



War Trauma and Disinformation Susceptibility in Peacebuilding: Strategic Communication and Psychological Resilience in Odi, Nigeria

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Abstract

Post-conflict communities are particularly vulnerable to disinformation because traumatic conflict experiences, institutional distrust, and fragmented communication environments influence how information is interpreted during peacebuilding. Although previous studies have examined trauma, misinformation, and strategic communication independently, limited evidence explains how these processes interact within African post-conflict settings. This qualitative case study investigated the association between war-related trauma and disinformation susceptibility in Odi, Bayelsa State, Nigeria, while examining the roles of strategic communication and psychological resilience in shaping information judgment. Data were collected in February 2025 through semi-structured interviews with 53 conflict-affected adults selected purposively from a target population of 72 residents. Documentary evidence comprising radio scripts, community flyers, town hall speeches, and other peace communication materials complemented the interviews. Reflexive thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis were integrated through pattern matching. Participants described enduring conflict memories as influencing threat appraisal, trust calibration, and verification behaviour, increasing receptivity to emotionally charged false claims. Conversely, structured peace messages delivered through trusted local intermediaries encouraged reflective information processing, greater verification, and stronger coping practices. Community cohesion, educational experience, media saturation, and conflict severity moderated these responses. The study advances theory by integrating trauma psychology, cognitive processing, strategic communication, and resilience within a single qualitative framework for explaining disinformation susceptibility in post-conflict settings. It also contributes context-specific African evidence to international debates on trauma-informed peacebuilding and communication.

Keywords: War-Related Trauma, Disinformation Susceptibility, Strategic Communication, Psychological Resilience, Peacebuilding.

Introduction

Disinformation has emerged as a significant challenge to peacebuilding in societies recovering from violent conflict. Following armed violence, weakened institutions, fragmented authority, and competing historical narratives create communication environments in which misleading information spreads easily and frequently influences public attitudes toward reconciliation, governance, and security. In many African post-conflict communities, distrust of state institutions and continued reliance on informal communication networks further complicate efforts to establish credible public information systems (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2019; Onapajo & Özden, 2020). Consequently, disinformation has become an important barrier to sustainable peace rather than merely a problem of media regulation or digital communication. Nigeria illustrates these challenges across several conflict-affected regions. Studies from the Niger Delta and North-East Nigeria demonstrate that rumours, manipulated narratives, and politically motivated false claims often undermine confidence in reconciliation initiatives and public institutions during post-conflict recovery (Aghedo & Osumah, 2015; Oriola, 2018). The rapid expansion of mobile communication and social media

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has intensified the circulation of emotionally charged information, often allowing unverified claims to spread more rapidly than official responses (Ojebode et al., 2020). Although these studies explain how disinformation circulates, they provide limited insight into why some individuals become more susceptible than others despite living within similar communication environments. Existing scholarship primarily attributes disinformation vulnerability to media exposure, political polarization, digital literacy, and characteristics of information ecosystems (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Comparatively less attention has been given to the role of conflict-related psychological experiences in shaping information judgment. Trauma research consistently demonstrates that exposure to armed violence alters attention, threat appraisal, emotional regulation, and interpersonal trust (Betancourt et al., 2013). These trauma-related cognitive changes are likely to influence how individuals evaluate emotionally charged information during peacebuilding, yet empirical evidence from African post-conflict communities remains limited. Odi, Bayelsa State, offers an important context for examining this relationship. The military intervention of 1999 resulted in widespread destruction, civilian deaths, displacement, and long-term psychosocial consequences that continue to influence community memory and institutional trust (Human Rights Watch, 1999; Amnesty International, 2001; Obi, 2010). More than two decades later, residents continue to negotiate peacebuilding within a communication environment shaped by historical grievances, evolving media technologies, and community-based reconciliation efforts.

