

## **Exploring Social Media Effects on Nigerian Youth's Perceptions of Apostasy as Tools for Peacebuilding**

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### **Abstract**

The rapid expansion of social media in Nigeria has transformed the ways in which young people engage with religious ideas, identities, and debates, particularly on sensitive issues such as apostasy in a religiously plural society. As digital platforms increasingly shape public discourse, perceptions of religious conversion or renunciation are often constructed and circulated through online interactions that may reinforce existing beliefs or intensify interreligious tensions. This study therefore investigates how social media influences Nigerian youths' perceptions of apostasy and the implications of these perceptions for peacebuilding. Drawing on Social Media Theory and Conflict Theory, the study explains how algorithm-driven content circulation, user interaction, and online echo chambers can amplify identity-based narratives, while group dynamics and competition for ideological influence may frame apostasy as a form of communal betrayal. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through an online survey administered to 200 respondents aged 18–45 across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. The findings indicate that social media significantly shapes youth perceptions of apostasy, often reinforcing polarized viewpoints through algorithmic filtering and the spread of misinformation, which may deepen suspicion between religious communities. At the same time, the study identifies opportunities for digital platforms to promote dialogue, interfaith understanding, and peace-oriented communication. The study concludes that while social media can intensify ideological divisions, it also holds considerable potential as a tool for digital peacebuilding when supported by critical digital literacy and intentional efforts to promote responsible and constructive online engagement.

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Apostasy, Nigeria, Youth, Peacebuilding, Interfaith Dialogue, Online Discourse, Misinformation, Extremism.*

### **Introduction**

Numerous inventions meant to make life easier and promote global well-being have been spurred by the desire to better human living. Social media, which has developed through incredible technological milestones from telegraph (1792) and radio (1891) to supercomputers (1940s), the World Wide Web (1991), and numerous platforms like LinkedIn (2002), Facebook

(2004), YouTube (2005), WhatsApp (2009), and Instagram (2010). Social media has become essential as a result of these innovations' profound effects on all facets of human life. Connecting with friends and family, locating employment, assisting companies with a larger customer base, keeping up with news, and encouraging knowledge exchange are just a few of its applications. In the modern world, social media has emerged as a crucial instrument for engagement, communication, and real-time information access. According to recent statistics, Nigeria has one of the biggest populations of social media users in Africa. The widespread use of cellphones, easier access to the internet, and the allure of social media in promoting immediate and extensive contact are the main causes of this high level of participation. This connectivity gives Nigerian adolescents essential connection to their local and international communities, allowing them to engage in a cross-border cultural conversation. As a result, social media facilitates cross-cultural communication by enabling the rapid adoption and dissemination of trends, norms, and values. Studies have shown that teenagers, adolescents and youths are among the most prolific users of social media across the globe. Roberts and Foehr also observe that with personal computers in their family rooms, laptops that they carry about and digital music players as well as cell phones in their backpacks, today's adolescents and youths are awash with social media. Neelamalar and Chitra further noted that an average of six to eight hours daily social media use has been reported for eighteen to thirty-five years-old adolescents and youths around the world, making them to spend more time with social media than any single activity other than sleeping. Apart from its use for positive things, social media has also been found to have its negative impact on the society. Some of which include, spreading of false information, promoting criminal activities, helping in the quick spread of vices, delinquencies in Juveniles. It is also addictive, and can preoccupy someone and prevent him or her from attending to other more pressing things.

