressing these aims and objectives, this study intends to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between social media and the fight against banditry. It will offer insights that can inform future strategies and interventions, ultimately enhancing the capacity of communities to respond to violence and insecurity.

Scope of Study

This study focuses on the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, a diverse area that has become increasingly affected by banditry in recent years. The scope is defined by both geographical and temporal boundaries, examining the period from 2010 to 2024. This timeframe is particularly significant as it encompasses the escalation of banditry and the corresponding rise in the use of social media as a tool for awareness and mobilization.

Geographical Focus

The Middle Belt is characterized by its ethnic diversity and historical complexities, making it an ideal case study for understanding the dynamics of banditry and community responses. The region includes states such as Kaduna, Benue, Plateau, and Niger, each with unique socio-political contexts. This diversity allows for a comprehensive exploration of how different communities engage with social media in their fight against

banditry. The study will consider urban and rural perspectives, recognizing that the impact of social media can vary significantly based on local contexts.

Time Frame

The chosen timeframe of 2010 to 2024 captures critical developments in both banditry and social media usage. Beginning in 2010, this period marks the rise of banditry as a prominent security issue in the Middle Belt, with reports of violent attacks and kidnappings becoming more frequent. Additionally, this era coincides with the increasing penetration of mobile technology and social media platforms in Nigeria, which have transformed communication and advocacy strategies.

By examining events and trends within this timeframe, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how social media has evolved as a tool for community engagement and action against banditry. It will highlight key incidents, campaigns, and shifts in public perception that illustrate the role of social media in shaping responses to violence and insecurity.

Methodology

This study employs a historical approach to investigate the role of social media in combating banditry in the Middle Belt of Nigeria. This methodology adopts qualitative and quantitative research methods where necessary, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media in the struggle against banditry in the middle belt, Nigeria.

Data Collection

1. Primary Sources:

Content Analysis: Social media content related to banditry will be analyzed to evaluate specific campaigns. This analysis will focus on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, as well as qualitative insights from posts and discussions.

2. Secondary Sources:

- Existing Research: A review of relevant academic articles, books and government reports will be conducted. This will contextualize the study within the broader discourse on banditry and social media.
- Reports and Case Studies: Analysis of reports from NGOs and governmental organizations addressing banditry and social media usage will provide additional context and data.

Literature Review

This literature review examines the multifaceted issue of banditry in Nigeria, with a specific focus on how social media influences awareness, mobilization, and potential conflict resolution efforts. It synthesizes findings from verifiable sources to provide a comprehensive overview of the topic.

Banditry in Nigeria

According to the UNDP, the Middle Belt, characterized by a mix of ethnic groups and agricultural communities, has long been a site of conflict, especially between pastoralists and sedentary farmers. Land disputes, exacerbated by climate change and

demographic pressures, have led to violent confrontations that serve as a breeding ground for banditry⁷.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), states that Following independence, the failure of successive Nigerian governments to address these grievances has contributed to a cycle of violence and instability. Disenfranchised groups have turned to banditry as a means of survival and resistance against perceived injustices⁸.

Agricultural productivity has plummeted in affected areas, leading to food insecurity and heightened poverty levels. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), over 200,000 people have been displaced due to banditry, compounding the humanitarian crisis in the region⁹.

In particular, the historical context of land use and ethnic relations in Nigeria plays a significant role in the emergence of banditry The Middle Belt is home to diverse ethnic groups, often competing for land and resources. The result of this competition can often detonate in banditry¹⁰

Banditry in Nigeria, particularly in the North West region, has evolved into a significant security challenge. The International Crisis Group reports that “banditry is characterized by violent acts, including kidnapping, armed robbery, and cattle rustling, leading to instability and fear among communities”¹¹. This phenomenon is not new; historical contexts reveal that banditry has deep roots in socio-economic issues such as poverty, unemployment, and climate change, which exacerbate farmer-herder conflicts¹².

The UNIDIR's study on banditry in Nigeria's North West provides insights from affected communities, highlighting that the drivers are primarily economic, with bandits often operating in highly mobile, armed groups¹³.

Socio-Economic Implications

According to M.O. Anthony, “The utter disregard for the well being of its rural population has lead Nigeria into a position national insecurity, and one may say that this is one of the birthed consequences of such neglect. Beyond that, the lavish lifestyles of those involved in banditry also create a "get-rich-quick syndrome", enticing more youth to participate¹⁴.”

The impact of banditry extends beyond physical violence, deeply affecting the socio-economic well-being of communities. According to the World Bank, the affected regions face increased poverty and food insecurity due to displacement and disrupted agricultural activities¹⁵. A recent report by OCHA (2022) indicates that hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced, further straining resources and social structures¹⁶. The loss of livelihoods and assets to ransom payments further impoverishes vulnerable populations¹⁷.

Social Media as a Tool for Awareness and Mobilization

M. Y. Oghogho, & O. M. C. Osazuwa, note that in situations of crisis, such as violent bandit attacks, social media allows users to report incidents as they occur, providing immediate updates to affected communities. Platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp enable individuals to share information about ongoing attacks, security alerts, and safety tips, helping communities to respond swiftly to threats¹⁸.

Moreover, in the words of I. V. Dunu, & C. E. Uzochukwu, “social media campaigns often incorporate compelling narratives and visuals that resonate with audiences.” For instance, community members may share personal stories of loss and resilience, which can evoke empathy and mobilize support from a broader audience. This storytelling aspect of social media not only raises awareness but also builds solidarity among diverse groups, encouraging collective action against banditry¹⁹.

For example, campaigns that successfully mobilize online support can translate into offline actions, such as community meetings, advocacy events, and policy forums. Social media can serve as a bridge, connecting grassroots movements with influential stakeholders who have the power to effect change at higher levels²⁰.

Additionally, Dr. Croc highlighted the alarming situation in Southern Kaduna, where "ethno-religious cleansing is taking place with hardly any intervention from the government"⁵. Such statements draw attention to the urgent need for policy reforms and active government engagement in addressing the violence²¹.

Social media platforms have become critical tools for raising awareness and mobilizing responses to banditry in Nigeria. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp facilitate real-time information sharing, enabling communities to report incidents and coordinate actions²². A study by the Centre for Social Justice highlights the potential of social media to enhance community engagement and awareness regarding security issues²³. The #EndSARS movement, while focused on police brutality,

demonstrated the power of social media to unify diverse groups around common causes and influence public discourse, providing a model for addressing banditry²⁴.

Challenges and Risks

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “misinformation” is defined as "false or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive²⁵," while “fake news” refers to "news that is fabricated or misleading, often created to manipulate public opinion²⁶". These definitions highlight the intentionality behind misinformation and the potential consequences it can have on public discourse.

Reports from the Nigerian Communications Commission indicate a significant rise in false narratives surrounding security issues, often fueled by sensationalist headlines and unverified claims²⁷.

A study by the Pew Research Center found that misinformation travels faster and further on social media than accurate news, with users more likely to engage with sensational content. This presents a significant challenge for activists who aim to provide accurate information and counter false narratives²⁸.

Despite these efforts, the influence of misinformation remains potent. One notable example involves a tweet from journalist Patrick Anum, who spoke out against the oversimplification of violence in the Middle Belt. He criticized how media narratives often reduce complex issues to simplistic terms, such as "farmer-herder clashes." Anum's advocacy highlights the responsibility of media professionals to provide nuanced coverage and the dangers of allowing misinformation to shape public perception. His

observations serve as a reminder that the media plays a critical role in shaping narratives that influence public understanding of complex issues²⁹.

Despite its potential, social media also presents challenges in the context of banditry. Misinformation and fake news can spread rapidly, exacerbating tensions and undermining trust in legitimate efforts³⁰. The exploitation of social media by criminal elements for recruitment and propaganda poses a significant risk³¹. Furthermore, the digital divide limits access to these platforms for many rural communities, hindering their ability to participate in awareness and mobilization efforts³².

Chapter Outline

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Chapter Five: Challenges and Limitations of Social Media in Conflict Resolution

Misinformation and Fake News

Digital Divide and Accessibility Issues

Online Harassment and Threats

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CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BANDITRY IN THE MIDDLE BELT

Overview Of Banditry In The Middle Belt

The terminology known as banditry can be defined as organized criminal activity involving robbery, kidnapping, and extortion, has taken root in Nigeria, particularly in the North West and Middle Belt regions. Unlike traditional crime, which may be opportunistic in nature, banditry is often characterized by systematic violence and the use of armed groups that exploit weak governance and law enforcement in rural areas¹. These criminal organizations operate with a high degree of mobility, evading capture and often leaving communities in fear and disarray.

The phenomenon of banditry in Nigeria has evolved significantly over the past two decades, particularly in the context of increasing violence and insecurity. While the term "banditry" has been used historically to describe various forms of criminal activity, it has recently become associated with organized, armed groups that engage in coordinated attacks against civilians, often for financial gain. The tactics employed by these groups include mass kidnappings, armed robbery, and cattle rustling, affecting both individual victims and entire communities².

Historical Context

The phenomenon of banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt is the culmination of long-standing historical, socio-economic, and political factors that have evolved over centuries.

