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**EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF BANDITS' SOCIAL MEDIA
VISIBILITY ON THE PERCEPTION OF BANDITRY BY YOUTHS IN
ILORIN METROPOLIS**

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Abstract

The growing visibility of armed bandits on social media has transformed public engagement with insecurity in Nigeria, particularly among digitally connected youths. Although studies have extensively examined the structural drivers of banditry, media representations of insecurity, and youth engagement with digital platforms, limited attention has been paid to how the sustained visibility of bandits across social media influences young people's perceptions of banditry. This paper evaluates the impact of bandits' social media visibility on the perception of banditry among youths in Ilorin metropolis. Drawing on Agenda-Setting Theory and Framing Theory, the study argues that repeated exposure to bandit-related content shapes cognitive evaluations of insecurity by influencing issue salience, framing violent actors, reinforcing emotional responses, and affecting perceptions of credibility, legitimacy and risk. Existing literature demonstrates that social media simultaneously functions as a platform for information dissemination, civic engagement and misinformation, thereby producing competing interpretations of violent events among young audiences. The paper concludes that the influence of social media visibility depends not only on the frequency of exposure but also on the interpretive frames embedded within digital content and the media literacy of users. It recommends strengthening digital media literacy, promoting conflict-sensitive reporting, encouraging responsible platform governance, and developing coordinated counter-narrative strategies capable of reducing the unintended normalization and amplification of bandit-related content among Nigerian youths.

Keywords: Banditry, Social Media Visibility, Youth Perception, Agenda Setting, Nigeria

Introduction

The rapid diffusion of digital communication technologies has transformed how information about insecurity is produced, circulated and consumed (Kpae, 2026). Unlike conventional media, social media platforms facilitate instantaneous content creation, user participation and algorithm-driven dissemination, increasing the visibility of events that previously received limited public attention. In Nigeria, platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, TikTok and YouTube have become important sources of information on armed banditry, kidnapping and other security challenges. Their interactive features enable users not only to access information but also to comment, share and amplify narratives relating to violent crime (Kala, 2024). Armed banditry has become one of Nigeria's most persistent security challenges. Recent studies indicate that the phenomenon has evolved beyond isolated criminal activities into organised criminal networks sustained by governance failures, socioeconomic deprivation, communal grievances, competition over land and weak state institutions (Ejiofor, 2022; Ebonine, 2022). These dynamics have intensified public interest in bandit-related information and increased media attention devoted to insecurity.

Although traditional news organisations continue to perform an important agenda-setting role, social media has become increasingly influential in shaping public understanding of security issues, particularly among younger audiences who rely heavily on digital platforms for news. Nigerian youths regard social media as a major source of news and public affairs, with Instagram and X among the most frequently used platforms (Akoja & Nweneazizi, 2021). Similarly, younger citizens have been found to express greater confidence in social media narratives than older generations despite comparable levels of media exposure (Erubami et al., 2021). These findings suggest that digital platforms substantially influence how young people interpret insecurity.

The influence of social media extends beyond information dissemination to the construction of social reality. Through repeated exposure, algorithmic amplification and user interaction, digital platforms shape the prominence of security issues and the representation of violent actors. Agenda-setting and framing theories explain that media emphasis determines the salience of issues and influences audience interpretation (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). In Nigeria, media framing has also been shown to influence public understanding of banditry and its implications for national cohesion (Ishaku & Tartsea-Anshase, 2025). At the same time, social media allows verified reports, eyewitness accounts, rumours and misinformation to circulate simultaneously, exposing youths to competing narratives capable of shaping perceptions of the causes, severity and normality of armed banditry.

Banditry has become one of the most persistent security challenges confronting Nigeria in the twenty-first century. The spate of banditry has become worrisome as activities of the various non-state actors threaten state, sub-regional and national security agenda (Okien, , Gabriel, & Nwala , 2024). Banditry is conceived as groups of lawless individuals and their characteristic behaviour, which runs contrary to civilized norms. Banditry, as an illegitimate violent man-handling of innocent citizens, has assumed a more sophisticated dimension with the application of modern weapons, use of communication gadgets among members and prior surveillance of territory of operations (Osasona, 2023). Oarhe & Aghedo, 2021) define banditry as “a criminal phenomenon that succeeds due to the governance void and the systemic negligence of rural communities, leading to insecurity, violence, and criminal operations by non-state actors.” They connect banditry to the collapse of local economies and the failure of pastoralism in many parts of Nigeria.

The story of banditry in Nigeria was largely confined to remote forests, deserted villages and dangerous highways. It was a grim tale told through reports of midnight attacks, mass abductions, cattle rustling, killings and ransom negotiations but Today, however, bandits are no longer confined to the forests. They are increasingly finding visibility in the digital space. They are now appearing on social media platforms, particularly TikTok, where they livestream, display wealth, interact with followers and project influence to audiences far beyond the communities affected by their activities,

mostly in Northern Nigeria (Ojo, 2026). Bandits are now flanked by belts of 7.62mm ammunition, an AK-47 and sub-machine guns. The development is now making TikTok, which began as a platform for entertainment, dance challenges and comedy skits, to confront a troubling reality (Ojo, 2026). Findings showed that they now use TikTok and Facebook videos to frame their violence as a justified 'rebellion or retaliation' against marginalisation, and called it their own version of survival or hustle. The recent circulation of viral TikTok live streams allegedly featuring suspected bandits sparked widespread outrage across Nigeria. In some of the videos, men believed to be operating from forest hideouts appeared displaying large bundles of cash, while interacting with viewers in real time (Ojo, 2026).