Theory and Literature Review

War-Related Trauma and Cognitive Vulnerability

War-related trauma influences how individuals interpret social information by altering attention, emotional regulation, threat appraisal, and interpersonal trust. Trauma theory suggests that prolonged exposure to violence increases vigilance toward perceived threats while reducing reliance on reflective cognitive processing (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; van der Kolk, 2014). Dual-process models similarly propose that stressful environments encourage rapid heuristic judgment rather than careful analytical evaluation (Kahneman, 2011). These theoretical perspectives imply that conflict survivors may become more responsive to emotionally charged information, particularly when messages invoke fear, insecurity, or identity-based grievances. Empirical evidence from African conflict settings supports these propositions. Betancourt et al. (2013) reported persistent emotional dysregulation and mistrust among war-affected youth in Sierra Leone. Research in northern Uganda likewise demonstrates that trauma exposure is associated with heightened emotional responsiveness and greater reliance on trusted authority figures during periods of uncertainty (Annan & Blattman, 2010). Despite these contributions, existing studies primarily conceptualize trauma as a mental health outcome. Comparatively little research has examined whether trauma also shapes susceptibility to false or manipulative information during peacebuilding. Disinformation exploits uncertainty, fear, and social division by aligning false narratives with existing grievances and emotionally salient experiences. Studies consistently demonstrate that emotionally charged information spreads more rapidly and is often perceived as more credible than factual corrections, particularly in polarized communication environments (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Nigerian research similarly shows that rumours and manipulated narratives frequently circulate through interpersonal networks, community leaders, and digital platforms during periods of insecurity (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2020; Oriola, 2018). However, this literature focuses largely on communication channels and exposure rather than the cognitive mechanisms influencing message acceptance. Strategic communication provides a complementary perspective by emphasizing the importance of message design, credibility, and trusted intermediaries in peacebuilding.

African evidence indicates that communication campaigns achieve greater effectiveness when they employ culturally relevant language and are delivered through respected community actors (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2019; UNDP, 2022). Nevertheless, relatively few studies examine how communication interacts with trauma-related cognitive processes or whether it strengthens resilience against emotionally manipulative information. Resilience theory further suggests that adaptive functioning emerges through interactions between individuals and supportive social environments rather than through individual characteristics alone (Ungar, 2011). Post-conflict research has linked resilience with emotional regulation, community participation, and constructive coping (Bonanno, 2004; Betancourt et al., 2013). Yet resilience has rarely been investigated as an information behaviour process involving verification, trust calibration, and tolerance for uncertainty. Integrating resilience theory with strategic communication therefore provides a broader understanding of how communities respond to disinformation during recovery.

Literature Gap and Conceptual Positioning

Current scholarship on trauma, disinformation, strategic communication, and resilience has developed largely in parallel. Trauma studies explain psychological consequences of conflict but seldom address information behaviour. Communication research emphasizes message design and trust-building while paying limited attention to trauma-related cognition. Disinformation scholarship focuses on exposure, media systems, and content characteristics rather than cognitive vulnerability. Similarly, resilience research concentrates on psychosocial recovery without examining adaptive information practices. This fragmentation limits understanding of how these processes interact within post-conflict societies. The present study addresses this limitation by integrating trauma psychology, cognitive processing, strategic communication, and resilience within a single qualitative framework. It conceptualizes war-related trauma as a source of cognitive vulnerability, strategic communication as a mechanism for trust repair and verification, and psychological resilience as a protective process supporting adaptive information behaviour. By grounding this framework in the post-conflict community of Odi, Bayelsa State, the study contributes context-specific African evidence to international debates on disinformation and peacebuilding while extending existing theory beyond fragmented disciplinary perspectives.

Understanding how these experiences influence responses to contemporary information contributes to both peacebuilding scholarship and disinformation research. Strategic communication has become a central component of peacebuilding because it seeks to rebuild trust, strengthen social cohesion, and promote constructive public engagement through coordinated messaging. Evidence from African peacebuilding programmes suggests that communication delivered through trusted local actors is more likely to encourage participation and dialogue than communication relying solely on institutional authority (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2019; UNDP, 2022). However, little is known about whether strategic communication reduces disinformation susceptibility by addressing trauma-related cognitive vulnerability or strengthening psychological resilience. Similarly, resilience research has focused largely on psychosocial recovery while paying comparatively little attention to adaptive information behaviour in conflict-affected populations. This study addresses these gaps by examining the relationships among war-related trauma, disinformation susceptibility, strategic communication, and psychological resilience in Odi, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Rather than treating these constructs independently, the study integrates them within a single qualitative framework to explain how conflict survivors interpret information during peacebuilding.