To comprehend its recent intensity, particularly between 2010 and 2024, one must employ a historical approach that traces its transformation from precolonial raiding traditions to a modern network of organized armed groups. Banditry is, therefore, not a new phenomenon but the re-emergence of historically embedded violence shaped by state fragility, inequality, and the failure of governance.³

Colonial and Post-Colonial Foundations of Violence. During the colonial period, the British system of indirect rule institutionalized pre-existing hierarchies, often subordinating Middle Belt minorities to northern emirates they had historically resisted.⁴ This arrangement fostered political resentment and disrupted local governance structures that previously mediated disputes and managed land use.⁵ The British emphasis on taxation and export-oriented agriculture weakened communal economies and increased dependence on state structures that rarely served minority interests.

Following independence in 1960, Nigeria's successive governments retained this uneven administrative structure, which perpetuated regional inequalities and deepened ethnic divisions.⁶ Economic marginalization and poor access to education left the Middle Belt vulnerable to cycles of violence. By the 1980s, rural banditry and cattle rustling had become prevalent across Plateau, Niger, and Kaduna states.⁷ Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1990s further eroded social welfare systems and intensified rural poverty, forcing many unemployed youths into criminal activity.⁸

The Modern Wave of Banditry (2010–2024)

Modern banditry in the Middle Belt emerged around 2010 as a distinct phase in

Nigeria's security crisis. Several interlocking factors—weak policing, proliferation of arms, and climate-induced displacement—converged to transform local banditry into a widespread armed movement. The fall of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya (2011) unleashed an influx of weapons into the Sahel, enabling small armed groups in Nigeria to acquire sophisticated arms.⁹

Between 2011 and 2015, reports from Kaduna, Benue, and Niger indicated rising attacks by heavily armed gangs targeting highways, farms, and rural communities.¹⁰ The Kaura and Zangon Kataf massacres in Southern Kaduna (2014–2015) signaled a new phase where bandits merged with communal militias, using ethno-religious grievances to justify economic violence.¹¹

From 2016 onward, attacks became more systematic. In 2018, Benue's Guma and Logo local governments were ravaged by armed raids that left over seventy people dead and displaced thousands.¹² The Kaduna–Birnin Gwari highway became a flashpoint for kidnappings and killings, reflecting the growing boldness of bandit groups.¹³

By 2020, these groups expanded their operations to school abductions and mass ransom schemes. The Kagara school kidnapping in Niger State (2021) epitomized this shift, as bandits abducted dozens of students to extort state authorities.¹⁴ The pattern continued across Plateau, Benue, and Nasarawa states, where villages were razed and farmlands abandoned.¹⁵

From 2022 to 2024, the situation reached an unprecedented scale. Intelligence reports revealed growing collaboration between bandit leaders and jihadist organizations such as

Boko Haram and ISWAP, enabling resource sharing and tactical coordination.¹⁶ The Nigerian Air Force launched repeated operations in 2023 to bomb fortified bandit camps in Niger and Zamfara, underscoring the level of militarization and resilience these groups had achieved.¹⁷

Socio-Economic Dimensions and Rural Collapse

The persistence of banditry is tightly connected to deepening rural poverty, demographic pressure, and environmental degradation. Climate change has intensified desertification and reduced arable land, forcing pastoralists and farmers into violent competition.¹⁸ The Middle Belt, serving as a transition zone between the arid north and fertile south, has become a flashpoint for these ecological conflicts. Agricultural productivity in Benue and Plateau states declined sharply after 2018, while displacement figures exceeded 200,000 by 2023.¹⁹

In the absence of effective state protection, communities have turned to local vigilante groups such as the Yan Sakai and Civilian Joint Task Force. While initially defensive, these groups often engage in revenge killings and human rights violations, perpetuating the cycle of violence.²⁰ Social media has also played a role in both exposing and amplifying these dynamics, as victims use online platforms to report attacks and mobilize for protection.²¹

Recent Patterns and Historical Continuity

Despite large-scale military operations such as Operation Whirl Stroke (2018) and Operation Safe Haven (2020–present), banditry continues to thrive.²² By 2024, vast areas

of southern Kaduna, Niger, and Benue had become semi-autonomous zones dominated by armed groups.²³

From a historical standpoint, banditry in the Middle Belt represents continuity rather than rupture, a manifestation of recurring patterns of state weakness, rural neglect, and localized resistance. Its modern form reflects the adaptation of old raiding cultures to contemporary conditions of scarcity, corruption, and technological advancement. Understanding this continuity is crucial to addressing the crisis beyond temporary military solutions.

Current trends in banditry

In recent years, banditry has escalated dramatically in the Middle Belt and North West, with reports indicating a surge in violent incidents. The International Crisis Group highlights that bandits have become more brazen, often operating in well-armed groups that raid villages, abduct individuals for ransom, and engage in cattle rustling.²⁴ The proliferation of small arms and light weapons, coupled with weak governance and poor law enforcement, has emboldened these groups, allowing them to carry out attacks with relative impunity.

The socio-economic impact of banditry is profound, affecting not only individual victims but entire communities. The World Bank has reported significant economic losses due to banditry, with families often forced to sell assets or take on debt to pay ransoms.²⁵ Agricultural productivity has plummeted in affected areas, leading to food insecurity and heightened poverty levels. According to the United Nations Office for the

Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), over 200,000 people have been displaced due to banditry, compounding the humanitarian crisis in the region.²⁶

Societal Responses to Banditry

Communities affected by banditry have developed various responses to cope with the escalating violence. In many cases, local populations have resorted to forming vigilante groups to protect their villages, filling the security vacuum left by government forces. These community-led initiatives highlight the inadequacies of official security responses and the urgent need for more effective strategies to address banditry.²⁷

While vigilante groups can provide immediate protection, their emergence raises concerns about potential human rights abuses and further escalation of violence. Additionally, these groups often operate outside the law, which can lead to conflicts with state authorities and exacerbate tensions within communities.²⁸ Traditional leaders have also assumed critical roles as mediators, attempting to negotiate peace between conflicting parties. However, their effectiveness is often hampered by a lack of resources and governmental support.²⁹

The Role of the State

The Nigerian government's approach to combating banditry has been criticized for being reactive rather than proactive. Military operations aimed at curbing banditry have met with limited success, often failing to address the underlying socio-economic issues that fuel this violence.³⁰ Critics argue that a comprehensive strategy is needed, one that

not only focuses on military action but also promotes socio-economic development and community engagement.

The absence of a cohesive national security policy further complicates efforts to combat banditry. Many communities feel abandoned by the state, which has led to a growing sense of distrust in government institutions. International organizations and NGOs have increasingly become involved in addressing the ramifications of banditry, promoting peacebuilding initiatives and socio-economic development programs as essential components of mitigating the factors that contribute to banditry.³¹

International Response and Collaboration

The international community has recognized the urgent need to address the crisis of banditry in Nigeria. Various organizations, including the United Nations and regional bodies, have called for concerted efforts to tackle the root causes of violence. Programs aimed at peacebuilding, conflict resolution, and economic development are crucial for creating sustainable solutions to the challenges posed by banditry.

Collaboration between local communities, government bodies, and international partners is essential for effective intervention. Initiatives that promote dialogue and understanding among different ethnic groups can help reduce tensions and foster cooperation in addressing common security threats. Furthermore, enhancing local governance and empowering communities to take an active role in their security can lead to more effective responses to banditry.

This overview of banditry in the Middle Belt reveals a complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, and political factors. Understanding the nature and evolution of banditry is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat it. As communities continue to grapple with the impact of banditry, comprehensive approaches that address both immediate security concerns and long-term socio-economic challenges are vital for restoring peace and stability in the region.

Causes Of Banditry

As may be the case for most things in life, banditry is not caused by a single element, nor can it be fixed by the elimination of said element. Rather, it is caused by a constellation of factors. The operation of such factors side by side leads to the outbreak of banditry. Hence, an effort will be made in order to pinpoint the causes of banditry.

Socio-Economic Factors

One of the primary drivers of banditry in Nigeria is socio-economic deprivation. The Middle Belt region, characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to basic services, has created an environment where criminal activities can thrive.³² Many young men, faced with limited opportunities for legitimate employment, find themselves drawn into banditry as a means of survival.³³ Whilst this may not serve as a sufficient justification for banditry, it remains a present factor that proliferates and festers the presence of banditry in the middle belt. The World Bank reports that over 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, with rural areas being disproportionately affected.³⁴ This economic hardship is compounded by rising inflation and a lack of

infrastructure, further exacerbating grievances among local populations.³⁵ The utter disregard for the well being of its rural population has lead Nigeria into a position national insecurity, and one may say that this is one of the birthed consequences of such neglect. Beyond that, the lavish lifestyles of those involved in banditry also create a "get-rich-quick syndrome", enticing more youth to participate.³⁶ This phenomenon sheds light on the double edged nature of social media. It can be a tool for proliferation of misconduct, however, it can also serve as a catalyst for change in the affected communities.