The growing online visibility of bandits raises important questions about the relationship between digital exposure and public perception. Bandits increasingly appear in viral videos, photographs, propaganda messages, ransom-related content and user-generated discussions that circulate widely across social media. While such visibility may increase public awareness of insecurity, it may also reinforce fear, normalise violence and amplify criminal propaganda. Studies have shown that social media promotes civic engagement and political participation while accelerating the spread of misinformation, producing mixed consequences for public understanding of security issues (Adekoya, 2021; Uwalaka & Nwala, 2023). Evidence also indicates that some Nigerian youths knowingly share misinformation on social media, further complicating public understanding of national security issues (Ononiwu, 2024). In the old dispensation, bandits carried out their activities in remote places and dark alleys. In current times, paradigm has shifted in which activities of bandits are engaged online without fear of the law, partly because they are fully armed and their social media presence (Marvasti, 2017; (Abiodun & Abila, 2018).

Ilorin metropolis provides an appropriate setting for examining this relationship because it has a large population of digitally connected youths whose news consumption increasingly occurs through social media platforms. Residents are regularly exposed to extensive online coverage from mainstream media and social media users. Consequently, many young people develop perceptions of banditry primarily through mediated experiences rather than direct encounters. Examining how social media visibility influences these perceptions is important for strengthening media literacy, improving security communication and informing policies that promote responsible digital engagement. Despite these growing bodies of literature, a critical gap remains. Most studies on armed banditry have concentrated on its causes, operational dynamics, humanitarian impacts, counter-insurgency strategies, governance challenges, and community security. Conversely, studies on social media have largely focused on political communication, electoral participation, digital activism, misinformation, entrepreneurship, and youth engagement. Comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to examining how the social media visibility of bandits themselves influences public perception, particularly among urban youths who may not have direct experience with armed violence but regularly encounter bandit-related content online. Consequently, the present study seeks to bridge this gap by evaluating how exposure to the online visibility of bandits influences youths' perceptions of banditry,

Statement of the Problem

The increasing prevalence of banditry has emerged as one of Nigeria's most significant internal security challenges, resulting in widespread loss of lives, displacement of communities, destruction of livelihoods, and growing public fear, particularly across the North-West and parts of the North-Central region (International Crisis Group, 2020; Aina, 2023). Although military operations and government security interventions have been intensified, armed bandit groups have continued to adapt their operational strategies, including the strategic use of digital communication platforms to publicise attacks, circulate propaganda, issue threats, and amplify their visibility among the public (Aina, 2023; European Union Agency for Asylum [EUAA], 2026).

The increasing visibility of bandits on social media has transformed insecurity from a predominantly physical phenomenon into a digital one, where violent activities are continuously disseminated to millions of users through platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram, and X. Given that Nigerian youths constitute the largest proportion of social media users, repeated exposure to bandit-related content may shape their perceptions of banditry, influence their sense of security, and affect their attitudes toward criminal violence and government responses. However, the extent to which the social media visibility of bandits influences youths' perceptions remains insufficiently understood.

Contemporary studies on armed banditry in Nigeria has largely concentrated on explaining its structural causes, political economy, communal dynamics, security implications and policing responses. Parallel studies within media and communication have examined agenda-setting, framing, news credibility and digital information behaviour among Nigerian audiences. While these bodies of literature have generated valuable insights independently, they rarely intersect to explain how the increasing visibility of bandits on social media influences the perceptions of young people who consume such content daily.

Existing studies have established that Nigerian youths rely heavily on social media for information and often assign considerable credibility to digital content. Other studies have demonstrated that media framing influences public interpretations of insecurity and that repeated exposure determines issue salience. However, the literature has paid limited attention to the specific mechanisms through which continuous social media visibility of bandits shapes youths' perceptions of banditry. Consequently, there remains no integrated conceptual framework that explains the interaction between social media visibility, media framing, agenda-setting processes and youth perception within the Nigerian communication environment.

This conceptual gap is particularly important because social media algorithms continuously amplify visual content capable of attracting engagement, regardless of its accuracy or social consequences. Without a coherent conceptual understanding of this relationship, scholars, media practitioners and policymakers possess limited theoretical guidance for interpreting the broader communication implications of bandits' digital visibility. This paper addresses this deficiency by synthesising contemporary literature to develop a comprehensive conceptual understanding of how social media visibility influences youths' perceptions of banditry within Ilorin metropolis.

Objectives of the study

The study seeks to:

1. examine the conceptual relationship between bandits' social media visibility and youths' perception of banditry in Ilorin metropolis;
2. synthesise existing scholarly perspectives on social media, media visibility, armed banditry and youth information behaviour within the Nigerian context;
3. evaluate the explanatory relevance of selected mass communication theories to understanding the relationship between social media visibility and perception of banditry; and
4. propose a refined conceptual understanding capable of guiding future empirical research and policy interventions on digital communication and insecurity.