Specifically, the study investigates how trauma shapes information judgment, how strategic communication influences verification behaviour, how resilience supports adaptive responses to uncertainty, and how contextual conditions moderate these relationships. The study was guided by five research questions:

1. How is war-related trauma associated with disinformation susceptibility during peacebuilding in Odi?
2. How does strategic communication influence participants' evaluation of potentially false claims?
3. How does psychological resilience support adaptive information behaviour?
4. Which contextual factors moderate disinformation susceptibility in the post-conflict communication environment?
5. What implications do these findings have for trauma-informed strategic communication during peacebuilding?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design to examine how war-related trauma was associated with disinformation susceptibility during peacebuilding in Odi, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and information judgment within a real-world post-conflict context rather than measure variable relationships statistically (Yin, 2018). The study integrated reflexive thematic analysis of interview data with critical discourse analysis of local peace communication materials to examine both participants' experiences and the communication environment in which those experiences were situated. Reporting followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) to enhance transparency and methodological rigour (Tong et al., 2007). The study was conducted in Odi, Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government Area of Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Odi remains one of Nigeria's most widely documented post-conflict communities following the military operation of 1999, which resulted in extensive destruction, displacement, and enduring psychosocial consequences. Peacebuilding initiatives involving government agencies, community organisations, faith-based institutions, and traditional leaders continue to operate within the

community, making Odi an appropriate setting for examining trauma, strategic communication, and information behaviour during post-conflict recovery.

Table 1. Characteristics of Interview Participants (N = 53)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	24	45.3
	Female	29	54.7
Age (years)	21 to 30	11	20.8
	31 to 40	14	26.4
	41 to 50	12	22.6
	51 to 60	9	17
	61 to 69	7	13.2
Occupation	Farmers	15	28.3
	Business owners	14	26.4
	Hunters	8	15.1
	Civil servants	16	30.2
Education	Secondary education	18	34
	Diploma/NCE	13	24.5
	Bachelor's degree	22	41.5
Community role	Elders	9	17
	Youth leaders	11	20.8
	Women leaders	10	18.9
	Faith leaders	8	15.1
	Ordinary residents	15	28.3

Participants were recruited through purposive maximum variation sampling to capture diverse perspectives across demographic and social groups within the community. Maximum variation sampling was selected because experiences of conflict, trust in information, and responses to peace communication differ according to age, gender, education, occupation, and community responsibilities. Recruiting participants with diverse backgrounds therefore enhanced the richness and breadth of qualitative evidence. Recruitment was facilitated through multiple community entry points, including traditional leaders, youth associations, women's organizations, faith leaders, and community development representatives. Using multiple gatekeepers reduced dependence on a single recruitment source and minimized the possibility of elite capture or network bias. During recruitment, the research team monitored participant diversity and actively sought additional participants from underrepresented groups to strengthen representation across the community. Eligibility criteria required participants to be at least 21 years of age, permanent residents of Odi, able to communicate in English, and willing to discuss experiences related to conflict, information sharing, and peacebuilding. Individuals experiencing visible emotional distress at the time of recruitment or those unwilling to provide informed consent were excluded from participation. A total of 53 adults participated in the interview component of the study. Participants comprised 29 women (54.7%) and 24 men (45.3%), ranging in age from 21 to 69 years. Participants represented a wide range of occupations, including farming, trading, hunting, and civil service. Educational attainment ranged from completion of secondary school to university degree holders. Community roles included traditional elders, youth leaders, women leaders, faith leaders, and ordinary residents, ensuring that perspectives reflected multiple dimensions of community life. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the stage at which successive interviews generated no substantively new insights relevant to the research questions (Guest et al., 2020).

Table 2. Documentary Corpus Analyzed

Document Type	Number	Purpose
Radio broadcast scripts	3	Peace messaging and rumor management
Community flyers	7	Community awareness and verification guidance
Town hall speech transcripts	10	Public peace communication
Community communication documents	4	Reconciliation and civic engagement
Total	24	Documentary corpus

Documentary Corpus

To complement interview evidence, the study examined strategic communication materials used during community peacebuilding activities. Documentary analysis provided an independent source of evidence for understanding communication framing, trust cues, and verification messages circulating within the community. Twenty-four communication documents were purposively selected because they addressed peacebuilding, security information, reconciliation, or community safety. The documentary corpus comprised three radio broadcast scripts, seven community flyers, ten transcripts of town hall speeches, and four additional communication documents produced by community organizations and local peace actors. Documents were selected according to four criteria.