Apostasy is the act of renouncing or abandoning one's religion, it can also be associated with the refusal to adopt or follow a given religion (generally within a territory controlled by that religion). The act of leaving one's religion, or apostasy, has important socio-religious ramifications in Nigeria, a nation with a diverse religious landscape that includes Christians, Muslims, followers of traditional religions, and an increasing number of people who are not religious. Apostasy from Islam or Christianity can result in extreme social stigma in many parts of Nigeria, especially in the more religiously orthodox north. Apostates may experience rejection from their social circles, families, and communities, which can lead to loneliness, lack of social support, and trouble making new friends. Conversion from one religion to another, or renouncing religion altogether, can also strain family ties considerably. They may be disowned, face pressure to recant, and experience breakdown of marriages, especially in situations where religious laws or customs heavily influence family matters. Individuals may lose their jobs, especially in religious institutions or religiously affiliated organizations. Inheritance rights might be revoked, and business relationships could be affected due to religious discrimination. In extreme cases, particularly in regions where religious sentiments are strong or where certain

interpretations of religious law prevail, apostates can face threats, harassment, physical violence, and even death. Nigeria's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, including the right to change one's religion. However, in some northern states that operate under Sharia law alongside secular law, apostasy from Islam can be considered a crime, although the enforcement and penalties vary. This creates a complex legal landscape where constitutional rights may clash with religious legal interpretations and many others.

Conflict can arise in these situations and as a part of the social and political aspect of human life, conflict is inherent and legitimate. However, conflict turns violent in many circumstances, causing grave damages in terms of lives and properties. The costs and consequences of conflict become highly unacceptable as it destroys the social fabric of the society. The significance of peacebuilding in a multi-religious society like Nigeria is profound and multifaceted. Religion, while often a source of social cohesion and positive values, can also be manipulated or become a marker of identity in conflicts over resources, power, and social justice. Peacebuilding efforts can proactively address religiously motivated misunderstandings and prejudices, preventing escalation into violence. In situations where religious differences have contributed to conflict, peacebuilding initiatives can create platforms for dialogue and reconciliation, helping to de-escalate tensions and foster understanding between communities.

In light of the transformative influence of social media on modern society, particularly among youth, it is crucial to examine its impact on sensitive socio-religious issues such as apostasy. As social media continues to serve as both a mirror and molder of societal values, it plays a critical role in shaping how Nigerian youth perceive religious identity, loyalty, and dissent. These perceptions have far-reaching implications for peacebuilding in a religiously pluralistic country like Nigeria, where misunderstandings around apostasy can inflame tensions and threaten social cohesion. The problem this study addresses is the extent to which social media platforms influence Nigerian youth's perceptions of apostasy, and how these perceptions affect peacebuilding efforts. To this end, the objectives of the study are threefold: (1) to assess the role of social media in shaping perceptions of apostasy among Nigerian youth, (2) to examine how online platforms contribute to societal polarization or promote interfaith dialogue, and (3) to provide strategies for leveraging social media for peacebuilding. The research will seek answers to critical questions such as: How do social media algorithms and user-generated content influence perceptions of apostasy? What role do online echo chambers play in spreading extremist narratives? And how can social media be utilized to foster interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding? This study is significant as it offers insights that can inform policy-making, guide religious leaders, and strengthen civil society initiatives aimed at promoting tolerance and unity. Moreover, it aims to enhance strategies for mitigating the adverse effects of social media while maximizing its potential for building a more peaceful and inclusive society. The scope of the study will focus on Nigerian youth from diverse religious backgrounds and regions, with recognition of limitations related to data access, platform restrictions, and the complexity of measuring digital influence.

## **Methodology**

Data for the study were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via digital platforms. The use of an online form was considered appropriate because the study focuses on social media engagement among youths. Individuals who actively use social media are more easily reached through digital channels, making the online survey method consistent with the nature of the research topic. Online data collection also enabled the researcher to reach respondents across multiple regions of Nigeria within a relatively short period of time. In addition, the anonymity associated with online responses may have encouraged participants to express their views more freely, particularly on a sensitive issue such as apostasy.

However, the method may exclude individuals with limited internet access and may also introduce self-selection bias, as respondents who are more active online or have stronger opinions may be more likely to participate. Despite these limitations, the online survey method remains appropriate for studies examining digital behavior and perceptions within social media environments.

## **Sampling and Sampling Analysis**

The study adopted a non-probability sampling approach, distributing the survey across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones in order to obtain responses from different parts of the country. The intention was not to achieve full statistical representation of the Nigerian population, which would be impractical, but rather to obtain a small yet diverse representation of Nigerian youths.