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual review approach to synthesise existing scholarly knowledge on the relationship between bandits' social media visibility and youths' perception of banditry. The objective is to integrate contemporary theoretical and conceptual insights capable of advancing scholarly understanding of the phenomenon and identifying directions for future empirical enquiry. The literature analysed in this paper was purposively selected based on four principal criteria. First, only

peer-reviewed journal articles that reflect current scholarly debates on armed banditry, social media communication and youth information behaviour in Nigeria. Second, preference was given to studies indexed in internationally recognised academic databases and published by reputable scholarly publishers. Third, the selected literature address the major concepts underpinning this paper. These concepts include armed banditry, social media visibility, media framing, agenda-setting, youth media consumption, digital communication, insecurity reporting, journalism, public perception, misinformation, or digital identity formation. The conceptual synthesis followed a thematic analytical strategy

Conceptual Review and Discussion

The Evolution of Armed Banditry and the Emergence of Digital Visibility

Understanding how bandits' social media visibility shapes youths' perceptions requires recognising the transformation of armed banditry in Nigeria. Earlier studies viewed banditry largely as cattle rustling, highway robbery and rural criminality. Recent scholarship, however, portrays it as organised crime characterised by structured networks, territorial influence and complex socioeconomic drivers, developments that have intensified public concern and media attention (Okoli & Abubakar, 2021; Ejiofor, 2022). A major contribution to this discourse is the concept of crimelordism, through which Okoli and Abubakar (2021) argue that armed banditry has evolved beyond fragmented criminality into quasi-political authority. Bandit leaders increasingly exercise territorial control, exploit governance deficiencies and cultivate relationships with local communities, functioning as alternative centres of authority rather than isolated criminal actors. Likewise, Ejiofor (2022) rejects the "ungoverned spaces" explanation, arguing that persistent poverty, political exclusion, weak institutions and socioeconomic inequality better explain the emergence and persistence of organised banditry.

Community-level studies reinforce this structural perspective. Obi and Iwuoha (2023) demonstrate that local collaborators, governance failures and ineffective community security arrangements create conditions that enable armed groups to operate. Similarly, Obi et al. (2025) argue that communal grievances, land-related conflicts, informal security structures and relationships involving traditional institutions sustain the expanding banditry economy, illustrating that insecurity is embedded within broader governance and social systems rather than the activities of armed groups alone. Theoretical explanations further highlight the importance of opportunity structures. Applying routine activity, rational choice and crime pattern theories, Akinyetun (2021) argues that criminal behaviour persists where environmental conditions reduce perceived risks and increase potential rewards. These opportunity structures increasingly extend to digital communication environments, where continuous online circulation of violent content enhances the visibility of bandit activities. Ejiofor (2022) further shows that motorcycle mobility has strengthened the operational capabilities of armed groups by facilitating rapid attacks, territorial surveillance and evasion of security forces, thereby increasing both the frequency of attacks and opportunities for digital documentation.

The convergence of organised crime and terrorism has further elevated banditry as a national security concern. Okoli and Nwangwu (2023) argue that operational collaboration, tactical adaptation and resource sharing between bandit groups and terrorist organisations have strengthened insecurity in northern Nigeria. Their analysis demonstrates a functional crime-terror nexus in which both groups increasingly adapt each other's structures and operational strategies. Likewise, Ojo, Oyewole and Aina (2023) argue that contemporary banditry reflects intertwined criminal, political and socioeconomic dynamics rather than pastoral conflict alone, requiring integrated policy responses. These developments have coincided with profound changes in Nigeria's communication environment. Information about insecurity, once mediated primarily through newspapers, radio and television, is now produced and circulated almost instantly through mobile phones and social media. User-generated videos, photographs and eyewitness accounts are rapidly redistributed across digital

platforms, reducing the exclusive gatekeeping role of professional journalists and allowing citizens to participate directly in constructing narratives of insecurity.

Unlike traditional media, social media platforms amplify highly engaging content through algorithm-driven recommendation systems. Consequently, dramatic images, videos and narratives of violence often achieve extensive circulation beyond the locations where attacks occur. Young people living in relatively peaceful areas such as Ilorin metropolis are therefore repeatedly exposed to representations of banditry despite having no direct experience of such incidents. Media visibility consequently extends beyond the mere availability of information to the cognitive prominence created through repeated exposure. Continuous encounters with reports of attacks, kidnappings, ransom negotiations and armed groups encourage audiences to interpret insecurity through mediated experience rather than personal observation. The parallel evolution of organised banditry and digital communication therefore provides the conceptual basis for understanding how social media increasingly shapes youths' perceptions of banditry and insecurity in Nigeria.

Social Media Visibility

The concept of social media visibility has become central to contemporary communication, digital sociology, and media studies because it explains how individuals, groups, and events become observable, discoverable, and continuously present within digital environments. In the context of social media, visibility does not merely refer to being “seen,” but rather to the degree of exposure, circulation, amplification, and algorithmic prominence that content receives across platforms. Scholars argue that visibility is now a form of symbolic power because what becomes visible online often shapes what is considered important, real, or socially significant (van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Bucher, 2012).