1. They addressed peacebuilding, conflict recovery, or community security.
2. They were publicly disseminated within Odi during community engagement activities.
3. They originated from recognized community or institutional actors.
4. They contained identifiable communication strategies relating to trust, verification, or reconciliation.

The documentary corpus served as an important triangulation source during analysis by enabling comparison between participants' reported experiences and the communication messages circulating within the community. Fieldwork was conducted in February 2025 at the Odi Town Hall and a community primary school. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 25 minutes explored participants' conflict experiences, trust in information sources, encounters with false information, verification practices, and perceptions of local peace communication. Interviews were conducted in English after participants provided verbal informed consent. Participants declined audio recording because of the sensitivity of discussing past conflict experiences. Consequently, detailed field notes were taken during each interview and expanded immediately afterwards to preserve accuracy and completeness. This approach was complemented by observations recorded during community interactions. Documentary evidence was also collected to strengthen methodological triangulation. The documentary corpus consisted of three radio scripts, seven community flyers, ten town hall speeches, and four additional peace communication documents produced by government agencies and community organizations. These materials were selected because they represented the principal communication channels used during local peacebuilding activities. Analysis combined reflexive thematic analysis with critical discourse analysis. Interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Two members of the research team independently reviewed interview notes to achieve familiarity with the dataset before generating initial inductive codes. Coding remained data-driven rather than theory-driven, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives. Initial codes describing similar experiences were grouped into broader categories and refined through iterative comparison across interviews. The research team then reviewed, defined, and named themes through consensus discussions to ensure conceptual coherence and alignment with the study objectives. Critical discourse analysis followed Fairclough's (2013) framework to examine communication materials. Analysis focused on message framing, emotional tone, source credibility, identity construction, verification prompts, and calls to collective action.

Findings from the discourse analysis were subsequently compared with interview themes using pattern matching to identify convergence and divergence between participants' reported experiences and the communication strategies employed within the community. The study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of interviews and documentary materials, member checking of thematic summaries with selected participants, and peer debriefing among the research team. Dependability was supported through systematic documentation of sampling, coding decisions, and theme development. Confirmability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail recording methodological decisions throughout the study. Transferability was facilitated through detailed descriptions of the study setting, participant

characteristics, and research procedures, enabling readers to assess the applicability of the findings to comparable post-conflict contexts.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Education, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Participation was voluntary, and all respondents provided verbal informed consent before interviews commenced. To protect confidentiality, participants were assigned identification codes and no personal identifiers were recorded. Interview notes and documentary materials were stored in password-protected electronic files accessible only to the research team. Trauma-sensitive interviewing procedures guided all interactions. Participants retained control over the pace of discussion, were free to decline any question or withdraw at any stage, and received information on locally available psychosocial support services where emotional distress became evident. Reflexive thematic analysis generated five interrelated themes describing how war-related trauma, strategic communication, psychological resilience, and contextual conditions shaped participants' experiences of disinformation during peacebuilding in Odi. These themes emerged consistently across the interview dataset and were strengthened through comparison with local peace communication materials. Pattern matching between interview narratives and documentary evidence demonstrated substantial convergence, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of how trauma-informed communication influenced information behaviour within the community.

Results

Theme 1: War-Related Trauma and Disinformation Susceptibility

Participants consistently described how memories of the 1999 conflict continued to influence their interpretation of contemporary information. Although the intensity of traumatic memories differed among participants, many explained that security-related messages immediately attracted their attention because they evoked previous experiences of violence. Such messages were often interpreted as credible before participants considered their source or accuracy. One participant explained: "When I hear anything about attacks or soldiers, I remember what happened years ago. My first reaction is fear before I even think about whether it is true." Another participant remarked: "Sometimes I forward messages immediately because I do not want my family to be caught unaware. I only discover later that the information was false." These accounts indicate that participants frequently prioritized perceived urgency over verification. Thematic analysis revealed that emotional responses often preceded deliberate evaluation, particularly when messages referred to violence, insecurity, displacement, or threats to community safety. Participants associated these reactions with memories of previous conflict rather than with current events alone. The documentary analysis supported these observations. Radio broadcasts and town hall speeches repeatedly acknowledged community fears before encouraging residents to verify information through recognized community structures. This alignment between participant narratives and communication materials suggests that local peace actors recognized the continuing influence of trauma on information processing.