A total of 200 respondents aged 18–45 participated in the survey. This age range was selected because individuals within this bracket are often still regarded as part of the youth demographic in many social and policy contexts in Nigeria, particularly in terms of digital engagement and participation in youth-oriented religious communities. The sampling strategy deliberately included participants from each geopolitical zone, ensuring that the study captured perspectives from different socio-religious environments. Although the number of responses from each region varies, the distribution allowed the researcher to obtain at least some insights from all parts of the country.

While the findings cannot be generalized to the entire Nigerian youth population, the sample provides valuable exploratory evidence of how social media shapes perceptions of apostasy among youths across different regions of Nigeria.

## **Definitions and interpretations of apostasy in Nigerian religious contexts**

The question of Apostasy and whether and how it should be punished, has primarily been a concern in Abrahamic religions which are the religions that trace their roots to Abraham including Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

## **Apostasy in Christianity**

Since the beginning of Christianity, the topic of apostasy has been central to Christian philosophy. When the Romans persecuted Christians, some of them abandoned their faith before it became a dominant one. The common response to the subject of how to handle those who wished to rejoin the church but had formally rejected Christianity was to avoid them. However, things altered after the Roman Emperor embraced Christianity. Some theologians, at least, believed that apostasy was just as grave a crime as murder or adultery. The most common punishment was excommunication. In the 20th century, Roman Catholic Canon Law still imposed the sanction of excommunication for those whose rejection of the faith fitted the technical definition of apostasy. But the absence of civil sanctions and an increasing tolerance of divergent viewpoints have tended increasingly to mitigate the reaction of believers to those who reject Christianity. The seriousness of apostasy is emphasized in both the Old and New Testaments. Scripture says apostasy jeopardizes one's soul's salvation, and intentional disbelief was punishable by stoning in ancient Israel. From the beginning of time, believers have faced challenges from apostasy in the form of heresy and idolatry. When his disciples abandoned him for worldly pursuits, Jesus Christ felt tremendous sadness. Rebellions and divisions are also documented in the New Testament. Apostasy is still common in the church today. The church responds to a person's departure from Christianity by visiting, counseling, and evangelizing them. Jesus advocated kindness and self-control and forbade the persecution of apostates. Since Christianity calls for divine accountability rather than punishment for apostasy, both clergy and laypeople are to leave judgment to God.

## **Apostasy in Islam**

Apostasy originates from the Arabic verb *Radda*, meaning “turning back.” *Riddah* and *Trinidad* also denote apostasy—turning back from Islam to another religion or unbelief. An apostate is called a *murtad*. For instance, *Radda-yard* means turning back on one's faith after accepting it. Islamic teaching defines apostasy as renouncing Islam or abandoning its epistemological and moral foundations. Some modern scholars define it as rejecting Islam's fundamental beliefs. The main debate centers not on its definition but on punishment. While some scholars advocate death for apostates, others argue that killing someone for leaving Islam contradicts the core teachings of the Qur'an. According to Istifanus, Azam (2007) says apostasy portrays the sense of turning away from Islam after receiving the commandment of Allah. This act involves a retreat from the Islamic faith to a new creed the apostate believes in, including a shift to another religion, adoption of atheism, or lack of belief in any religion. These forms of retreat are examples of apostasy. The Qur'an refers to apostasy as withdrawal from Islam or the spiritual plane. It clearly indicates abandonment of Islam after accepting it, whether briefly or for a long time, and warns those who accept Islam only to later forsake it. Apostasy, therefore, signals a serious spiritual retreat. Azam urges those who accept Islam to cling to it, as it is the

true guidance and authority, the way of living and life. He encourages perseverance in faith, advising Muslims to remain steadfast and die as Muslim believers, without turning back.