From a theoretical perspective, social media visibility is closely linked to the architecture of digital platforms, where algorithms determine the distribution and prominence of content. Tarleton Gillespie (2014) explains that social media platforms are not neutral spaces; rather, they are algorithmically curated environments that actively shape what users see and do not see. This means that visibility is not only produced by users but also by platform governance systems that prioritise certain types of content based on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, comments, and watch time.

Similarly, Bucher (2012) argues that algorithmic visibility introduces a condition where users continuously attempt to make themselves or their content “seen” within competitive attention economies. In this context, visibility becomes a strategic resource, where actors compete for attention in saturated digital environments. Content that is highly visible tends to attract more engagement, further reinforcing its circulation through feedback loops created by platform algorithms (Bucher, 2012; Gillespie, 2014). The concept of visibility is also strongly associated with the idea of the attention economy, where human attention is treated as a scarce resource in digital spaces. Herbert A. Simon (1971) originally introduced the idea that information consumption is constrained by limited human attention. In modern digital communication, this concept has been expanded to explain how platforms compete for users' attention through personalised feeds and recommendation systems. As a result, visibility becomes a determinant of influence because highly visible content is more likely to be consumed, shared, and remembered.

In the context of social media, visibility also includes networked visibility, which refers to how content spreads through user interactions such as reposting, forwarding, tagging, and commenting. According to boyd (2010), social media visibility is shaped by both technological design and user behaviour, meaning that content can rapidly move from private communication spaces (such as WhatsApp groups) to public domains (such as X or TikTok). This dynamic circulation increases the reach and social impact of online content beyond its original context. Furthermore, social media visibility is closely tied to mediated publicness, where private or semi-private actions become

publicly accessible through digital documentation and sharing. van Dijck (2013) explains that digital platforms blur the boundaries between private and public communication, making it possible for individuals, organisations, and even criminal actors to achieve widespread visibility without traditional media gatekeeping. This transformation has significant implications for how events are interpreted, as visibility often substitutes for verification in fast-moving online environments.

Social Media as a Contemporary Agenda-Setter in Security Communication

The emergence of social media has transformed how security issues attain public prominence. While traditional news organisations continue to shape public discourse, digital platforms have expanded agenda-setting by enabling information to circulate rapidly through institutional and citizen-driven networks. Consequently, the visibility of armed banditry is influenced not only by editorial decisions but also by platform algorithms, user engagement and networked information sharing, with significant implications for youths' perceptions of insecurity.

Agenda-Setting Theory posits that media influence public priorities by determining which issues receive sustained attention. Although developed for conventional mass media, the theory remains applicable to digital communication. In social media environments, journalists, citizens, influencers, security agencies, victims and algorithmic recommendation systems collectively shape issue salience. Consequently, public agendas emerge through interactions between institutional communication and audience participation rather than newsroom decisions alone. Empirical evidence confirms the continuing agenda-setting role of the media in reporting insecurity. Ugwu et al. (2022) found that Nigerian newspapers devoted greater attention and interpretive depth to reports of armed banditry than television stations, demonstrating that differences in media emphasis influence public perceptions of security issues. Likewise, Ishaku, Tartsea-Anshase, and Kente (2025) reported significant variation in the frequency and prominence of newspaper coverage of bandit attacks, reinforcing the agenda-setting proposition that repeated emphasis increases issue salience.

Agenda-setting becomes more pronounced on social media because platform algorithms continuously recirculate engaging content. Unlike traditional media with fixed publication cycles, digital platforms repeatedly promote videos, eyewitness accounts, official statements and discussions through reposts, recommendations, hashtags and trending topics. Consequently, perceptions of banditry are reinforced through repeated digital exposure rather than isolated media encounters. This algorithmic amplification extends classical agenda-setting assumptions. Whereas traditional media established issue salience through editorial selection, social media platforms prioritise content capable of generating interaction. Dramatic images, emotionally charged videos and sensational narratives relating to insecurity often receive greater visibility because they stimulate viewing, commenting and sharing. Audience attention is therefore shaped jointly by journalistic judgement and computational recommendation systems.

The participatory nature of social media further distinguishes contemporary agenda-setting. Information on bandit attacks frequently originates from eyewitnesses, community members, security personnel or independent content creators before being incorporated into mainstream news. This multidirectional communication accelerates information dissemination and enables audiences to influence which security issues remain visible through their engagement. Studies of youth media behaviour support this perspective. Akoja and Nweneazizi (2021) found that Nigerian youths increasingly depend on social media for news, with Instagram and X serving as major information sources. Similarly, Erubami et al. (2021) reported that younger Nigerians place greater trust in social media than older generations, suggesting that repeated digital exposure may exert stronger agenda-setting effects among youth populations. Evidence from political communication further illustrates these dynamics. Uwalaka and Nwala (2023) showed that social media facilitated information exchange, narrative construction and public participation during the #EndSARS protests while

simultaneously accelerating the spread of misinformation. Although their study examined political mobilisation, the same mechanisms shape the circulation of security narratives relating to banditry. For youths in Ilorin metropolis, these communication processes are particularly significant. Despite limited direct experience with armed banditry, they remain connected to national digital networks through smartphones and social media, where they routinely encounter reports, videos, official statements and public commentary on insecurity. Such repeated exposure increases the cognitive accessibility of banditry and reinforces perceptions of insecurity as a major national concern. Agenda setting alone, however, cannot explain why individuals interpret the same information differently. While it accounts for the prominence of issues in public consciousness, it does not explain differences in how audiences understand their causes, consequences or significance. These variations arise from framing processes, which shape how digital representations of banditry influence interpretation, emotional response and social meaning.