Theme 2: Trust, Credibility, and Information Evaluation

Trust emerged as the principal factor shaping participants' evaluation of information. Rather than assessing credibility primarily through institutional authority, participants relied heavily on the perceived integrity and familiarity of the messenger. Historical experiences associated with the conflict continued to influence attitudes toward government agencies and security institutions, while confidence remained comparatively higher in community-based leaders. One elder explained: "We first listen to our chiefs because they understand our situation. Government messages become easier to believe after our leaders explain them." A faith leader similarly observed: "People accept difficult messages when they come through someone they already trust." Participants consistently identified traditional rulers, faith leaders, women leaders, youth representatives, and respected elders as the most credible communicators. These individuals were viewed as sharing the community's experiences and therefore possessing greater legitimacy than external institutions. Critical discourse analysis demonstrated that locally developed peace messages reflected this communication pattern. Radio announcements and community flyers frequently referenced respected local leaders, while town hall meetings deliberately positioned community representatives as principal communicators. These strategies appeared to reinforce message credibility by connecting institutional communication with established community trust networks.

Theme 3: Strategic Communication and Verification Behaviour

Participants described several communication features that encouraged more careful evaluation of information. Messages delivered consistently across different communication channels, presented in culturally familiar language, and framed with empathy were perceived as more trustworthy than messages emphasizing fear or authority alone. One participant explained: "When the same message comes from the radio, the church, and our community meeting, people begin to believe it because everyone is saying the same thing." Another participant stated: "Messages that calm people down help us think better. When somebody tries to frighten us, we react without thinking." Thematic analysis further indicated that participants appreciated messages encouraging verification rather than demanding immediate acceptance. Communication that acknowledged past suffering while providing practical guidance for confirming information was viewed as more credible and respectful. Documentary analysis reinforced these observations. Radio scripts consistently encouraged residents to confirm reports through recognized community channels before acting. Community flyers emphasized peaceful dialogue and verification, while town hall speeches repeatedly discouraged rumour dissemination and promoted collective responsibility for accurate information. Across these communication materials, empathy, reassurance, consistency, and evidence-based explanation emerged as dominant discourse features.

Theme 4: Psychological Resilience and Adaptive Information Behaviour

Participants described resilience as an evolving process of learning how to respond more thoughtfully to uncertain situations following years of conflict recovery. Rather than suggesting that fear had disappeared, participants explained that repeated exposure to peacebuilding activities had strengthened their ability to regulate emotional reactions and evaluate information more deliberately. One participant reflected: "Before now, any frightening news would make me panic. Today I wait and ask questions before believing what I hear." Another participant added: "We discuss information together before sharing it because experience has taught us that not every story is correct." Thematic analysis revealed three recurring characteristics of resilient information behaviour. First, participants reported greater emotional control when confronted with alarming messages. Second, they demonstrated increased willingness to verify information through multiple sources before acting. Third, they relied more frequently on collective discussion as a means of evaluating uncertain information. Community meetings, religious gatherings, and peace committee activities were repeatedly identified as spaces where participants developed these practices. Documentary analysis showed that peace communication materials consistently encouraged dialogue, patience, and community verification rather than immediate reactions. These communication strategies appeared to reinforce adaptive information practices by normalizing collective reflection during periods of uncertainty.

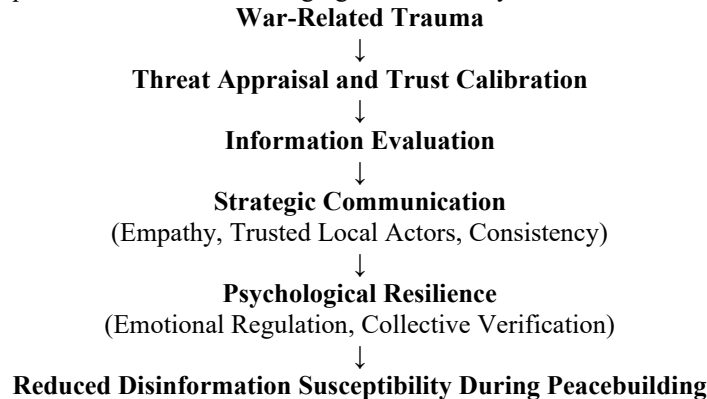
Theme 5: Contextual Conditions Influencing Disinformation Susceptibility