In the midst of all this, agricultural communities in the Middle Belt are particularly vulnerable. As farming is the primary source of livelihood, any disruption, whether due to bandit attacks or climate change, can lead to severe economic consequences.³⁷ The decline in agricultural productivity due to insecurity has led to food shortages, driving communities further into poverty.³⁸ People who find themselves in difficult situations tend to make difficult and oftentimes, destructive decisions. Hence, it is of no surprise that in the midst of such hardships, some individuals resort to banditry, viewing it as a viable means of financial gain.³⁹

Historical Grievances and Ethnic Conflicts

Whilst the socio-economic aspect plays a crucial role in setting the stage for banditry, it does not operate in a vacuum. Beyond that there are other factors which contribute to the outbreak of banditry. In particular, the historical context of land use and ethnic relations in Nigeria plays a significant role in the emergence of banditry.⁴⁰ The Middle

Belt is home to diverse ethnic groups, often competing for land and resources.⁴¹ These highly divisive ethnic lines serve to further exacerbate tensions as it gives birth to stereotypes, misconceptions and a culture of hatred. Historical grievances stemming from colonial policies and post-independence governance failures have resulted in long-standing tensions between pastoralists and farmers.⁴² Both groups find themselves to be justified in their actions, and particularly on the side of pastoralist, this gives room for more violent manifestations of the conflict. The expansion of pastoralists into farming areas has led to violent confrontations, with both sides blaming each other for resource depletion and environmental degradation.⁴³ Many bandits also claim to be freedom fighters for the Fulani, seeking to avenge attacks on their kinsmen, which is rooted in long-standing grievances over land and resources.⁴⁴

These ethnic tensions have been further exacerbated by political manipulation, where leaders exploit existing divisions for electoral gain.⁴⁵ The politicization of ethnic identities contributes to a cycle of violence, as communities feel compelled to defend their interests against perceived threats from rival groups.⁴⁶ Banditry often emerges as a byproduct of these conflicts, with armed groups capitalizing on the chaos to engage in criminal activities.

Weak Governance and Law Enforcement

As John Locke famously said in his “two treatises of government”, “where law ends, tyranny begins”. Such has been the case in the middle belt. The incapacity of the government to effect itself has further aided the breakdown of law and order on the

affected regions. The effectiveness of governance and law enforcement in Nigeria has been a critical factor in the rise of banditry.⁴⁷ The failure of government institutions to provide security and uphold the rule of law has created a vacuum that criminal organizations can exploit.⁴⁸ For if there is no fear of punishment, then it is only natural that misconduct and oppression will continue to run rampant. The Nigerian Police Force, often criticized for corruption and inefficiency, struggles to maintain order in rural areas, leaving communities vulnerable to bandit attacks.⁴⁹ These communities lacking weapons of self defense, as well as sufficient law enforcement, find themselves at the mercy of these proclaimed bandits. Corruption within the police force leads to extrajudicial killings and citizens' unwillingness to report crimes.⁵⁰ The lack of adequate resources and training further hampers law enforcement efforts, making it difficult to tackle organized crime effectively.⁵¹

Additionally, the central government's focus on urban areas often means that rural regions receive minimal attention regarding security and development.⁵² When you have a group that feel marginalized, they become erratic and are pushed into taking action on their own. The sustained neglect fosters a sense of abandonment among rural populations, leading some to take matters into their own hands through vigilante groups or banditry.⁵³ The absence of a cohesive national security strategy exacerbates these issues, as local governments may lack the capacity to address the unique challenges posed by banditry.⁵⁴

In particular when looking at the Yelwata massacre in Benue state on the 13th of June, 2025, we see this continued trend of governmental incapability. As well as the

horrors which unfolded from it. In an interview with Mr Samuel Ochayi, he stated that
“It started around 10:45 pm, it had just started raining. We were all indoors when the Fulani herdsmen came. They started the hunt from the police station. They knew that there was a police station and that there would be arms there

Did they chase the police?

No, the police were there to fight them, they did their best. Knowing that they had attacked the station, another group came to start attacking us. They started opening the doors from one house to another. They would pour fuel and light fire. That is how it started, we were hopeless. The amount of people that died in our community was unexpected. We did not believe that such would happen in our own area, in our town

Why?

We were thinking that the government would be there for us. But look around, there was no security to come to our aid. It was our community youths that stood up to them, we were hopeless.

When did it end?

It was around 2 am that these people did what they wanted and left

Were you able to fight back?

They tried, our youths tried, but they were not able to kill any one of them, not a single one. We need to thank the police, if they had not come later, this town would have been destroyed, it would have been a mess.”⁵⁵

This interview shows us the ineptitude of the government to provide sufficient support to the locals of such communities. These people without aid from the government, whilst also lacking weapons of defense, find themselves being slaughtered like defenseless sheep.

Proliferation of Small Arms

Beyond factors such as ethnic tensions and weak government, our picture would remain unclear if we didn't devote a segment of this chapter to the proliferation of weapons. Banditry becomes marginally difficult when one does but have access to sufficient weaponry. Conversely, the proliferation of such weapons can help to further enable and propagate the existence of banditry.

It can be said that the availability of small arms and light weapons has significantly contributed to the rise of banditry in Nigeria.⁵⁶ The proliferation of firearms, often smuggled across borders, has empowered criminal groups, enabling them to carry out violent attacks with relative ease.⁵⁷ It is estimated that 70% of illicit arms in West Africa are in Nigeria.⁵⁸ Hence it is of no surprise that such a country with a heavy influx of illicit arms will naturally face a high likelihood of banditry and other forms of organized crime. To make matters even worse, the porous borders exacerbate the issue, further enabling the influx of arms.⁵⁹

This easy access to weapons has escalated the scale and frequency of violent incidents, making it increasingly difficult for security forces to respond effectively.⁶⁰ Armed groups are often better equipped than local law enforcement, further intimidating

communities and perpetuating the cycle of violence.⁶¹ In a world where crime groups are often better equipped than law enforcement forces, it instills a level of boldness in the belligerent parties leading to untold bloodshed and chaos. The use of firearms not only increases the lethality of bandit attacks but also creates a culture of fear that can deter communities from cooperating with security forces.⁶² Such an atmosphere of fear and insecurity can only help to further facilitate the prevalence of banditry in the middle belt region.

Climate Change and Environmental Factors

Finally, it would be important to add a final element to compound of banditry in the middle belt. This will of course be the effect of climate change and environmental factors. A central theme to Thomas Hobbes' work "the leviathan", is that the competition for limited resources leads to conflict amongst people. When juxtaposed against the topic of banditry in the middle belt, it is evident that a major bone of contention lies in scarcity of fertile land. This scarcity is brought into play by virtue of topography and the climatic conditions.

Environmental factors, particularly climate change, play a significant role in exacerbating conflicts in Nigeria.⁶³ Changes in weather patterns have led to droughts and reduced agricultural yields, contributing to food insecurity and competition for resources.⁶⁴ In the Middle Belt, where agriculture is the mainstay of the economy, these environmental stresses can ignite tensions between groups competing for dwindling

resources.⁶⁵ Climate change impacts agriculture through rising temperatures, altered rainfall patterns, and increased frequency of droughts and floods.⁶⁶

The migration of pastoralists in search of grazing land often leads to conflicts with sedentary farmers, as both groups vie for control over increasingly scarce resources.⁶⁷ The resulting violence can create a fertile ground for banditry, as some individuals may turn to criminal activities in response to the economic and social pressures stemming from these conflicts.⁶⁸ Climate change thus serves as both a direct and indirect contributor to the rise of banditry, highlighting the need for integrated approaches to conflict resolution that address environmental issues.⁶⁹

Conclusion

In conclusion, the causes of banditry in the Middle Belt of Nigeria are complex and interrelated. There is no single determining factor which facilitates it, rather, it is born of a mixture of interrelated and symbiotic factors. These encompass the socio-economic, historical, and environmental factors amongst others. whilst these are not a summation of all the causes, it however stands as an effective starting point for understanding the causes of banditry. Understanding these underlying causes is crucial for developing effective strategies to combat banditry and promote sustainable peace in the region. Addressing poverty, improving governance, and fostering dialogue among different ethnic groups are essential steps toward mitigating the factors that contribute to banditry.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PUBLIC AWARENESS

Social Media Landscape in Nigeria

The emergence of social media in Nigeria has transformed the communication landscape, fostering new avenues for information dissemination and community engagement. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram have gained substantial traction, particularly among the youth, who constitute a significant portion of the user base. As of 2024, Nigeria ranks as one of the highest users of social media in Africa, with over 33 million active users, reflecting a penetration rate of approximately 30% of the population¹. This growing digital engagement presents both opportunities and challenges, particularly in the context of social issues like banditry.

The Evolution of Social Media Use

Social media in Nigeria began to gain prominence in the early 2000s, largely driven by increased internet accessibility and the proliferation of mobile technology. Initially, it

served as a platform for social interaction and entertainment, but its role has rapidly evolved to encompass activism and political engagement. Notably, the #EndSARS movement, which protested against police brutality in late 2020, showcased the power of social media in mobilizing public support and facilitating grassroots activism². This movement not only highlighted the potential of social media to unify voices but also illustrated the capability of digital platforms to challenge governmental narratives.