Framing Banditry in Digital Spaces and the Construction of Youth Perception

While Agenda-Setting Theory explains why armed banditry becomes a prominent public issue, Framing Theory explains how audiences interpret it. Media do not merely report insecurity; they organise events into narratives that define problems, assign responsibility and suggest appropriate responses. Within social media environments, framing extends beyond professional journalism because users actively create, modify and disseminate content. Consequently, youths' perceptions of banditry are shaped by both repeated exposure and the interpretive frames embedded in digital communication. Empirical studies demonstrate the influence of framing on public understanding of insecurity. Olajuwon, Ajaegbu, and Atakiti (2024) found that television webcasts on YouTube predominantly employed conflict and human-interest frames, emphasising violent attacks, casualties and government responses. Such narratives increase public awareness but also heighten fear by portraying insecurity as widespread and persistent. Within social media, emotionally charged images, videos and testimonies receive greater engagement and algorithmic amplification, making them influential reference points through which many youths understand banditry.

Similarly, Ishaku and Tartsea-Anshase (2025) argue that media framing influences national discourse through choices of language, emphasis and narrative structure. Reports emphasising fear, ethnic identity or political blame may deepen social divisions, whereas conflict-sensitive reporting encourages informed public engagement. These effects are amplified on social media, where limited editorial oversight allows eyewitnesses, political actors and ordinary users to generate competing narratives that attribute banditry to government failure, poverty, ethnic conflict or institutional weaknesses. Framing also shapes perceptions of the actors involved. Okoli and Abubakar (2021) describe contemporary bandit leaders as exercising forms of local authority in poorly governed communities. Digital narratives repeatedly portraying territorial control, negotiations or public statements may unintentionally construct images of influence, whereas stories emphasising victims, humanitarian consequences and successful security operations reinforce perceptions of bandits as threats to public order. Likewise, Ejiofor (2022) and Obi et al. (2025) demonstrate that governance failures, socioeconomic deprivation and communal grievances provide structural explanations for banditry, encouraging audiences to interpret insecurity beyond individual criminal acts.

Human-interest framing further influences emotional responses. Stories centred on victims, bereaved families and displaced communities generate empathy but may also heighten perceived vulnerability among youths whose understanding of banditry is largely mediated rather than experiential. Continuous exposure to distressing digital content can therefore shape perceptions of risk independently of local security conditions. Unlike conventional media, social media allows users to frame events through captions, comments, hashtags and reposts, making framing a continuous and participatory process. Uwalaka and Nwala (2023) argue that these platforms simultaneously facilitate information exchange and misinformation, allowing inaccurate narratives to compete with verified accounts and shape public interpretation. Wahab and Edun (2026) further suggest that prolonged

digital engagement influences identity formation and social reality, implying that repeated exposure to particular frames gradually shapes beliefs about insecurity, state capacity and appropriate responses to violence. Overall, framing is the principal mechanism linking social media visibility with youths' perceptions of banditry. Digital influence depends not only on the frequency of exposure but also on how bandits, victims, institutions and the causes of insecurity are represented.

Youth Media Consumption, Credibility Judgements and the Influence of Social Media

The influence of bandits' social media visibility cannot be fully understood without examining youths' media consumption behaviour. Although social media provides unprecedented access to information, its effects depend on users' motivations, engagement patterns and credibility judgements. Rather than acting as passive recipients, youths actively select, interpret and redistribute information, making audience behaviour central to understanding how digital visibility shapes perceptions of banditry. Literature consistently identifies Nigerian youths as intensive users of digital media. Akoja and Nweneaziri (2021) found that social media, particularly Instagram and X, has become a major source of news and public affairs among young people, who increasingly regard these platforms as credible alternatives to conventional media. This shift places social media at the centre of youths' understanding of national events, including armed banditry.

Unlike conventional journalism, whose credibility rests on editorial gatekeeping and professional standards, social media often derives legitimacy from immediacy, peer endorsement, visual evidence and repeated circulation. Consequently, information shared by friends, influencers and widely followed accounts may be accepted as trustworthy despite limited professional verification. This pattern supports Uses and Gratifications Theory, which explains that audiences actively select media capable of satisfying their informational and social needs. Security-related information therefore becomes integrated into everyday digital activities alongside entertainment, education and interpersonal communication. However, active media use does not necessarily encourage critical evaluation. Dependence on social networking platforms can increase exposure to rumours, manipulated images and misleading narratives, particularly where users rely heavily on peer-generated information. Apuke et al. (2024) found that dependence on social media significantly predicts susceptibility to misinformation among Nigerian users, demonstrating that digital participation simultaneously facilitates information exchange and the circulation of false or misleading content. These findings suggest that repeated exposure to banditry-related information may influence perceptions regardless of whether the information is fully verified.