### **Peacebuilding**

According to Henry, Bliss defined peace building as a term within the international development community that describes processes and activities aimed at resolving violent conflicts and establishing sustainable peace. These include conflict transformation, restorative justice, trauma healing, reconciliation, development, and leadership. While similar to conflict resolution, peace building goes further by focusing on sustainable social and economic development and, more importantly, preventing future wars and violence. Gaulden (cited by Henry) defines peace building as ensuring a country or society creates conditions for sustainable peace. These conditions may be created in already peaceful societies to prevent conflict or in post-conflict situations after conflict resolution mechanisms have ended the violence. In post-conflict settings, peace building begins during the transition period and involves implementing peace agreements. Gaulden also notes that peace building is a continuous process involving various measures such as transformation of state organs, socio-economic development, democratization, and regional integration to maintain long-term peace.

National governments' interest in peace building has increased due to concerns that failed states foster conflict and extremism, threatening international security. Some states now see peace building as a way to assert their relevance, though these activities still account for small portions of national budgets. While short-term humanitarian relief and crisis intervention are important, they are insufficient for lasting impact in conflict or post-conflict societies. There is growing awareness of the need for proactive measures to prevent violent conflicts, and where conflict occurs, to pursue reconciliation, build conflict resolution capacity, and foster sustainable peace. Peace building theory focuses on addressing root causes of violence to reduce future outbreaks. The literature describes peace building as dynamic, contributing at every conflict phase and adapting to each stage of peacemaking. It is increasingly recognized that conflicts rarely end completely or are fully resolved, and stopping a conflict without justice may be counterproductive. The most durable peace agreements involve proactive strategies and mutual participation by conflicting groups. Despite varied definitions, peace building ultimately aims to create an atmosphere of positive peace, love, and tranquility essential for human flourishing and achieving life's best outcomes.

### **Social Media Theory: Algorithms, User Behavior, and Echo Chambers**

Social media platforms have become ubiquitous in the 21st century, fundamentally altering how individuals connect, consume information, and participate in public discourse. At the heart of this transformation lie the sophisticated algorithms that curate the content users

encounter. Understanding the interplay between these algorithms, user behavior, and the emergence of echo chambers is crucial for comprehending the societal impact of social media.

### **Algorithms**

Social media algorithms are complex systems designed to personalize user experience by determining which content appears in an individual's feed. These algorithms consider a multitude of factors, including: User Interactions like past likes, comments, shares, and follows signal preferences and influence future content recommendations, Content Characteristics which is the type of content (text, image, video), its recency, popularity, and the engagement it generates all play a role and Network Effects like content from users within an individual's network and broader trends within their communities are prioritized. While the primary goal of these algorithms is often framed as enhancing user engagement and platform stickiness, their inherent design can inadvertently lead to filter bubbles and echo chambers. By prioritizing content that aligns with existing preferences and showing users more of what they have previously engaged with, algorithms can limit exposure to diverse perspectives.

### **User Behavior**

User behavior on social media is a complex interplay of individual motivations, social influences, and platform design. Several key aspects of user behavior contribute to the dynamics within social media ecosystems. Individuals tend to seek out information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs and avoid contradictory viewpoints. This cognitive bias is amplified on social media, where users can easily curate their feeds by following like-minded individuals and groups. Engagement with content, such as likes and positive comments, reinforces users' beliefs and encourages them to share similar content. This creates feedback loops where opinions within a network become increasingly homogenous. The tendency for individuals to connect with others who share similar characteristics, including beliefs and values, further contributes to the formation of insular online communities.

### **Echo Chambers**

Echo chambers, also known as filter bubbles, are online environments where individuals are primarily exposed to information and perspectives that reinforce their existing beliefs. This phenomenon arises from the combination of algorithmic filtering and users' tendency towards selective exposure and network homophily. Within echo chambers, users are less likely to encounter dissenting opinions or alternative perspectives, hindering critical thinking and nuanced understanding of complex issues. Repeated exposure to like-minded viewpoints strengthens conviction and can lead to the polarization of opinions. The lack of exposure to fact-checking and diverse sources can make individuals within echo chambers more vulnerable to the

spread of misinformation and propaganda. Limited interaction with those holding different beliefs can erode empathy and understanding across social and political divides.