The rise of social media coincided with significant political events, leading to increased awareness and engagement among citizens. The Arab Spring, which demonstrated the power of social media in mobilizing protests, served as a source of inspiration for Nigerian activists. Following these global trends, Nigerian citizens began to leverage social media to voice their concerns about governance, security, and social justice³. The immediacy of social media allows users to share real-time updates, making it a powerful tool for advocacy and communication.

Diverse Platforms and Their Impact

Different social media platforms serve varied purposes, each contributing uniquely to the landscape of activism and awareness. Twitter, known for its real-time updates and trending topics, has become a hub for advocacy and mobilization. Hashtags like #SecureNorth and #EndBanditry have gained traction, inspiring discussions and community responses⁴. These hashtags not only raise awareness but also serve as rallying points for collective action against banditry.

Facebook, with its broader audience reach, is instrumental in organizing community meetings and sharing detailed information. It allows for the creation of groups focused on specific issues, enabling community members to collaborate on solutions to local problems⁵. WhatsApp facilitates the rapid dissemination of information among localized groups, allowing for urgent communication during crises. Community leaders and activists use WhatsApp to share alerts about security threats, coordinate responses, and mobilize support for victims of violence⁶.

Instagram, with its visual-centric approach, has also contributed to raising awareness through impactful imagery and storytelling. Activists utilize this platform to share narratives about the impacts of banditry on local communities, combining visuals with call-to-action messages to inspire engagement and support⁷. Each of these platforms plays a complementary role in the broader ecosystem of social media activism, enabling diverse forms of engagement and outreach.

Demographic Engagement

The demographic profile of social media users in Nigeria is predominantly young, with over 60% of users aged between 18 and 34 years⁸. This youthful demographic is particularly crucial in the context of banditry, as they are often the most affected by violence and displacement. Engaging this group through social media allows for mobilization of a significant portion of the population, utilizing their digital fluency to spread awareness and advocate for change.

Moreover, social media serves as a platform for marginalized voices that may not have access to traditional media outlets. Community leaders and activists leverage these platforms to articulate the grievances of affected populations, fostering a sense of solidarity and collective action against banditry⁹. This democratization of information dissemination enables communities to challenge dominant narratives and advocate for their rights.

Additionally, the rapid spread of information via social media has empowered local communities to document incidents of banditry, often bypassing traditional media channels that may underreport such violence. This capability has led to greater accountability, as communities can directly report incidents to authorities and raise awareness among their peers¹⁰. The immediacy of social media also allows for quick responses to threats, enhancing community resilience in the face of violence.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite the potential of social media as a tool for awareness and mobilization, several challenges hinder its efficacy. Misinformation remains a significant issue, with false narratives sometimes spreading faster than factual information. The rapid dissemination of unverified information can exacerbate tensions and complicate community responses to banditry¹¹. For instance, during crises, rumors about impending attacks can lead to panic and unwarranted violence, undermining community safety efforts.

Furthermore, the digital divide in Nigeria remains a barrier, with many rural communities lacking access to reliable internet and technological resources, limiting their

participation in online discourse¹². While urban areas may enjoy robust connectivity, rural regions often suffer from inadequate infrastructure, exacerbating inequalities in access to information and resources. This divide can lead to a situation where only certain voices are heard, leaving marginalized communities further vulnerable to banditry.

Online harassment and threats can deter activists from utilizing social media effectively. The prevalence of hate speech and targeted harassment against individuals advocating for social change can create an environment of fear, undermining the potential for collective action¹³. Women and minority groups are particularly vulnerable to online abuse, which can silence their voices and hinder their participation in activism.

The potential for social media to be co-opted by criminal elements also poses a significant challenge. Bandits and other criminal organizations may exploit social media for recruitment, propaganda, and coordination of attacks. Reports have indicated that some criminal groups use social media to showcase their wealth and intimidate communities, further complicating the security landscape¹⁴. This duality of social media as both a tool for empowerment and a platform for criminality requires careful navigation by activists and community leaders.

The relationship between social media and banditry is emblematic of broader societal dynamics in Nigeria. As communities continue to grapple with the impacts of violence, the role of social media in fostering resilience and collective action will be increasingly important. Future efforts should focus on enhancing digital literacy, promoting responsible use of social media, and fostering inclusive dialogue among diverse

community members. By addressing these factors, Nigeria can leverage the power of social media to build a more informed and engaged citizenry capable of tackling the challenges posed by banditry and other forms of violence.

Impact of Social Media On Public Awareness

The role of social media in shaping public awareness in Nigeria, particularly concerning issues like banditry, cannot be overstated. As traditional media often struggles to cover the complexities of these crises comprehensively, social media platforms have emerged as vital tools for disseminating information, mobilizing community responses, and fostering dialogue. This section explores the multifaceted impact of social media on public awareness, focusing on its ability to inform, engage, and empower citizens.

Real-Time Information Dissemination

One of the most significant advantages of social media is its capacity for real-time information dissemination. In situations of crisis, such as violent bandit attacks, social media allows users to report incidents as they occur, providing immediate updates to affected communities. Platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp enable individuals to share information about ongoing attacks, security alerts, and safety tips, helping communities to respond swiftly to threats¹⁵. This immediacy is crucial in a country where traditional media may take hours or days to report on developing stories.

For example, during the recent surge in banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt, local residents have used social media to alert others about impending attacks, share the locations of safe havens, and coordinate evacuations¹⁶. By bypassing traditional media channels, social

media empowers communities to take charge of their safety, fostering a culture of vigilance and preparedness.

Raising Awareness and Advocacy

Social media serves as a powerful platform for raising awareness about the impacts of banditry and advocating for change. Activists and community leaders utilize these platforms to highlight the socio-economic consequences of banditry, such as displacement, loss of livelihoods, and food insecurity. Campaigns that utilize hashtags like #EndBanditry and #SecureNorth have gained traction, bringing national and international attention to the plight of affected communities¹⁷.

Moreover, social media campaigns often incorporate compelling narratives and visuals that resonate with audiences. For instance, community members may share personal stories of loss and resilience, which can evoke empathy and mobilize support from a broader audience. This storytelling aspect of social media not only raises awareness but also builds solidarity among diverse groups, encouraging collective action against banditry¹⁸.

Influencing Public Perception

The influence of social media on public perception cannot be overlooked. By shaping narratives around banditry, social media plays a crucial role in how these issues are understood by the general public. For instance, the visibility of grassroots movements on social media has shifted perceptions from viewing banditry solely as a law enforcement

issue to recognizing it as a complex socio-political crisis that requires comprehensive solutions¹⁹.

Furthermore, social media has the potential to challenge dominant narratives perpetuated by traditional media. Often, mainstream outlets may focus on sensational aspects of violence, neglecting the underlying causes and community responses. Social media allows local voices to counteract these narratives, emphasizing the need for community engagement, governance reforms, and socio-economic development as part of the solution to banditry²⁰.

Engaging Diverse Audiences

Social media platforms facilitate engagement with a wide range of audiences, including policymakers, civil society organizations, and international actors. This engagement is crucial for fostering dialogue and collaboration aimed at addressing the challenges posed by banditry. By sharing research, data, and success stories, activists can influence policy discussions and encourage governmental and non-governmental organizations to prioritize security and development initiatives²¹.

For example, campaigns that successfully mobilize online support can translate into offline actions, such as community meetings, advocacy events, and policy forums. Social media can serve as a bridge, connecting grassroots movements with influential stakeholders who have the power to effect change at higher levels²². This

interconnectedness enhances the potential for comprehensive responses to banditry, integrating local insights with broader policy frameworks.

Challenges of Misinformation

Despite its advantages, social media is not without challenges. The rapid spread of misinformation can undermine public awareness efforts and exacerbate tensions in conflict situations. False narratives regarding banditry may circulate quickly, leading to panic and mistrust among communities²³. For instance, rumors about impending attacks or exaggerated claims of violence can provoke unnecessary fear, complicating community responses and law enforcement efforts.

To combat misinformation, civil society organizations and activists have started initiatives aimed at promoting digital literacy and responsible social media use. By educating users on verifying information before sharing and understanding the implications of their online actions, these initiatives seek to mitigate the negative impacts of misinformation on public awareness and community safety²⁴.

Case Studies of Social Media Campaigns

Social media has played a pivotal role in raising awareness and mobilizing action against banditry and related violence in Nigeria. This section presents various case studies that illustrate the effectiveness of social media campaigns in addressing these pressing issues. By examining specific examples, we can better understand the strategies employed and the outcomes achieved through these digital platforms.

Case Study 1: The #EndBanditry Campaign

The #EndBanditry campaign specifically addresses the escalating violence from banditry in Nigeria's northern regions. Launched by a coalition of activists, journalists, and community leaders, the campaign aims to raise awareness about the impact of banditry and mobilize support for affected communities²⁵. Activist Aisha Yesufu stated on Instagram, "We cannot afford to remain silent while our people are killed. #EndBanditry is our call to action".

Through powerful imagery and testimonials, the campaign has successfully engaged local and international audiences. Activists have shared videos depicting the devastation caused by banditry, emphasizing the urgent need for security reforms²⁶. Community leader Alhaji Mohammed remarked on Facebook, "Social media has given us a voice. We will not let the world forget our suffering". The campaign has also organized virtual town halls and discussions to engage the community and press for action from policymakers.