Apuke et al. (2022) further argue that digital and media literacy improve users' ability to identify misinformation and reduce the tendency to share false content. Their findings underscore the importance of critical evaluation in contemporary communication environments, where credibility is frequently determined by online popularity rather than journalistic verification. Consequently, the influence of social media on perceptions of insecurity depends not only on the quantity of information available but also on users' capacity to distinguish credible reports from misleading narratives.

The Duality of Social Media Visibility: Awareness, Misinformation and the Normalisation of Violence

The increasing Social media has transformed security communication by expanding access to information while simultaneously facilitating misinformation and the widespread circulation of violent content. Consequently, its influence on perceptions of armed banditry depends on the interaction between media visibility, content characteristics, audience interpretation and platform architecture rather than being inherently beneficial or harmful. Digital platforms have democratised information production by enabling eyewitnesses, victims and citizens to document security incidents in real time, increasing public awareness and participation in security discourse. Studies show that sustained media coverage elevates insecurity within public consciousness and strengthens civic engagement with national security issues (Ugwu et al., 2022). Although social media enhances rapid

information exchange and public participation, its limited editorial gatekeeping also enables rumours, manipulated content and misleading narratives to circulate alongside verified reports. As a result, visibility does not necessarily improve public understanding but often amplifies both accurate and inaccurate information.

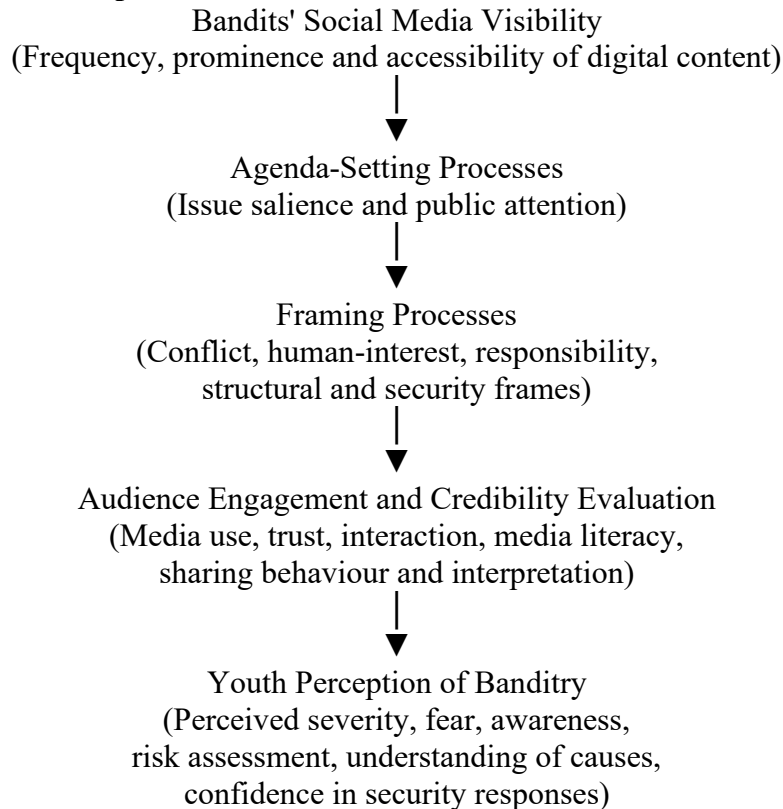
This challenge is particularly significant among Nigerian youths, who increasingly rely on social media for news and often regard digital information as credible (Akoja & Nweneazizi, 2021). High trust in online content increases the likelihood that misinformation about banditry will shape perceptions alongside verified reports, especially where users engage in limited critical evaluation. Repeated exposure to violent content also raises concerns about the normalisation of insecurity. Continuous circulation of videos, photographs and reports of attacks may gradually make violence appear routine rather than exceptional. Conflict and human-interest framing, reinforced by algorithmic recommendation systems, further increases the visibility of emotionally engaging security content (Olajuwon, Ajaegbu, & Atakiti, 2024). Similarly, extensive online circulation of images portraying bandits exercising territorial control or negotiating with authorities may inadvertently reinforce perceptions of their power and of state weakness (Okoli & Abubakar, 2021). Nevertheless, media effects are not deterministic. Audience responses vary according to credibility judgements, prior knowledge, interpretive frames and patterns of media use. Consequently, some youths develop informed understandings of the structural causes of banditry, whereas others primarily experience heightened fear or distorted perceptions arising from sensational or misleading narratives. Existing studies have largely examined banditry, media framing, misinformation and youth media behaviour separately. Limited attention has been given to how these processes interact to shape youths' perceptions of banditry in urban areas such as Ilorin metropolis. This study addresses that gap by integrating agenda-setting, framing, credibility evaluation and active audience engagement into a unified explanation of how bandits' social media visibility influences youth perception. This synthesis provides the conceptual framework for the present study and future research on the communication dimensions of armed banditry in Nigeria.