Participants emphasized that responses to disinformation were shaped not only by personal experiences but also by broader community conditions. Four contextual influences emerged consistently across the interviews: media saturation, educational experience, severity of conflict exposure, and community cohesion. Participants reported receiving information simultaneously through interpersonal conversations, radio broadcasts, religious gatherings, and mobile communication platforms. While these multiple channels improved access to information, they also increased exposure to conflicting narratives. A participant explained: "Different people tell different stories. Sometimes you do not know which one to believe." Educational experience influenced participants' confidence in evaluating information. Those with higher educational attainment described greater familiarity with verification practices, although participants emphasized that collective discussion frequently compensated for differences in formal education. Conflict severity also shaped information behaviour. Individuals who reported more direct experiences of violence described stronger emotional reactions to security-related messages than participants whose exposure had been indirect. Nevertheless, participants consistently noted that supportive community relationships reduced the influence of fear by encouraging discussion before action. One participant summarized this process: "When people meet and discuss information together, rumours do not spread easily." Documentary evidence supported these observations. Communication materials employed simple language, repeated key messages across multiple channels, and encouraged collective verification through community institutions. These strategies reflected an awareness of varying educational backgrounds and continuing psychological sensitivity within the community.

Integrated Interpretation

The integration of thematic and discourse analyses revealed a coherent pattern linking trauma, communication, resilience, and information behaviour. Participants described conflict memories as shaping initial responses to potentially threatening information by influencing attention, trust, and credibility judgments. Strategic communication moderated these responses when messages were delivered consistently through trusted local actors, employed empathetic language, and encouraged verification rather than immediate acceptance. Psychological resilience further strengthened adaptive information practices by promoting emotional regulation, tolerance for uncertainty, and collective discussion. Finally, media environments, educational experiences, conflict histories, and community cohesion influenced how these processes operated across participants.

Figure 1 summarizes the qualitative framework emerging from the analysis.



The findings demonstrate that disinformation susceptibility in post-conflict settings is not determined solely by exposure to misleading information. Instead, it emerges through interactions among historical trauma, trust relationships, communication design, resilience processes, and the broader social environment. This integrated interpretation provides the foundation for the discussion of theoretical and practical implications presented in the following section. The present study examined how war-related trauma, strategic communication, psychological resilience, and contextual factors interact to shape disinformation susceptibility during peacebuilding in Odi, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. The findings suggest that disinformation vulnerability extends beyond exposure to false information and is closely associated with how conflict survivors interpret, evaluate, and respond to information within a post-conflict communication environment. By integrating participants' lived experiences with analysis of locally produced peace communication materials, the study offers a context-specific explanation of how trauma-related cognitive processes, trust relationships, and communication strategies jointly influence information behaviour. These findings contribute to emerging scholarship that seeks to explain disinformation as both a communication and psychosocial challenge in fragile societies.

War-Related Trauma and Information Behaviour

A central finding of this study is that participants described conflict-related memories as continuing to influence their interpretation of contemporary security information. Participants frequently associated emotionally charged messages with previous experiences of violence, leading to rapid threat appraisal and reduced attention to message verification. Rather than evaluating information through deliberate analysis, many participants described responding first to the emotional content of messages before considering their credibility. These findings are consistent with trauma theory, which proposes that traumatic experiences alter attention, emotional regulation, and threat perception (Ehlers & Clark, 2000; van der Kolk, 2014). They also support dual-process models suggesting that stressful situations increase reliance on intuitive rather than analytical information processing (Kahneman, 2011). The present study extends previous research in two important ways. First, it demonstrates that trauma-related cognitive responses remain relevant decades after the original conflict, influencing everyday information judgement during peacebuilding rather than only immediate post-conflict adjustment. Second, it positions trauma as an important determinant of information behaviour rather than solely a mental health outcome. This perspective broadens existing trauma scholarship by showing how psychological consequences of conflict shape responses to communication within fragile information environments. The findings also demonstrate that trust played a decisive role in participants' evaluation of information. Rather than

relying primarily on institutional authority, participants consistently evaluated information through relationships with trusted community actors.