### **Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory, as associated with Karl Marx, is a social theory that posits that society is in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources. Conflict theory holds that social order is maintained by domination and power, rather than by consensus and conformity. According to conflict theory, those with wealth and power try to hold on to it by any means possible, chiefly by suppressing the poor and powerless. A basic premise of conflict theory is that individuals and groups within society will work to try to maximize their own wealth and power. Conflict theory provides a framework for understanding *why* certain groups propagate misinformation and extremist narratives. Dominant groups might use misinformation to reinforce existing power structures by scapegoating marginalized groups and deflecting blame for societal problems. Competition for scarce resources – be it land, economic opportunities, or political influence is a central tenet of conflict theory.<sup>5</sup> Misinformation can be strategically used to demonize rival groups and justify their exclusion from accessing these resources. For example, false claims about a particular ethnic group hoarding wealth can fuel resentment and calls for discriminatory policies. Extremist narratives, even if based on falsehoods, can strengthen in-group solidarity by creating a shared sense of purpose and a common enemy. This heightened cohesion can be a powerful tool for collective action, including conflict.

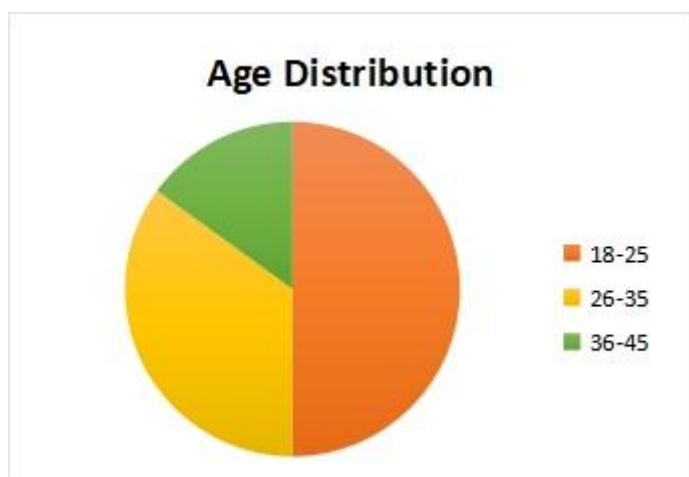
From a conflict theory perspective, misinformation and extremist narratives are not simply misguided beliefs; they are potent instruments in the struggle for power and resources. By creating divisions, weaponizing grievances, undermining trust, and dehumanizing others, these narratives act as a catalyst for societal conflict. Understanding this dynamic is crucial for developing effective strategies to counter misinformation, de-escalate tensions, and foster more inclusive and equitable societies.

### **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the findings from the survey conducted on how social media influences Nigerian youths' perception of apostasy and its implications for peacebuilding. The analysis follows a thematic and statistical approach, supported by existing literature and the responses derived from the administered questionnaire.

#### **Demographic Profile of Respondents**

A total of 200 respondents aged 18–45 participated in the survey, distributed across Nigeria's geopolitical zones. The sample was stratified by gender, region, and religious affiliation.



REGIONS REPRESENTED	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
South-West	55	27.5%
North Central	35	17.5%
North West	45	22.5%
South-East	30	15%
North-East	25	12.5%
South-South	10	5%
Total	200	100 %

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Christianity	100	50%
Islam	90	45%
Traditional Religion	6	3%
None/Other	4	2%
Total	200	100 %

GENDER	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Male	110	55%
Female	86	43%
Prefer Not to Say	4	2%
Total	200	100 %