A Proposed Conceptual Model of the Relationship Between Bandits' Social Media Visibility and Youth Perception in Ilorin Metropolis

A key gap in the literature is the absence of an integrated framework explaining how bandits' social media visibility shapes youths' perceptions of banditry. Existing studies examine banditry, media coverage, digital communication and youth media behaviour separately, providing limited explanation of the communication processes linking visibility to perception. Drawing on Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, this study proposes that social media visibility is the primary communication stimulus influencing youth perception through interconnected cognitive and communicative processes. Bandit-related content disseminated through platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube increases the salience of insecurity through repeated exposure and algorithmic amplification. As banditry becomes more prominent, audiences interpret it through dominant frames that emphasise violence, victims, responsibility or structural causes, shaping emotional and cognitive responses.

These effects are mediated by audience engagement and credibility evaluation. Guided by Uses and Gratifications Theory, youths actively select, interpret and share content based on media literacy, prior knowledge, source credibility and personal motivations. Consequently, identical content may produce different perceptions among different users. The outcome is youths' perception of banditry, reflected in their assessment of its prevalence, severity, causes, risks and confidence in security responses. This relationship is further moderated by media literacy, educational attainment, previous exposure to insecurity, trust in conventional media, interpersonal communication, platform algorithms and misinformation, explaining variations in perception despite similar levels of digital exposure. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework proposed by this paper.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Model of the Relationship Between Bandits' Social Media Visibility and Youth Perception



The proposed model advances three arguments. First, social media visibility influences youths' perceptions through agenda-setting and framing processes, rather than through exposure alone. Second, youths are active interpreters whose motivations, credibility judgements and engagement shape communication effects. Third, perceptions of banditry are dynamic, continually influenced by interactions between digital media and audience characteristics. The framework integrates agenda setting, framing, youth media behaviour and banditry into a single communication model. It also provides a basis for empirical testing by operationalising social media visibility through exposure, engagement and platform use, and youth perception through perceived severity, vulnerability, confidence in security institutions, fear of victimisation and attitudes towards government responses. Overall, the model offers a coherent explanation of how digital communication shapes youths' perceptions of banditry and provides a robust framework for future research in mass communication and security communication.

Theoretical Framework

The relationship between bandits' social media visibility and youths' perception of banditry is multidimensional and cannot be sufficiently explained by a single communication theory. Social media simultaneously determines the prominence of security issues, influences how those issues are interpreted, and provides gratifications that shape patterns of media consumption. Consequently, this paper is anchored on Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory, and Uses and Gratifications Theory. Collectively, these theories provide a comprehensive conceptual lens for explaining how digital media visibility influences cognitive, affective and behavioural responses among young audiences.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory was developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1972) following their seminal study of the 1968 United States presidential election. The theory posits that although the media may not determine what people think, it significantly influences what they think about by assigning prominence through repeated coverage. Issues that receive sustained media attention

become more salient and are perceived as more important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory remains relevant even today. Although social media has reduced the traditional gatekeeping role of mainstream media, agenda-setting continues through algorithmic recommendation systems, trending topics, hashtags, user engagement metrics and repeated content circulation. Continuous online visibility increases the salience of issues regardless of audiences' direct experience.

Recent studies in Nigerian supports the continued relevance of agenda-setting in security communication. Media coverage of banditry differs in prominence and depth across news organisations, influencing public attention to insecurity and national cohesion (Ishaku & Tartsea-Anshase, 2025). Within social media environments, algorithmic amplification and user engagement further increase the visibility of security-related content, extending agenda-setting beyond institutional journalism (Uwalaka & Nwala, 2023). For youths in Ilorin metropolis, repeated exposure to videos, photographs, eyewitness accounts, live broadcasts and online discussions of armed banditry can increase the perceived importance of insecurity even when such incidents occur outside their immediate environment. Social media enables ordinary users, influencers, citizen journalists and algorithm-driven systems to shape the security narratives that dominate public attention. Agenda-Setting Theory is therefore appropriate for this study because it explains how sustained social media visibility increases the salience of banditry and influences youths' perceptions of the phenomenon.

Framing Theory

Framing Theory Complements Agenda-Setting Theory by explaining how issues are presented and interpreted rather than merely how they gain prominence. Its foundations are commonly associated with Erving Goffman (1974), while Robert M. Entman (1993) refined the communication perspective by arguing that framing involves selecting aspects of reality and making them more salient to promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations and treatment recommendations. Media frames shape public understanding by organising complex events into coherent narratives. Rather than presenting reality objectively, media content emphasises selected aspects of an issue while downplaying others, leading audiences to interpret events through the perspectives embedded in communication messages (Entman, 1993).