Case Study 2: The #SecureNorth Campaign

The #SecureNorth campaign highlights the plight of communities affected by banditry in Nigeria's northern regions. Launched in response to rising violence, this campaign aims to raise awareness and mobilize support for urgent security measures. Activists have utilized social media to share personal stories and data about the impacts of banditry on local communities²⁷.

One prominent voice in this campaign is journalist and activist Fisayo Fosudo, who tweeted, "The North is bleeding, and we cannot stay silent. #SecureNorth is a call for immediate action and accountability from our leaders". The campaign has effectively

engaged citizens and garnered attention from policymakers, emphasizing the need for comprehensive solutions to the security crisis.

Case Study 3: The #BringBackOurGirls Movement

The #BringBackOurGirls movement emerged in 2014 following the abduction of 276 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in Chibok, Borno State. This campaign utilized social media to raise global awareness about the plight of the girls and the broader issues of kidnapping and insecurity in Nigeria. The hashtag quickly gained traction, leading to international solidarity and mobilizing global leaders to call for action²⁸.

As one of the key figures in the movement, Obiageli Ezekwesili stated on Twitter, "We will not rest until our girls are back home. This is not just about them; it's about every girl who deserves to be safe". The movement's use of social media exemplifies how digital platforms can bridge local issues with global audiences. Continuous updates and personal stories have maintained pressure on the Nigerian government to prioritize the rescue of the abducted girls and address the underlying causes of such violence²⁹.

Case Study 4: The #EndSARS Movement

The #EndSARS movement, which emerged in late 2020, serves as a landmark case of social media's power to mobilize public sentiment against police brutality in Nigeria. Although primarily focused on police reform, the movement significantly impacted discussions surrounding security and violence, including banditry. Activists utilized platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to share personal stories, organize protests, and garner international attention³⁰.

A notable quote from activist Modupe Odele, shared on Twitter, encapsulates the movement's impact: "The #EndSARS protests are not just about police brutality; they're about a system that has failed us. We're standing together to demand change for a better future". The hashtag #EndSARS trended globally, mobilizing thousands of young Nigerians to participate in peaceful protests across major cities. Social media facilitated real-time updates and coordination among protestors, highlighting broader systemic issues related to security governance in Nigeria³¹.

Case Study 5: The Role of Influencers

Influencers and public figures have played a significant role in leveraging social media for advocacy against banditry and violence. For instance, popular Nigerian musician Burna Boy used Twitter to address the issue of banditry in a tweet that read, "The government needs to act NOW! Our people are suffering, and it's time for us to stand together to end this madness. #EndBanditry". This tweet resonated with his millions of followers, amplifying the campaign's message.

Another notable example is actress Kate Henshaw, who shared on her Instagram account: "We cannot keep quiet while our brothers and sisters are being slaughtered. The time to act is NOW! #EndBanditry". Her call to action encouraged her followers to engage with the campaign and advocate for change.

Additionally, comedian and activist Mr. Macaroni has used Twitter to raise awareness about the dangers posed by banditry. He tweeted, "Let's not wait until it

happens to us. We must stand up and say enough is enough. #EndBanditry". His influence among youth allows him to mobilize support and amplify discussions around security issues.

Challenges Faced by Campaigns

While these case studies demonstrate the effectiveness of social media campaigns, they also highlight several challenges. Misinformation can undermine campaign efforts, complicating narratives that activists seek to promote³². Additionally, the digital divide means that not all affected communities can participate fully in these campaigns, limiting their impact³³.

Furthermore, online harassment and threats against activists can deter engagement and silence important voices, underscoring the need for protective measures within digital spaces³⁴. Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing the efficacy and sustainability of social media campaigns in the fight against banditry and violence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the social media landscape in Nigeria significantly influences public awareness and engagement regarding banditry, serving as a vital tool for real-time information dissemination, mobilization, and advocacy efforts. Its capacity to connect diverse audiences positions it as a critical mechanism for addressing issues of violence and insecurity. However, challenges such as misinformation, the digital divide, and online harassment hinder its effectiveness and must be navigated carefully. A comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is essential for developing effective

strategies that empower affected communities, promote resilience, and foster solidarity. As the role of social media continues to evolve, it remains imperative for stakeholders to leverage its transformative potential while addressing the complex issues surrounding banditry in Nigeria.

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CHAPTER FOUR

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR MOBILIZATION AND ADVOCACY

Community Mobilization Efforts

Social media has emerged as a powerful tool for community mobilization in Nigeria, particularly in response to banditry and related violence. As communities leverage various platforms to organize, advocate for their rights, and respond to security challenges, this section explores strategies employed and the impact of these mobilization efforts through specific examples and case studies.

Organizing Community Responses

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become essential for organizing community responses to banditry. Local leaders and activists utilize these platforms to disseminate information quickly, coordinate meetings, and mobilize community members for collective action. For instance, WhatsApp groups are often used to share real-time updates and safety alerts during banditry incidents, ensuring residents are informed and prepared.

In Kaduna State, a WhatsApp group called "Kaduna Vigilante Network" allows residents to share information about suspicious activities and coordinate neighborhood watch efforts. A commentator noted, that ; "In times of crisis, we cannot rely solely on the police. Our safety is in our hands, and social media helps us stay connected"¹. Such networks enhance community resilience and proactive security measures.

Moreover, the use of social media has facilitated public demonstrations, such as the protest march organized by the people of Plateau State. On January 17, 2024, Zariy Yusuf tweeted about a peace walk in the Federal Capital Territory that aimed to express grief over the ongoing violence, stating, "The world must hear the truth! The truth shall set us free!"². Such events mobilize community members to come together and highlight their struggles, increasing visibility for their cause.

Advocacy for Policy Change

Social media plays a crucial role in advocating for policy changes to address banditry. Activists and community organizations utilize these platforms to raise awareness about

violence and demand government accountability. Campaigns often employ hashtags like #EndBanditry and #SecureNorth to unify voices and amplify messages.

For instance, security expert Bulama Bukarti emphasized the need for government intervention, warning that "if we gave the bandits in North North-Western part or Boko Haram one year's budget of Nigeria, they will damage and overrun Nigeria"³. This type of commentary puts pressure on local and national governments to take strong action against the security crisis and implement protective measures.

Additionally, Dr. Croc highlighted the alarming situation in Southern Kaduna, where "ethno-religious cleansing is taking place with hardly any intervention from the government"⁴. Such statements draw attention to the urgent need for policy reforms and active government engagement in addressing the violence.

A recent report by the International Crisis Group emphasized the need for comprehensive strategies that address the root causes of banditry, such as poverty and lack of education⁵. The report notes that without addressing these underlying issues, efforts at mobilization will be limited in their effectiveness.

Mobilizing Humanitarian Support

Social media also facilitates the mobilization of humanitarian support for communities affected by banditry. Grassroots organizations employ these platforms to raise funds, collect supplies, and organize relief efforts. During a violent period in 2021, NGOs launched an Instagram campaign to support displaced families in the Middle Belt, sharing stories of affected individuals and appealing for donations.

A campaign leader, Amina Bello, emphasized the role of social media in raising awareness and mobilizing resources, stating, "Social media has allowed us to reach a wider audience and mobilize support quickly. People are more willing to help when they see real stories and faces behind the crisis"⁶. This approach provides immediate assistance and raises awareness about ongoing humanitarian needs.

Furthermore, the emotional weight of these stories is highlighted in accounts of violence, such as the recent recovery of 40 bodies in Southern Kaduna, which underscores the urgency for humanitarian action. Dr. Croc's post capturing these events serves to engage viewers emotionally, pushing them to recognize the real human suffering behind the statistics⁷. This type of visual and narrative storytelling is instrumental in galvanizing public support and encouraging donations.

Engaging Youth in Activism

Youth engagement is a critical aspect of community mobilization facilitated by social media. Young Nigerians increasingly use platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter to raise awareness about the violence affecting their communities and advocate for change. This engagement is characterized by personal narratives, creative expression, and direct calls to action.

Chief Ene's poignant reflections on the life of those from the Middle Belt encapsulate the urgency and emotional depth of youth activism. She wrote, "To be from the middle-belt feels like a curse. You grow up to witness killings of the most inhumane form, and it

doesn't even register in your adulthood"⁸. This raw honesty captures the burden of living in a region fraught with violence and neglect, leading many young people to seek change.

Ene elaborates on the isolation felt by those in the Middle Belt, saying, "You're unrecognizable by the average Nigerian... you have to run from Makurdi to Ohimini and then hear people are being burnt alive in Otuoko"⁹. This vivid imagery illustrates the constant fear and chaos that permeate their lives, further motivating youth to mobilize through social media.

The emotional toll of ongoing violence leads many young people to demand accountability from their leaders. "I am tired. I truly hate my part of being Nigerian," Chief Ene laments, reflecting a sense of despair that resonates with countless others¹⁰. This sentiment not only captures the frustrations of youth but also highlights their determination to fight for a better future. The pain and anger expressed in such statements serve as a rallying cry for collective action.

Young activists often harness the power of social media to share personal stories, creating a sense of solidarity among those affected. This collective voice is vital for challenging dominant narratives and advocating for change. By using platforms to express their fears, dreams, and frustrations, they not only raise awareness but also build a community of support.