Traditional rulers, faith leaders, women leaders, and youth representatives were perceived as more credible than official institutions because they shared the community's historical experiences and maintained continuous engagement with residents. These findings reinforce previous African peacebuilding research emphasizing the importance of local legitimacy in communication processes (Aning & Edu-Afful, 2019; Ojebode & Adegbola, 2020). However, the study moves beyond identifying trusted actors by explaining why they are trusted. Participants' narratives suggest that trust reflects both historical experience and shared social identity. In communities where institutional relationships were weakened by conflict, credibility became rooted in familiarity, accountability, and perceived concern for community welfare. Consequently, trust functioned as a cognitive filter through which information was interpreted before verification occurred. This finding suggests that rebuilding public confidence requires strengthening relationships between institutions and locally respected intermediaries rather than relying exclusively on centralized communication.

Strategic Communication as a Resilience Mechanism: The study further demonstrates that strategic communication influenced participants' information behaviour when messages combined empathy, consistency, cultural relevance, and credible messengers. Participants associated these communication characteristics with greater willingness to pause, verify information, and seek clarification before acting. Documentary analysis similarly showed that local peace messages consistently encouraged dialogue, reassurance, and verification instead of emotional appeals or coercive language. These findings support communication scholarship emphasizing the importance of trusted messengers and culturally appropriate framing in peacebuilding (Paluck, 2009; UNDP, 2022). More importantly, they extend existing theory by demonstrating that communication functions as a resilience mechanism rather than simply a channel for information dissemination. Participants described communication campaigns as helping them regulate emotional responses and adopt more reflective approaches to uncertain information. Strategic communication therefore contributed to strengthening psychological resources that supported more adaptive information behaviour. This finding suggests that communication interventions achieve greater effectiveness when they address emotional recovery alongside information needs.

Psychological Resilience and Adaptive Information Practices: Participants described resilience not as the absence of fear but as the gradual development of emotional control, patience, and collective verification practices. Community dialogue, religious gatherings, and peacebuilding activities provided opportunities to discuss uncertain information before accepting or sharing it. These experiences promoted tolerance for ambiguity and reduced immediate reactions to emotionally charged claims. This finding aligns with resilience theory, which conceptualizes resilience as adaptive capacity emerging through interactions between individuals and supportive social environments (Ungar, 2011). It also supports research showing that community participation strengthens coping following conflict (Betancourt et al., 2013). The present study extends this literature by identifying verification behaviour as an expression of resilience. Participants demonstrated resilience through practical communication behaviours, including consulting trusted individuals, comparing information across multiple sources, and delaying decisions until additional evidence became available. These adaptive practices illustrate how resilience operates within everyday information environments rather than only within psychological recovery processes.

Contextual Factors Shaping Disinformation Susceptibility: The findings indicate that disinformation susceptibility is influenced by broader social and communication conditions. Media saturation increased exposure to competing narratives, while educational experiences influenced participants' confidence in evaluating information. Participants with more severe conflict experiences described stronger emotional reactions to security-related messages, whereas strong community cohesion encouraged collective verification and reduced acceptance of rumours. These findings support ecological perspectives that conceptualize information behaviour as the product of interactions between individuals and their environments rather than personal characteristics alone. They also suggest that trauma does not operate independently but interacts with community relationships, communication systems, and educational experiences to shape responses to information. Consequently, interventions designed to reduce disinformation should consider these contextual influences rather than focusing exclusively on individual behaviour change.

Theoretical Contribution: The principal theoretical contribution of this study lies in integrating trauma psychology, cognitive processing, strategic communication, and resilience within a single explanatory framework for understanding disinformation susceptibility in post-conflict settings. Existing scholarship has generally examined these domains independently. Trauma research focuses on psychological consequences of violence, communication research emphasizes message design and trust, while disinformation scholarship concentrates on information environments and media systems. The present study demonstrates that these processes are interconnected and should be understood as mutually reinforcing components of post-conflict information behaviour. The findings also extend dual-process theory by illustrating how heuristic information processing is shaped by historical conflict experiences rather than representing only a universal cognitive shortcut. By positioning trauma as a determinant of information judgement and strategic communication as a resilience-building intervention, the study provides a more comprehensive explanation of why some post-conflict communities remain vulnerable to disinformation despite similar levels of information exposure. This integrated perspective contributes context-specific African evidence to international debates on information disorder and peacebuilding.