Contemporary Nigerian studies demonstrate the relevance of framing in reporting insecurity. Television webcast coverage of banditry has been shown to rely predominantly on conflict and human-interest frames, with government responses and attacks receiving the greatest prominence (Olajuwon et al., 2024). Similarly, newspaper framing of banditry influences public discourse and national cohesion by shaping citizens' interpretations of insecurity (Ishaku & Tartsea-Anshase, 2025). On social media, framing becomes more dynamic as users create, modify and redistribute narratives through captions, comments, hashtags, memes and short-form videos. Consequently, youths encounter not only information about banditry but also competing interpretations of violent events. Some narratives portray bandits as ruthless criminals, whereas others emphasise governance failures, poverty and marginalisation as underlying drivers. Repeated circulation of sensational images and propaganda may normalise or amplify violent actors, while alternative narratives focus on victims and community resilience. These competing frames shape emotional responses, moral judgements and perceptions of the causes, severity and legitimacy of armed banditry. Framing Theory is therefore appropriate for this study because it explains how the presentation of bandit-related content on social media influences youths' perceptions beyond the frequency of exposure.

Conclusion

This study conceptually examined the impact of bandits' social media visibility on the perception of banditry among youths in Ilorin metropolis by synthesising contemporary scholarship on armed banditry, digital communication, media framing, agenda setting and youth media behaviour in Nigeria. The review demonstrates that the communication dimension of banditry has become increasingly important as digital technologies have transformed the production, circulation and

consumption of information relating to insecurity. Whereas earlier studies primarily concentrated on the structural causes, operational dynamics and security implications of banditry, the contemporary digital environment has introduced new communication processes through which public perceptions of insecurity are constructed and sustained. The analysis established that the visibility of bandit-related content on social media extends beyond increasing awareness of insecurity. Through repeated exposure, algorithmic amplification and audience interaction, digital platforms elevate banditry within public consciousness while simultaneously shaping the interpretive frameworks through which violent events are understood. Consequently, youths' perceptions are influenced not merely by the frequency with which banditry appears online but also by the dominant frames, narratives and symbolic representations embedded within digital content.

The study also demonstrated that young people occupy a central position within these communication processes because they constitute one of the most active groups of social media users in Nigeria. Existing scholarship indicates that youths increasingly rely on digital platforms for news and public affairs, often attributing considerable credibility to online information. Their active participation through sharing, commenting and content creation further transforms social media from a simple information source into a collaborative environment where perceptions of insecurity are continually negotiated and reconstructed. An equally significant finding emerging from the conceptual synthesis is the dual character of social media visibility. On one hand, digital platforms facilitate rapid information dissemination, broaden public awareness, strengthen civic participation and expand access to security-related information. On the other hand, the same platforms accelerate the circulation of misinformation, sensational narratives and emotionally charged content capable of reinforcing fear, distorting public understanding or inadvertently increasing the symbolic visibility of violent actors. The influence of social media should therefore be understood as contingent upon the interaction between media exposure, framing processes, audience characteristics and contextual factors such as media literacy and credibility assessment.

One of the principal theoretical contributions of this paper lies in its integration of Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory into a unified explanatory framework. Rather than treating these theoretical traditions independently, the paper demonstrates how they collectively explain the pathways through which social media visibility influences youth perception. Agenda setting explains the increasing prominence of banditry within digital discourse, framing clarifies the interpretive construction of insecurity, while Uses and Gratifications Theory explains why youths actively consume, evaluate and redistribute security-related information. Their combined application provides a more comprehensive understanding of the communication dynamics surrounding armed banditry than any single theoretical perspective could achieve independently. Overall, the study argues that understanding contemporary banditry requires attention not only to its structural and security dimensions but also to the communication environments through which public perceptions are formed. As social media continues to shape how insecurity is represented, interpreted and discussed, communication scholarship must increasingly recognize digital visibility as a significant factor influencing public understanding of armed conflict and criminal violence in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the conceptual analysis, the paper advances the following recommendations:

1. Media organisations should adopt conflict-sensitive reporting practices that prioritise contextual analysis over sensational presentation. Reports should provide balanced explanations of the structural causes of banditry while avoiding unnecessary amplification of violent actors through repetitive or dramatic visual representations.
2. The National Broadcasting Commission, in collaboration with relevant digital regulatory agencies, should develop communication guidelines that encourage the responsible dissemination of security-related content across both conventional and digital media

- platforms. Such guidelines should preserve press freedom while discouraging practices capable of unintentionally glorifying violent actors.
3. Government agencies responsible for public communication should strengthen strategic digital engagement by disseminating timely, accurate and evidence-based security information capable of reducing the influence of rumours and misinformation within social media environments.
 4. Educational institutions should incorporate digital media literacy into formal and informal learning programmes to strengthen young people's capacity to evaluate online information critically, identify misinformation and distinguish between verified reports and speculative narratives.
 5. Civil society organisations and media development institutions should implement public awareness campaigns that promote responsible social media use, encourage ethical information sharing and discourage the redistribution of unverified security-related content.
 6. Social media platform operators should strengthen collaboration with independent fact-checking organisations and relevant Nigerian institutions to reduce the algorithmic amplification of demonstrably false or manipulated security-related information while promoting access to verified sources.
 7. Security agencies should improve transparency and public communication by providing timely updates during security incidents. Regular and credible communication can reduce information vacuums that are often filled by rumours, misinformation and speculative commentary.

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