Moreover, youth-led initiatives have surfaced that focus on education and awareness. Many young people create content that not only informs but also inspires action among

their peers. They use hashtags and social media campaigns to encourage discussions about safety, identity, and community resilience¹¹.

Challenges in Community Mobilization

Despite successes, community mobilization through social media faces numerous challenges. Misinformation can spread rapidly, creating panic and confusion. Patrick Anum criticized the media's lack of in-depth reporting on the Middle Belt, arguing that this leads to a shallow understanding of the complexities involved, particularly regarding the narratives of "farmer-herder clashes"¹². The digital divide limits access to technology, restricting participation in online mobilization efforts.

Community organizer Chidi Eze remarked, "While social media is a powerful tool, we must recognize that not everyone is online. We need to find ways to include all voices, especially those who are most affected by banditry"¹³. Addressing these challenges is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of community mobilization efforts.

Moreover, the emotional toll of ongoing violence makes it difficult for communities to sustain activism over time. The constant threat of violence can lead to fatigue among activists, making it essential for them to find balance and resilience in their efforts¹⁴.

Hence one may say that social media has significantly enhanced community mobilization efforts in Nigeria in response to banditry. By facilitating real-time communication, advocacy, and humanitarian support, these platforms empower communities to take action and demand accountability. Nonetheless, ongoing challenges such as misinformation and the digital divide must be addressed to ensure that all voices

are heard in combating violence. As communities navigate the complexities of insecurity, social media remains a vital tool for mobilization and advocacy.

Successful Advocacy Campaigns

Social media has played a pivotal role in various advocacy campaigns across Nigeria, particularly in raising awareness about issues related to banditry, violence, and human rights in the Middle Belt. This section examines notable advocacy campaigns that have effectively leveraged social media to mobilize support, influence public opinion, and drive change.

1. The #PeaceForTheMiddleBelt Campaign

In light of the ongoing violence in the Middle Belt, the #PeaceForTheMiddleBelt campaign was launched to advocate for peacebuilding efforts and promote dialogue among communities affected by banditry. Activists used social media to call for unity and collaboration among different ethnic groups, emphasizing the need for collective action to address the root causes of violence.

The campaign gained momentum following a series of violent clashes between herders and farmers, which have historically been a source of tension in the region¹⁵. By using social media to share messages of peace and reconciliation, activists sought to counteract the narratives of division and conflict that often dominate discussions about the Middle Belt¹⁶.

One notable instance occurred in 2022 when community leaders and activists organized a peace walk in Jos, Plateau State, which was widely promoted on social media. The event

aimed to bring together individuals from different backgrounds to foster understanding and dialogue. Participants shared their experiences on various platforms, emphasizing the importance of peaceful coexistence and community solidarity in the face of violence.

Success Metrics: The #PeaceForTheMiddleBelt campaign has contributed to fostering dialogue and reconciliation in some communities. For instance, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) invested \$15 million in the Community Initiatives to Promote Peace (CIPP) program, training over 46,000 community members in dispute resolution¹⁷. Additionally, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD) facilitated a peace agreement between Tiv and Igede communities based on shared natural resource use¹⁸. However, achieving lasting peace remains a challenge, as highlighted by ongoing conflicts and the need for sustained efforts¹⁹.

2. The #SaveOurSchools Campaign

The #SaveOurSchools campaign emerged as a direct response to the alarming rates of school kidnappings and attacks in northern Nigeria, particularly in the Middle Belt states like Kaduna, Niger, and Katsina²⁰. The campaign mobilized parents, students, and activists to advocate for the safety of educational institutions that have become targets of bandits and extremist groups.

Social media has been instrumental in raising awareness about these incidents, sharing personal stories of affected families, and calling for government action. For example, in December 2020, gunmen abducted over 300 students from Government

Science Secondary School in Kankara, Katsina State, which sparked outrage and mobilization efforts across social media platforms²¹. The hashtag #SaveOurSchools trended, with activists organizing online campaigns and protests demanding that the government prioritize the safety of schools²².

Success Metrics: While the campaign did not immediately halt school kidnappings (as evidenced by further abductions in 2021 and 2024)²³, it did contribute to increased public awareness and some government action. For instance, the Nigerian government endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration²⁴, an international commitment to protect education from attack. Additionally, the government initiated the Safe School Initiative, although its implementation has faced challenges²⁵. However, attacks and kidnappings have continued, highlighting the limitations and ongoing need for more effective measures²⁶.

3. The #JusticeForVictims Campaign

Another relevant advocacy campaign is the #JusticeForVictims campaign, which arose in response to the increasing violence and human rights abuses faced by communities in the Middle Belt due to banditry. This campaign seeks to bring attention to the plight of victims and their families, advocating for justice and accountability.

In 2021, following a series of brutal attacks in communities like Southern Kaduna, activists began using social media to document incidents of violence and the lack of governmental response²⁷. They shared stories of affected individuals, emphasizing the need for justice for those who have lost loved ones or suffered trauma due to banditry²⁸.

The campaign encouraged victims and their families to share their stories, creating a powerful narrative that resonated with many Nigerians.

Success Metrics: The #JusticeForVictims campaign has been successful in raising awareness and putting pressure on the government to acknowledge the suffering of victims. For example, the Katsina State Government disbursed N9.5 million to victims of banditry in Kurfi, Danmusa, and Kankara Local Government Areas²⁹. President Bola Tinubu also pledged to restore peace and stability, launching a housing scheme for victims of banditry in Kaduna State³⁰. While these actions provide some relief, the campaign continues to push for more comprehensive justice mechanisms and long-term solutions³¹.

Successful advocacy campaigns in Nigeria, particularly in the context of banditry in the Middle Belt, illustrate the transformative power of social media in mobilizing support and driving social change. From #SaveOurSchools and #JusticeForVictims to #PeaceForTheMiddleBelt, these campaigns demonstrate how digital platforms can amplify voices, foster solidarity, and influence public policy. As social media continues to evolve, it will remain a crucial tool for advocacy, enabling citizens to engage with pressing issues and advocate for a more just and equitable society.

Role of Influencers And Activists

In the context of banditry and violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt, the role of social media influencers and grassroots activists has become increasingly significant. These individuals leverage their platforms to raise awareness, mobilize communities, and

advocate for justice and policy changes. This section explores the strategies used by influencers and activists, highlights notable figures, and examines the impact of their efforts on public discourse and government action.

1. The Emergence of Influencers in Activism

Social media influencers, particularly those with substantial followings, have become powerful advocates for social change in Nigeria. Their ability to reach wide audiences allows them to shape public opinion and mobilize support for various causes, including the fight against banditry and the protection of vulnerable communities.

For instance, influencers like “Diane Russet”, a former Big Brother Naija contestant, have utilized their platforms to advocate for the safety of schools and the need for government accountability. In 2021, Diane shared information about the ongoing kidnappings in the Middle Belt, urging her followers to support campaigns like #SaveOurSchools and amplifying the voices of affected families³².

Similarly, “Tunde Ednut”, a popular social media personality, has used his influence to shine a light on the plight of victims of banditry. His posts often include calls to action, encouraging his followers to participate in protests or contribute to relief efforts. By mobilizing his audience, Ednut has helped to raise significant funds for victims and has amplified the urgency of addressing banditry in the region³³.

2. Grassroots Activism and Community Engagement

While influencers play a vital role, grassroots activists are often the backbone of advocacy efforts in the Middle Belt. These individuals are deeply rooted in their

communities and understand the local dynamics of violence and insecurity. They use social media to document incidents, share personal stories, and organize community responses.

One notable grassroots activist is “Sadiya Umar Farouq”, who has been active in raising awareness about the impact of banditry on women and children in the Middle Belt. Through her social media channels, she shares stories of survivors, highlighting their struggles and advocating for support services. In 2022, Sadiya organized a series of community workshops aimed at educating families about safety and resilience in the face of violence³⁴.

Another prominent activist, “Yusuf K.”, has focused on mobilizing youth in the Middle Belt to engage in peacebuilding efforts. His organization, “Youth for Peace Initiative”, uses social media to promote dialogue among different ethnic groups and foster understanding. During a peace summit held in Jos, Yusuf utilized live streams and social media posts to engage a broader audience, encouraging participation in discussions about conflict resolution and community safety³⁵.

3. Collaborative Efforts and Network Building

The effectiveness of influencers and grassroots activists is often enhanced through collaboration. By forming coalitions and networks, these individuals can amplify their messages and reach larger audiences. For example, various organizations, including “Amnesty International Nigeria”, have partnered with local activists to conduct

awareness campaigns and advocacy initiatives focused on the rights of victims of banditry.

In 2021, a coalition of activists organized a series of events under the banner "Voices Against Banditry," which included online campaigns, community forums, and public protests. Influencers played a crucial role in promoting these events through their social media platforms, helping to draw attention to the urgent need for government action. The campaign successfully attracted media coverage, further amplifying its reach and impact³⁶.

Additionally, platforms like "Change.org" have facilitated petitions led by activists, garnering thousands of signatures calling for specific actions from the government. These petitions often gain traction when shared by influencers, creating a sense of urgency and community support around critical issues, such as the need for better security measures in schools³⁷.