Practical Implications: The findings have important implications for communication policy and peacebuilding practice. First, communication strategies should acknowledge the enduring psychological consequences of conflict by using empathetic language, consistent messaging, and practical verification guidance. Second, peacebuilding initiatives should strengthen partnerships with trusted local intermediaries because these actors possess established credibility within their communities. Third, psychosocial support should complement communication programmes to strengthen emotional regulation and verification behaviour among conflict-affected populations. Finally, communication campaigns should encourage community dialogue and collective verification rather than relying solely on institutional messaging or factual correction.

Conclusion

This study examined how war-related trauma, strategic communication, and psychological resilience shape disinformation susceptibility during peacebuilding in Odi, Bayelsa State, Nigeria. Using a qualitative case study design, the research integrated reflexive thematic analysis of interviews with critical discourse analysis of locally produced peace communication materials to examine how conflict survivors interpreted and responded to information within a post-conflict environment. The findings demonstrate that participants associated conflict-related memories with heightened sensitivity to emotionally charged information, reduced attention to source credibility, and greater reliance on trusted community networks. At the same time, strategic communication delivered through respected local intermediaries encouraged verification, strengthened trust, and supported adaptive information practices. Psychological resilience emerged as an important protective process, expressed through emotional regulation, collective discussion, and responsible information sharing. These relationships were further influenced by media saturation, educational experiences, conflict severity, and community cohesion. The study advances theory by integrating trauma psychology, dual-process cognition, strategic communication, and resilience within a single explanatory framework for understanding information behaviour during peacebuilding. It extends existing scholarship by positioning war-related trauma as a determinant of information judgment while conceptualizing strategic communication as a resilience-oriented intervention that supports trust calibration and verification behaviour. In doing so, the study contributes one of the first qualitative African accounts linking trauma, cognition, communication, and disinformation susceptibility within a post-conflict community.

Methodologically, the integration of reflexive thematic analysis with critical discourse analysis demonstrates the value of combining participant narratives with communication materials to examine both lived experiences and the information environment in which those experiences occur. The use of multiple data sources, transparent coding procedures, and triangulation strengthened the credibility and analytical depth of the findings. The study also offers practical implications for governments, development agencies, civil society organizations, and community leaders engaged in peacebuilding. Communication interventions are likely to achieve greater effectiveness when they acknowledge historical trauma, strengthen partnerships with trusted local actors, encourage verification practices, and integrate psychosocial support into broader recovery programmes. These findings suggest that sustainable responses to disinformation require attention not only to message accuracy but also to the psychological and social conditions through which information is interpreted. The study is limited by its focus on a single post-conflict community and by the absence of audio-recorded interviews, which restricted the availability of extensive verbatim quotations despite detailed contemporaneous note-taking. Accordingly, the findings provide analytical rather than statistical

generalization. Future research should examine comparable post-conflict communities across Nigeria and other African countries using comparative, longitudinal, and mixed-methods designs to assess the transferability of the proposed framework and evaluate the long-term effectiveness of trauma-informed communication interventions. Understanding disinformation in fragile societies requires equal attention to historical trauma, cognitive vulnerability, trusted communication, and community resilience. Strengthening these interconnected processes will contribute to more effective peacebuilding and more resilient information environments in post-conflict communities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the study:

1. Peacebuilding actors should therefore adopt trauma-informed communication approaches that recognize how conflict experiences continue to shape threat appraisal, trust, and information judgment.
2. Messages should employ empathetic language, avoid unnecessary fear appeals, and include practical verification guidance that encourages reflective rather than reactive responses.
3. Government agencies, development partners, and civil society organizations should collaborate closely with traditional rulers, faith leaders, women leaders, youth representatives, and other respected community actors throughout the design and delivery of peace communication.
4. Community dialogue, psychoeducation, and trauma support services provide opportunities for emotional regulation, strengthen resilience, and encourage responsible information behaviour.
5. Communication strategies should incorporate continuous monitoring of emerging rumours, community trust, and verification practices.

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