### Social Media Usage Patterns

**Most Used Platforms:** WhatsApp (60%), Facebook (50%), Twitter/X (50%), Instagram (40%).

**Time Spent Daily:** 4–6 hours (50%), 1–3 hours (30%), 7+ hours (15%), less than 1 hour (5%).

### **Adequacy of the Data Used**

The study utilized data obtained from 200 respondents between the ages of 18 and 45 drawn from Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. The dataset is adequate for an exploratory quantitative study examining how social media influences youth perceptions of apostasy and its implications for peacebuilding. The sample reflects diversity in region, gender, and religious affiliation, which is particularly important given Nigeria's complex religious landscape. Including respondents from different regions and religious backgrounds strengthens the analytical value of the study by capturing varied perspectives on a sensitive socio-religious issue. Although the sample cannot fully represent the entire Nigerian youth population, it provides sufficient empirical insight into patterns of perception among digitally active youths, especially those who frequently engage with social media platforms. The data therefore serve as a useful basis for examining emerging trends in online religious discourse and its potential implications for interfaith relations.

### **Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings**

The analysis was guided by the research objectives which sought to examine how social media shapes perceptions of apostasy among Nigerian youths, assess its role in digital polarization, and explore its potential for peacebuilding.

The findings indicate that social media plays a significant role in shaping youth perceptions of apostasy. Respondents reported high levels of engagement with platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter/X, and Instagram, with most spending between four and six hours online daily. This level of engagement suggests that social media has become an important space where religious narratives and identity discussions are formed and circulated.

A recurring theme in the responses was the perception of apostasy as a form of religious or communal betrayal. Posts condemning religious conversion or renunciation were reported to attract significant engagement online. This pattern supports existing studies which show that emotionally charged content, particularly when linked to identity and belief systems, tends to spread rapidly within digital networks. The findings also suggest the presence of algorithmically reinforced echo chambers. Many respondents indicated that the content they encounter online often reflects their existing beliefs. This dynamic limit exposure to alternative viewpoints and may reinforce rigid attitudes toward religious differences.

Another important finding relates to the spread of misinformation within online spaces. Some respondents acknowledged encountering misleading information regarding religious conversion or interfaith relations, which sometimes contributed to suspicion between religious

communities. Such patterns align with broader research that identifies misinformation as a major driver of polarization in digital environments.

Despite these challenges, the study also reveals that social media can function as a platform for constructive engagement. Respondents noted examples of interfaith discussions, educational content, and digital campaigns promoting tolerance and dialogue. These initiatives demonstrate the potential of social media to support peacebuilding efforts when intentionally used to promote understanding and respectful interaction between religious groups. Overall, the findings highlight the dual nature of social media: while it can amplify divisive narratives and reinforce ideological boundaries, it can also provide opportunities for dialogue, education, and digital peace advocacy.

## **Recommendations**

Following the findings, the researchers recommend:

**Strengthening digital literacy programs among Nigerian youths:** Implement educational initiatives at schools, universities, and religious institutions to equip young people with critical thinking and media literacy skills, enabling them to identify and reject online misinformation.

**Equip religious institutions and influencers with tools to counter misinformation:** Provide training and support for religious leaders and online influencers to actively engage in constructive discourse and respond to false narratives with credible information and peaceful messaging.

**Collaborate with tech platforms to promote interfaith-friendly content:** Advocate for algorithmic transparency and corporate social responsibility from social media companies to prioritize peace-promoting content, remove extremist material, and support interfaith dialogue initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined how social media influences Nigerian youths' perceptions of apostasy and the implications of these perceptions for peacebuilding in a religiously plural society. The findings show that social media has become a significant platform where discussions about religion, identity, and belief are actively shaped. On one hand, algorithmic amplification, echo chambers, and the spread of misinformation can reinforce negative attitudes toward religious dissent and contribute to digital polarization. These dynamics may indirectly affect interfaith relations by deepening suspicion and misunderstanding among religious communities.

On the other hand, the study also demonstrates that social media holds considerable potential as a tool for promoting dialogue and interfaith understanding. When used strategically, digital platforms can support educational initiatives, encourage respectful engagement, and amplify messages of tolerance.

The study therefore underscores the importance of strengthening digital literacy, encouraging responsible online discourse, and promoting peace-oriented digital initiatives. By doing so, social media can be better harnessed as a platform that contributes not only to information exchange but also to sustainable peacebuilding within Nigeria's diverse religious landscape.

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