4. Challenges Faced by Activists and Influencers

Despite their impactful roles, influencers and activists face numerous challenges. Social media can be a double-edged sword; while it provides a platform for advocacy, it also exposes individuals to online harassment and threats. Activists speaking out against banditry often face backlash from those who oppose their messages or who are involved in the violence.

For example, in 2022, a prominent activist received threats after organizing a peaceful protest against banditry in Kaduna. The backlash highlighted the risks associated

with activism in a region where violence is deeply entrenched³⁸. Moreover, the digital divide in Nigeria means that not all communities have equal access to social media, limiting the reach of activists' messages.

Additionally, misinformation can undermine the efforts of activists and influencers. False narratives about banditry and the complexities of the conflict can spread quickly on social media, complicating advocacy efforts. Activists must constantly combat misinformation to ensure that their messages resonate accurately with the public and policymakers³⁹.

5. Impact on Public Discourse and Government Action

The combined efforts of influencers and grassroots activists have significantly shaped public discourse around banditry in Nigeria. Their campaigns have raised awareness about the realities of violence in the Middle Belt and have pushed the government to respond more effectively. For instance, the pressure generated by social media campaigns has led to increased funding for security initiatives aimed at protecting vulnerable communities and schools.

Moreover, the visibility of these advocacy efforts has contributed to a growing national conversation about the need for a comprehensive approach to addressing banditry, which includes not only security measures but also social and economic interventions⁴⁰. The call for a multi-faceted strategy reflects a broader understanding that addressing the root causes of violence is essential for sustainable peace.

Conclusion

The role of influencers and activists in mobilizing support and advocating for change in the context of banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt cannot be overstated. Through their strategic use of social media, they have raised awareness, fostered community engagement, and influenced public discourse. While challenges remain, their collective efforts continue to drive meaningful conversations about justice, accountability, and the need for lasting change. As social media evolves, so too will the strategies employed by these advocates, ensuring that the voices of affected communities remain at the forefront of the fight against banditry.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Misinformation And Fake News

As social media becomes an essential tool for advocacy in addressing issues like banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt, the challenges posed by misinformation and fake news emerge as significant barriers. This section explores the nature of misinformation, its

impact on public perception and advocacy efforts, and the strategies employed by activists to combat these challenges.

Understanding misinformation and fake news is crucial for navigating the current media landscape. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “misinformation” is defined as “false or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive,¹” while “fake news” refers to “news that is fabricated or misleading, often created to manipulate public opinion²”. These definitions highlight the intentionality behind misinformation and the potential consequences it can have on public discourse.

Both phenomena have proliferated on social media, particularly during crises such as the ongoing violence in the Middle Belt. During heightened periods of unrest, misleading posts often circulate, misattributing attacks or exaggerating incidents. This creates confusion and exacerbates tensions between communities. Reports from the Nigerian Communications Commission indicate a significant rise in false narratives surrounding security issues, often fueled by sensationalist headlines and unverified claims³.

The impact of misinformation is particularly pronounced in a context like Nigeria, where ethnic and religious divides can be easily inflamed. For instance, misinformation can lead to scapegoating, inciting violence against innocent communities and undermining trust among different groups. Activists striving to promote peace and understanding find their efforts complicated by the prevalence of false information, which often drowns out their messages.

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp play a central role in the dissemination of information but also facilitate the rapid spread of misinformation. The algorithms that prioritize sensational content can amplify false narratives, ensuring they reach a larger audience than factual information. A study by the Pew Research Center found that misinformation travels faster and further on social media than accurate news, with users more likely to engage with sensational content⁴. This presents a significant challenge for activists who aim to provide accurate information and counter false narratives.

Moreover, the anonymity afforded by social media can embolden individuals to share misleading information without accountability. This lack of consequence allows for the unchecked spread of harmful content, complicating efforts to maintain a truthful narrative concerning the realities of banditry and violence in the Middle Belt.

The presence of misinformation undermines the efforts of activists and organizations working to raise awareness and advocate for change. When false narratives gain traction, they divert attention from the actual issues at hand and create an environment of distrust among potential supporters. Activists face the daunting task of correcting these inaccuracies while also striving to mobilize communities and advocate for systemic change.

To combat these challenges, activists and organizations have developed several strategies aimed at addressing the spread of misinformation. Media literacy campaigns are crucial in educating the public about how to identify credible sources and discern fact

from fiction. Activists are increasingly using social media to promote media literacy, sharing tips on recognizing misinformation and encouraging critical thinking⁵. Collaborating with fact-checking organizations can also help verify claims and provide accurate information to audiences. By creating a network of reliable sources, activists can more effectively counter false narratives.

Despite these efforts, the influence of misinformation remains potent. One notable example involves a tweet from journalist Patrick Anum, who spoke out against the oversimplification of violence in the Middle Belt. He criticized how media narratives often reduce complex issues to simplistic terms, such as "farmer-herder clashes." Anum's advocacy highlights the responsibility of media professionals to provide nuanced coverage and the dangers of allowing misinformation to shape public perception. His observations serve as a reminder that the media plays a critical role in shaping narratives that influence public understanding of complex issues⁶.

In contrast, another tweet from @ZariyiYusuf exemplifies the spread of misinformation. The tweet claims that the violence in the region is part of an "Islamic Jihad" aimed at covering up a "genocide" of Christians. This kind of messaging not only misrepresents the realities on the ground but also fosters division and conflict among communities, complicating the efforts of those advocating for peace and understanding. Such statements can incite fear and promote a narrative that oversimplifies the multifaceted nature of the violence, ultimately hindering effective responses⁷.

Hence, one may deduce that misinformation and fake news present substantial challenges to social media advocacy related to banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt. The rapid spread of false narratives can undermine trust, divert attention from critical issues, and complicate the efforts of activists striving for peace and justice. To effectively address these challenges, a multi-faceted approach that includes media literacy, collaboration with fact-checkers, and community mobilization is essential. By actively combating misinformation, advocates can create a more credible and effective advocacy landscape that amplifies the voices of those most affected by violence and insecurity.

Digital Divide and Accessibility Issues

In the contemporary landscape of social media advocacy, the digital divide represents a formidable challenge, particularly in addressing critical issues like banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt. This section delves into the nature of the digital divide, its implications for social media engagement, and the ways in which accessibility issues hinder effective advocacy efforts.

Defining the Digital Divide

The "digital divide" is a term used to describe the disparity in access to information and communication technologies (ICT) between different groups of people⁸. According to the Oxford Learner's Dictionary, the digital divide is "the very large difference in opportunity between people who can easily access computers and the internet and people

who cannot"⁹. This divide encompasses not only physical access to technology but also the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to use it effectively¹⁰. This disparity can be influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status, geographic location, education, gender, and infrastructure¹¹.

In Nigeria, the digital divide is stark, with significant differences in access and usage between urban and rural areas, as well as between different socioeconomic groups¹². For instance, a study revealed that Nigerians in urban areas are more likely to be digitally literate than those in rural areas¹³. Furthermore, men are more likely to have access and be literate in ICT than women¹⁴. This inequality is particularly concerning in the context of advocacy against banditry, as the most affected communities are often those with limited access to digital platforms¹⁵.

Implications for Advocacy Efforts

The digital divide has profound implications for advocacy efforts aimed at addressing violence and insecurity in the Middle Belt. Activists rely on social media to disseminate information, mobilize support, and raise awareness about pressing issues¹⁶. However, when large segments of the population lack internet access or digital literacy, their voices and experiences are often marginalized¹⁷.

For instance, communities affected by banditry may have limited means to share their stories, report incidents, or connect with broader networks of support¹⁸. This can lead to a lack of representation in discussions surrounding violence and conflict resolution, perpetuating the cycle of neglect and violence. Moreover, when advocates

cannot reach these communities through digital channels, they miss vital opportunities to educate and empower local populations¹⁹.

Barriers to Access and Usage

Several barriers contribute to the digital divide in Nigeria. One significant factor is the lack of infrastructure, particularly in rural areas²⁰. Many regions still grapple with inadequate electricity supply and limited internet connectivity, making it challenging for residents to access online resources²¹. According to official statistics, approximately 27.1 million Nigerians lack access to telecom infrastructure²².

The high cost of data and devices also restricts access for low-income individuals and families²³. Although the average cost of mobile internet data in Nigeria is relatively low at around \$0.39 per gigabyte²⁴, the cost of subscribing to unlimited internet plans can range from ₦13,100 to ₦57,000 per month, making it unaffordable for many²⁵.

Educational disparities also play a crucial role in perpetuating the digital divide²⁶. Individuals with lower levels of education may lack the digital literacy skills necessary to navigate online platforms effectively²⁷. This gap in skills can lead to a situation where those who are most in need of information and support are least equipped to access it. Studies show that a significant percentage of women, particularly in Northern Nigeria, identify illiteracy as a key barrier to mobile phone ownership and internet usage²⁸.

Strategies for Bridging the Divide

To bridge the digital divide, concerted efforts are required from various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and private sector

players²⁹. Initiatives aimed at improving infrastructure, such as expanding internet access in rural areas, are essential³⁰. Public-private partnerships can play a crucial role in developing the necessary technology and infrastructure to support greater connectivity³¹.

Promoting digital literacy programs can empower communities by equipping them with the skills needed to navigate online spaces effectively³². These programs can help individuals understand how to use social media for advocacy, access information, and connect with wider networks. Organizations like Tech4Dev and the Elite Star Foundation are actively involved in providing digital literacy training to vulnerable populations in Nigeria³³. The Digital Skills Nigeria program, a collaboration between Microsoft, the Federal Ministry of Communication and Digital Economy, and Tech4Dev, aims to provide digital skills training to young people between the ages of 16 and 35³⁴. The Nigerian government has also launched partnerships to integrate digital literacy into primary and secondary school curricula, focusing on rural communities³⁵.

Community-based initiatives can also significantly contribute to addressing accessibility issues³⁶. By fostering local leadership and encouraging community participation in digital advocacy efforts, organizations can help ensure that the voices of marginalized populations are heard. This approach not only amplifies local narratives but also fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among community members.

The Role of Social Media Platforms

Despite the challenges posed by the digital divide, social media platforms can serve as powerful tools for bridging accessibility gaps³⁷. For example, platforms like WhatsApp

and Facebook allow for the rapid dissemination of information, even in areas with limited internet connectivity. Community groups can leverage these platforms to share important updates, mobilize support, and foster dialogue around pressing issues.

Furthermore, social media can facilitate collaboration among different advocacy groups, allowing them to pool resources and share best practices. By creating networks of support, organizations can enhance their collective impact and reach communities that might otherwise remain isolated.

The digital divide and accessibility issues present significant challenges to social media advocacy related to banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt. The disparities in access to information and communication technologies can marginalize vulnerable communities and hinder effective advocacy efforts. To address these challenges, a multi-faceted approach that includes improving infrastructure, promoting digital literacy, and fostering community engagement is essential. By actively working to bridge the digital divide, advocates can create a more inclusive and impactful advocacy landscape that amplifies the voices of those most affected by violence and insecurity.

Online Harassment and Threats

In the realm of social media advocacy, particularly in sensitive contexts such as the ongoing issue of banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt, online harassment and threats pose significant barriers to effective engagement and mobilization. This section examines the nature of online harassment, its implications for advocates, and strategies to mitigate its impact.

Understanding Online Harassment

Online harassment encompasses a range of harmful behaviors that individuals may encounter on digital platforms, including threats, abuse, stalking, and doxing. The Oxford English Dictionary defines online harassment as "the utilisation of information and communication technologies by an individual or a group to repeatedly inflict harm upon another person. This may encompass issuing threats, causing embarrassment, or inducing humiliation in a virtual environment³⁸. This form of abuse can target anyone but disproportionately affects marginalized groups and individuals who speak out on contentious issues, such as violence and conflict³⁹.

In Nigeria, social media has become a battleground for various ideological conflicts, making activists and advocates particularly vulnerable to online harassment⁴⁰. Women, in particular, face heightened risks; studies indicate that female activists are often subjected to gender-based harassment, which can manifest as threats of sexual violence, misogynistic comments, and personal attacks aimed at discrediting their advocacy efforts⁴¹.

Implications for Advocacy

The implications of online harassment for advocacy efforts are profound. Activists who face harassment may experience psychological distress, which can deter them from engaging in public discourse or continuing their advocacy work. This chilling effect not

only silences individual voices but can also discourage others from participating in social movements, thereby stifling collective action against issues such as banditry⁴². Furthermore, the fear of harassment can lead to self-censorship, where individuals refrain from expressing their opinions or sharing information for fear of backlash. This dynamic is particularly concerning in the context of banditry, where transparency and open dialogue are crucial for fostering understanding and finding solutions.

Moreover, online harassment can undermine the credibility of advocates. When attackers focus on personal attacks rather than substantive arguments, they divert attention from the critical issues being raised. This tactic is often employed to delegitimize activists and disrupt their efforts to mobilize support for their causes⁴³.

Examples of Online Harassment

Activists and journalists reporting on banditry in the Middle Belt have increasingly faced online harassment, including cyberstalking and threats⁴⁴. This abuse aims to silence them, disrupt their work, and create a climate of fear. The personal information of activists has been shared online (doxing), leading to real-world threats and heightened safety concerns⁴⁵. Such tactics not only endanger the targeted individuals but also deter others from speaking out against violence and injustice.

Strategies for Combating Online Harassment

To combat online harassment, various strategies can be employed by individuals, organizations, and platforms. For activists, it's essential to build supportive networks that can provide emotional and practical assistance in the face of harassment⁴⁶. Allyship is a

crucial part of cyber-activism, creating a network of like-minded activists who can assist if one faces harassment⁴⁷. Peer support groups and coalitions can help individuals share experiences, strategies, and resources to deal with online abuse.

Education and awareness-raising about online harassment are also crucial. Workshops and training sessions can equip activists with the skills to manage harassment, including how to report abusive behavior and protect their online presence⁴⁸. Organizations like the Digital Rights Lawyers Initiative in Nigeria are working to provide resources and training aimed at empowering activists to navigate the digital landscape safely⁴⁹.

Social media platforms also have a role to play in addressing online harassment. Implementing and enforcing robust policies against harassment can create a safer environment for users⁵⁰. Advocacy for improved reporting mechanisms and transparency in how platforms handle complaints can lead to more effective responses to incidents of harassment. Nigerian authorities have shut down millions of social media accounts and removed harmful content to curb online abuse⁵¹.

Legal Protections and Support

Legal protections against online harassment are also critical. In Nigeria, the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc.) Act of 2015, and its amendment in 2024, aims to combat cybercrime, including cyberstalking⁵². Section 24 of the Act specifically addresses unauthorized phone recordings and makes it a cybercrime to intercept or access electronic communications without authorization, with penalties including fines and imprisonment⁵³.

However, the implementation and enforcement of these laws remain inconsistent, and the Act has been criticized for being used to target journalists and activists⁵⁴.

Organizations such as the Nigerian Cyber Crime Unit are working to improve responses to online abuse, but more comprehensive measures are needed⁵⁵. Victims of online harassment can report incidents to law enforcement agencies and seek legal counsel from organizations specializing in digital rights⁵⁶.

Conclusion

In addressing the challenges of social media advocacy related to banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt, it is evident that misinformation, digital divides, and online harassment significantly hinder effective action for peace and justice. A multifaceted approach is essential, incorporating media literacy, improved infrastructure, and community mobilization. Advocates must work to bridge the digital divide, promote digital safety, and raise awareness while fostering inclusive environments that empower marginalized voices. By tackling these interconnected issues, advocates can enhance the credibility and effectiveness of their efforts, ultimately amplifying the call for justice and security in affected communities.

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CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The persistent issue of banditry in Nigeria's Middle Belt represents a complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, and political factors that have escalated over the years. This study has highlighted the multifaceted nature of banditry, emphasizing that it is not merely a law enforcement challenge but a phenomenon deeply rooted in socio-economic deprivation, historical grievances, and systemic governance failures. The significant rise in violent attacks, kidnappings, and other forms of criminality has created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity, profoundly affecting the lives of communities in the region¹.

Social media has emerged as a crucial tool in the fight against banditry, offering platforms for rapid information dissemination, community mobilization, and grassroots activism. The immediacy of social media enables individuals to report incidents of violence, share security updates, and advocate for change more effectively than traditional media channels, which often lag in coverage and responsiveness². Activists have leveraged platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to raise awareness, mobilize support, and challenge prevailing narratives surrounding banditry. Campaigns utilizing hashtags like #EndBanditry and #SecureNorth have garnered significant public attention, compelling authorities to take more decisive action against the crisis³.

However, the study has also identified critical challenges that undermine the effectiveness of social media advocacy. Misinformation and fake news have proliferated on social media, complicating efforts to provide accurate information and mobilize communities. The rapid spread of false narratives can exacerbate tensions between communities and divert attention from the pressing issues at hand⁴. Moreover, the digital

divide remains a substantial barrier, with significant disparities in access to technology and digital literacy between urban and rural populations. This divide limits the participation of marginalized communities in online advocacy, perpetuating their vulnerability to violence and insecurity⁵.

Online harassment and threats pose further challenges for activists engaging in social media advocacy. Many individuals, particularly women, face targeted abuse that can deter them from participating in public discourse and undermine their credibility as advocates⁶. The implications of online harassment extend beyond individual experiences, stifling collective action and silencing voices that seek to address issues of violence and insecurity⁷.

In summary, the findings of this study underscore the dual nature of social media as both a powerful tool for advocacy and a platform susceptible to misuse. While it presents opportunities for engagement and mobilization, it is crucial to recognize its limitations and the challenges that activists face. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that includes media literacy, improved access to technology, and robust legal protections against online harassment.

As Nigeria continues to navigate the complexities of banditry, understanding the dynamics at play in social media advocacy will be essential for developing effective strategies to combat violence and foster community resilience. The subsequent recommendations aim to provide actionable steps for policymakers, community leaders, and activists to enhance the effectiveness of social media in the struggle against banditry.

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